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Perceptions of secure base provision within the family

Susan S. Woodhouse^{a*}, Matthew J. Dykas^b and Jude Cassidy^c

^aDepartment of Counselor Education, Counseling Psychology and Rehabilitation Services, Pennsylvania State University, USA; ^bDepartment of Psychology, State University of New York at Oswego, USA; ^cDepartment of Psychology, University of Maryland at College Park, USA

The present study examined three sets of questions about secure base provision in the context of the family, including (1) relations between inter-parental perceptions of secure base provision and parents' adult romantic attachment and marital satisfaction, (2) interrelations among family members' perception of secure base provision, and (3) links between both adolescents' and parents' perceptions of secure base provision and adolescent symptoms. Participants were 189 adolescents from two-parent families (mean age = 17 years; 118 girls) and their parents. We found partial support for theorized links between perceptions of spousal secure base provision and spousal romantic attachment, as well as full support for expected associations between secure base provision and marital satisfaction. Family members' perceptions of secure base provision were linked in theoretically expected ways: mothers' perceptions of her spouse as a secure base were positively related to their adolescents' perceptions of the mother as a secure base and the father as a secure base. Further, adolescents tended to agree with mothers about perceptions of the husband/father and with fathers about the wife/mother as a secure base. Finally, adolescents' perceptions of parents as a secure base were associated with lower adolescent internalizing and externalizing symptoms. Inter-parental perceptions of secure base provision were not linked to adolescent symptoms.

Keywords: attachment; secure base; adolescent; family; marital satisfaction; symptoms

Introduction

Perception of an attachment figure as a secure base from which one can safely explore and to which one can return for comfort or connection is a central idea in attachment theory (Bowlby, 1973, 1988). For Bowlby (1988), the secure base concept was at the very heart of attachment theory: "No concept within the attachment framework is more central to developmental psychiatry than that of the secure base" (pp. 163–164). Parents provide a secure base when children, based on prior experiences with the parents, feel confident to explore with an expectation that the parent will be available and sensitively responsive when needed. Bowlby (1969/1982) argued that attachment behaviors evolved in humans, including the use of a parent as a secure base, because these behaviors enhanced the child's survival to reproductive age by reducing the threat of predators and other dangers.

*Corresponding author. Email: ssw10@psu.edu

Converging data indicate that secure attachment is associated with both secure base use in children and secure base provision in parents. In children, it is the capacity to use the parent as a secure base that defines attachment security (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978), and research has shown that infants who are securely attached exhibit more secure base behavior in the home than insecurely attached infants (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Pederson & Moran, 1996; Vaughn & Waters, 1990). Likewise, children who are securely attached are more likely to have parents who behave in ways that are sensitively responsive to their children's needs (Pederson & Moran, 1996; Pederson, Gleason, Moran, & Bento, 1998; Posada et al., 1995; see DeWolff & van IJzendoorn, 1997, for a meta-analysis).

Bowlby (1973) viewed the secure base construct as essential to close relationships not only during childhood, but also across the lifespan, noting that at all ages people function best when they have an available and responsive attachment figure to serve as a secure base. More recently, Waters and Cummings (2000) have called for increased efforts to understand secure base use and provision in adolescents and adults, particularly within adult romantic attachment relationships. Research at both the representational level and the behavioral level has indicated that secure attachment beyond childhood is also associated with secure base phenomena. At the representational level, H. Waters and her colleagues (Waters, Rodrigues, & Ridgeway, 1998; see also Bretherton, 1991) have proposed that individuals develop experience-based "secure base scripts" about how causally linked attachment-related events unfold in time. Individuals are thought to show greater evidence of possessing a secure base script when their narratives (assessed with a laboratory task) are characterized by scenarios in which people seek and receive care in times of distress and then return to exploration. Narratives containing greater evidence of a secure base script are characteristic of more securely attached adolescents and adults (assessed with the Adult Attachment Interview AAI; George, Kaplan, & Main, 1984, 1985, 1996; Coppola, Vaughn, Cassibba, & Costantini, 2006; Dykas, Woodhouse, Cassidy, & Waters, 2006) and are characteristic of adults whose children are securely attached to them, presumably because adults with such a script are skilled at secure base provision (Bost et al., 2006).

At the behavioral level, most research examining secure base use and provision in adults has emerged from studies using measures of adult romantic attachment style to investigate couples on the dimensions of both support seeking (turning to the partner when distressed, which can be viewed as secure base use) and caregiving (which can be viewed as secure base provision; Collins & Feeney, 2000, 2004; Feeney & Collins, 2001). The two dimensions of adult romantic attachment insecurity include attachment anxiety (preoccupation with relationships and worry about being abandoned by others), and attachment avoidance (discomfort with interpersonal intimacy and closeness; Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998). As is the case with studies of children and parents, converging findings from studies of adult partners indicate associations between attachment security and both secure base use and provision. Higher attachment anxiety has been associated with perceptions of lower support from the partner and with provision of poorer caregiving to the partner; higher attachment avoidance also has been associated with perceptions of lower support from the partner as well as with more ineffective seeking of support from the partner (Collins & Feeney, 2000, 2004). In a study of 157 engaged couples by Crowell, Treboux, Gao, Fyffe, Pan, and Waters (2002), links emerged between attachment security (in this case, assessed with the AAI) and both secure base use and secure base provision. In addition, the study showed that secure base behavior was related to couple communication behaviors, and reports of satisfaction with the relationship.

The secure base concept is distinct from the general adult romantic attachment dimensions of anxiety and avoidance. Attachment anxiety and avoidance reflect general interpersonal strategies and feelings across close relationships, and are not considered to be specific to a particular attachment figure (Brennan et al., 1998). Secure base representations, on the other hand, are an individual's cognitive and affective representations, thought to be experience-based, about the extent to which he or she can turn to a specific attachment figure (e.g., the spouse or the parent) in times of trouble.

Even though the research focus on secure base use has been largely at the dyadic level, it is useful to consider the family context more broadly. Drawing on attachment theory, Byng-Hall (1995a) described the "secure family base" as a network of attachment relationships in which appropriate caregivers within the family provide needed care in order to allow each family member to feel secure enough to explore. A family systems perspective on secure base use suggests that children typically turn to "older and wiser" protective parents in times of need, and that it is the experience-based confidence in the availability of this secure base which, in turn, contributes to competent exploration, mastery, and healthy functioning. Parents, on the other hand, do not typically turn to their children as a secure base. Such behavior, according to Bowlby (1973, 1988), most often arises from troubled childhood experiences in the parent, and contributes to psychopathology in the child (see Lyons-Ruth & Jacobvitz, 1999, and Macfie, McElwain, Houts, & Cox, 2005, for theory and research related to role-reversal and insecure attachment). Parents in well-functioning families instead turn to each other when seeking a secure base. (For additional discussion of attachment and the family system, see Byng-Hall, 1995b, 1999; Byng-Hall & Stevenson-Hinde, 1991; Jacobvitz, Morgan, Kretchmar, & Morgan, 1991; Marvin & Stewart, 1990.)

An interest in the ways in which aspects of one dyad (or family subsystem) can influence aspects of another dyad is central to a family systems framework (Minuchin, 1974, 1985). Of particular importance to Bowlby (1988) was the notion that the degree to which a parent can turn to a spouse as a secure base is important for the family as a whole. Bowlby wrote; "each of us is apt to do unto others as we have been done by" (Bowlby, 1979, p. 141). Thus, according to Bowlby (1988), if a parent feels supported in times of need by the partner, he or she is more likely, in turn, to be available to provide care to others, including children. Specifically, Bowlby argued that if a mother can turn to her spouse as a secure base, then the mother will be able to be more available to serve as a secure base for the child (Bowlby, 1988). Similarly, Belsky (1984) suggested that fathers' support of the mother helps the mother provide better care for her children, a notion supported by findings that Japanese mothers of secure infants were more likely to perceive their husbands as supportive than were mothers of avoidant infants (Durrett, Otaki, & Richards, 1984).

The present study

Secure base provision has typically been studied in parent-child *dyads* (most frequently mother-child dyads) and secure base provision and use within the family context has been largely ignored (Waters & Cummings, 2000). Moreover, most research on secure base provision has focused on parents of younger children, with the secure base needs of adolescents frequently ignored by many researchers (examples of notable exceptions include Allen et al., 2003; Dykas et al., 2006; Markiewicz, Lawford, Doyle, & Haggert, 2006; Zenger, Schuengel, van IJzendoorn, & Janssens, 2006). The present study focuses on

all too frequently neglected questions about secure base provision and use within families containing adolescent children.

We asked three sets of research questions about secure base phenomena in the family. First, we examined whether adults' perceptions of the partner as a secure base were linked to two theoretically related constructs: adult attachment security and satisfaction with marriage. In keeping with theory and research described above revealing connections between security and secure base use and provision in adult romantic relationships (Collins & Feeney, 2000, 2004; Feeney & Collins, 2001), we expected that parents who were higher in attachment anxiety or in attachment avoidance would be less likely to view their spouse as a secure base, and would be viewed less as a secure base by their spouses. We also examined the construct of marital satisfaction. Previous research has shown that when couples are able to provide and receive care, such that they are able to mutually receive and provide a secure base for one another, there are a number of positive outcomes in the relationship such as increased trust and commitment, strengthening of the relationship, improved communication, and increased satisfaction (Collins & Feeney, 2000; Crowell et al., 2002; Feeney, 2004; Kirkpatrick & Davis, 1994; Mikulincer, 1998). Thus, we hypothesized that the more parents viewed the spouse as a secure base, the greater their marital satisfaction. We also hypothesized that the more a parent was viewed *by the spouse* as serving as a secure base, the greater would be his or her marital satisfaction. In fact, we expected that both mother and father ratings of the spouse as a secure base would uniquely predict marital satisfaction for both partners. For both attachment security and marital satisfaction, it is likely that causal links with secure base phenomena are bidirectional and mutually reinforcing. That is, perceiving the partner as a secure base and being perceived as such by the partner is likely to result from and contribute to both attachment security and marital satisfaction. It is perhaps not surprising that receiving secure base support would be a positive and relationship-enhancing experience for the recipient since the goal of secure base provision is to reduce distress and provide comfort. The provision of a secure base, however, is also likely to enhance the satisfaction of the *caregiver* because it allows for heightened feelings of benevolence, relational self-efficacy, and increased feelings of communion with the partner (Mikulincer & Goodman, 2006; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007).

Second, we moved from a focus on the marital dyad to a focus on a broader family context. The straightforward notion of Bowlby's, that being able to turn to one's adult partner as a secure base would enhance one's own availability as a secure base to offspring, is at the core of the present study. Bowlby's theorizing, likely influenced by the zeitgeist of his era, focused on mothers. Here, we were interested in both parents, and the degree to which each parent's availability to the adolescent was linked to his/her perceptions of the spouse as a secure base. To our knowledge, this is the first study to examine Bowlby's proposition in relation to fathers as well as mothers, and in families containing an adolescent rather than an infant. Thus, we asked: are parents who believe that they can turn to their spouse in times of distress more likely to be perceived by their adolescents as providing a secure base for them?

We also focused on two additional questions about the interrelations of perceptions of secure base provision in the family. We wondered whether parents were viewed as providing a secure base similarly by their spouse and their adolescent. Although it is possible that the capacity to provide a secure base is independent across relationships (e.g., a parent could provide a secure base for the spouse, but not for the adolescent, or vice versa), we expected that the qualities that allow a spouse do a good job of providing

a secure base to the partner (e.g., empathy, secure working models of attachment, or consistent availability) would also allow that individual to provide a secure base to offspring. Thus, we hypothesized that there would be significant correlations between family members' perceptions of each parent (e.g., a mother's perception that her husband provides a secure base to her would be positively associated with the adolescent's perception that the father provides a secure base to him or her). Finally, we asked whether *both* mother and father ratings of the spouse as a secure base would play a role in predicting teen perceptions of (1) mother as secure base, and (2) father as a secure base. We hypothesized that both mother and father ratings would uniquely predict teen perceptions of each parent as a secure base. We theorized that the degree to which both parents felt they were involved in a relationship involving a reciprocal give and take of secure base provision (i.e., when the mother feels her husband provides a secure base for her and the father feels his wife provides a secure base for him) would be related to the degree to which adolescents perceived each parent as a secure base. In other words, we thought that adolescent perceptions of a parent as a secure base would depend not only on *that parent's* ability to rely on the spouse as a secure base, but also on *the other parent's* perceptions that the spouse could be relied on as a secure base.

Our third set of research questions focused on adolescent outcomes. Attachment insecurity has been associated with both internalizing and externalizing symptoms in adolescents (Allen, Moore, Kuperminc, & Bell, 1998; Kobak, Sudler, & Gamble, 1991; Rosenstein & Horowitz, 1996). We expected that because secure base provision/use is the hallmark of a secure relationship, adolescents with lower perceptions of secure base provision would show greater symptomatology. We asked: is secure base use within the family related to adolescent internalizing and externalizing symptoms? First, we hypothesized that adolescents' perceptions of mothers and fathers as providing a secure base would relate to low internalizing and externalizing symptoms. Second, we hypothesized that mothers' and fathers' perceptions of their spouse as providing a secure base would be related to adolescents' low internalizing and externalizing symptoms because we theorized that less inter-spousal support would diminish the parents' ability to provide a secure base for their children; thus symptoms would be higher.

Finally, we note that we included no specific hypotheses regarding sex differences in the present study. Previous research on attachment has found little support for attachment-related sex differences either in children (see Belsky & Cassidy, 1994, for a review) or in adult romantic attachment (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). For example, although there is some evidence for attachment-related sex differences in sexual behavior, early findings of sex differences in attachment and relationship satisfaction or relationship stability have not been replicated in later studies (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Nevertheless, because previous research has found evidence of sex differences in some aspects of intimate relationships, such as in the use of power strategies (Falbo & Peplau, 1980), relationship beliefs (Frazier & Esterly, 1990), interpersonal sensitivity (Hall & Mast, 2008), and gender-related differences in interactional patterns in certain situations (Christensen & Heavey, 1990; Heavey, Layne, & Christensen, 1993), we decided to test for interaction effects that included gender in all of our analyses.

Method

Participants

Participants were 189 adolescents (mean age = 17 years; 118 girls), their mothers, and their fathers who were enrolled in a larger study of family and peer relationships in

adolescence. Over two-thirds of the families were White (73%), with Black/African American (14%), Asian (10%), and Hispanic (3%) representing the next largest racial/ethnic groups. Over 90% of mothers and fathers reported having at least some college education and 95% of families reported having an annual household income greater than \$41,000. Families were paid US\$125 for their participation in the larger study.

Measures

Spouse as a Secure Base Scale (Cassidy & Woodhouse, 1998)

Mothers and fathers used this 13-item questionnaire to rate the extent to which their spouse had served as an available, responsive, and sensitive secure base. The mother and father spouse as secure base versions of this scale originally included 16 items. However, after conducting principal axis factor analyses, 3 items were dropped from both versions of this questionnaire because they had low factor loadings. The mother and father versions of this measure were internally consistent (alphas = .90 and .92, respectively) and sample items include “My husband/wife is someone I can go to when I’m upset” and “My husband/wife is there for me in times of trouble.” Like adolescents, mothers and fathers rated items using a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from *almost never true* (1) to *almost always true* (5). For the mother and father versions of this scale, we summed the items to create total *husband as a secure base scores* and *wife as a secure base scores*. Possible total scores ranged from 13 to 65.

Experiences in Close Relationships Scale (ECRS; Brennan et al., 1998)

This widely used 36-item questionnaire taps parents’ attachment-related anxiety and avoidance within the context of romantic relationships. The anxiety subscale (18 items) measures the extent to which parents are concerned about being rejected, abandoned, and unloved by others (e.g., “I worry about being abandoned”). The avoidance subscale (18 items) measures the extent to which parents are uncomfortable with closeness and intimacy, uncomfortable depending on others, and uncertain that others could be relied on when needed (e.g., “I prefer not to show a partner how I feel deep down”). For each item, parents rated their degree of attachment-related anxiety or avoidance using a 7-point Likert scale ranging from (1) *disagree strongly* to (7) *agree strongly*. We averaged items along the anxiety and avoidance dimensions to generate summary scores reflecting parents’ attachment-related anxiety and avoidance; possible scores ranged from 1 to 7. In the present study, reliability estimates were adequate for maternal and paternal attachment anxiety and avoidance, with alphas ranging from .83 to .89. Evidence for the validity for the subscales of the ECRS include theoretically predicted relations to sexual practices, post-coital emotions, and touch (Brennan et al., 1998).

Revised Dyadic Adjustment Scale (RDAS; Busby, Christensen, Crane, & Larson, 1995)

This frequently used 14-item questionnaire assesses mothers’ and fathers’ degree of marital satisfaction in terms of marital consensus, satisfaction, and cohesion. Using a 6-point scale with appropriate anchors, participants rated either the extent to which they felt that they and their spouse agree on particular topics (e.g., religious matters, career decisions) or the frequency with which they engage in certain behaviors (e.g., quarreling, engaging in

outside interests together). We averaged the 14 items to create an overall marital satisfaction score for mothers ($\alpha = .88$) and fathers ($\alpha = .89$). Possible total scores ranged from 0 to 5. Busby et al. (1995) provided evidence for the validity of the RDAS, which correlated highly with two established measures of marital satisfaction, and discriminated distressed from non-distressed couples.

Parent as a Secure Base Scale-Revised (Cassidy & Woodhouse, 2003)

Adolescents used this 13-item questionnaire to rate the degree to which their parent had served as an available, responsive, and sensitive secure base. The mother and father as secure base versions of this scale originally included 16 items. However, after conducting principal axis factor analyses, 3 items were dropped from both versions of this questionnaire because they had low factor loadings (Cassidy, Ziv, Rodenberg, & Woodhouse, 2003). Adolescents completed separate scales for mother ($\alpha = .91$) and father ($\alpha = .91$), and sample items are “My mother/father is someone I can count on when I need help” and “My mother/father is there for me in times of trouble.” Adolescents rated items using a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from *almost never true* (1) to *almost always true* (5). For the mother and father versions of this scale, we summed the items to create total scores for *mother as a secure base* and *father as a secure base*. Possible total scores ranged from 13 to 65. Data on the validity of this scale have shown that perceptions of the parents as providing a secure base are associated with attachment and other aspects of the parents’ parenting, such as warmth and understanding (Cassidy et al., 2003; Dykas, Woodhouse, Ziv, Feeney, & Cassidy, 2007).

Child Behavior Checklist for ages 6–18 (CBCL; Achenbach, 1991)

Mothers completed the 113-item CBCL, a widely used measure of internalizing and externalizing problems in childhood and adolescence with established reliability and validity (see Achenbach & Rescorla, 2001, for a review). For each item, mothers used a 3-point scale ranging from *not true* (0) to *very true* (2) to rate the degree to which a given attribute described their adolescent (e.g., sad, argues). We summed appropriate items to calculate total *internalizing* and *externalizing* scores. Because of time limitations, the CBCL was completed by mothers only.

Procedure

During a family laboratory visit, adolescents completed the mother and father versions of the Parent as a Secure Base Scale as part of a large self-report questionnaire packet. Mothers and fathers completed respective versions of the Spouse as a Secure Base Scale, the ECR, and the RDAS as part of a large self-report questionnaire packet. Mothers also completed the CBCL as part of this packet. All data collection was supervised by trained graduate students, and each family member completed the questionnaires independently and in a different rooms.

Results

First, we examine associations of parents’ secure base perceptions, with their attachment anxiety, attachment avoidance, and marital satisfaction. Then we examine interrelations of

perceptions of secure base in the family. Finally, we examine links between family secure base perceptions and adolescent outcomes. For all of our principal analyses, we examined whether adolescent gender moderated the relations between our dependent and independent variables by examining interactions between adolescent gender and the independent variables. Because no significant interactions emerged, we reran these principal analyses without modeling either adolescent gender or interactions between adolescent gender and the independent variables and report these analyses below.¹

Parents' secure base perceptions, attachment, and marital satisfaction

First we asked: *For parents, are higher scores on romantic attachment anxiety and avoidance related to (1) perceptions of the spouse as a less secure base and (2) lower levels of being perceived as available as a secure base by their spouse?* As shown in Table 1, mothers who reported greater attachment avoidance (but not anxiety) on the Experiences in Close Relationships scale were less likely to perceive their husbands as a secure base, and fathers who reported greater anxiety (but not avoidance) were less likely to view their wives as a secure base. Additionally, when mothers reported greater avoidant attachment, their husbands were significantly less likely to perceive them as a secure base. Two other correlations approached but did not attain conventional ($p < .05$) levels of significance: (1) wives with higher attachment anxiety had husbands who viewed them as providing a less secure base, and similarly (2) husbands with higher attachment anxiety had wives who viewed them as providing a less secure base. These non-significant correlations were low, with a small effect size (accounting for 3% of the variance in each case). Contrary to expectations, no other connections emerged between attachment dimensions and perceptions of the partner as a secure base.

Next we asked: *Is marital satisfaction positively associated with (1) viewing the spouse as a secure base, and (2) being viewed by the spouse as a secure base?* In the first set of analyses, we conducted a series of zero-order correlational analyses examining associations between parents' marital satisfaction scores and spouse as a secure base scores. As can be seen in Table 1, parents who reported that their spouse served as a secure base had greater marital satisfaction. Also, as expected, parents whose spouses rated them as providing a secure base were themselves more satisfied with the marriage.

In the second set of analyses, we conducted a set of four hierarchical multiple regression analyses to examine the extent to which mothers' and fathers' perceptions of the spouse as a secure base were uniquely associated with mothers' and fathers' marital satisfaction scores, and whether or not each parent's perception of the spouse as a secure base predicted marital satisfaction above and beyond the other spouse's ratings (see Table 2). As expected, parental marital satisfaction was significantly higher when parents felt they could turn to their spouses as a secure base (above and beyond the spouses' perceptions of them as secure base) and also when the parents' spouses felt they could turn to them as a secure base (above and beyond parents' perceptions of the spouse as someone they could turn to). In short, marital satisfaction for both parents was *uniquely* predicted by both their own and their partner's perceptions of the spouse as a secure base. Specifically, a mother's marital satisfaction was predicted by her own view of her husband as a secure base, with her husband's perception of her as secure base contributing a significant amount of additional variance. Also, maternal marital satisfaction was significantly predicted by the father's sense that he could turn to her as a secure base, with her own feeling that she could turn to the father as a secure base contributing significant additional variance. As can be seen in Table 2, parallel results emerged for fathers. It is

Table 1. Intercorrelations for the study variables.

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1. M-Spouse as SB												
2. F-Spouse as SB	.57***											
3. A-Mother as SB	.36***	.37***										
4. A-Father as SB	.34***	.35***	.60***									
5. M-ECR Anxiety	-.14	-.19 [^]	-.10	.09								
6. M-ECR Avoidance	-.26*	-.25*	-.45***	-.36***	.33**							
7. F-ECR Anxiety	-.18 [^]	-.23*	-.10	-.18 [^]	.26*	.18						
8. F-ECR Avoidance	.01	-.14	-.07	-.15	.08	.13	.17 [^]					
9. M-Satisfaction	.78***	.56***	.31***	.33***	-.14	-.24*	-.11	.02				
10. F-Satisfaction	.54***	.78***	.37***	.28***	-.17	-.14	-.17	-.18 [^]	.59***			
11. A-CBCL Int.	-.11	.03	-.19*	-.21**	.16	.17	-.01	-.17	-.11	.02		
12. A-CBCL Ext.	-.10	-.04	-.27***	-.25**	.05	.02	.03	-.01	-.06	.02	.62***	

Note: *N*'s ranged between 87 to 186. M = Mother. F = Father. A = Adolescent. SB = Secure Base. ECR = Experiences in Close Relationships. CBCL = Child Behavior Checklist. Int. = Internalizing Symptoms. Ext. = Externalizing Symptoms. [^]*p* < .10; **p* < .05; ***p* < .01; ****p* < .001.

Table 2. Summary of four hierarchical multiple regression analyses predicting parents' marital satisfaction scores from parents' spouse as secure base scores.

Criterion Variable Predictors	β (entry into model)	β (final model)	sr^2 (final model)	ΔR^2	Total R^2
Mother marital satisfaction					
1. Mother: Spouse as Secure Base	.78***	.69***	.32	.61***	
2. Father: Spouse as Secure Base	.16**	.16**	.02	.02**	.63
Mother marital satisfaction					
1. Father: Spouse as Secure Base	.56***	.16**	.02	.31***	
2. Mother: Spouse as Secure Base	.69***	.69***	.32	.32***	.63
Father marital satisfaction					
1. Mother: Spouse as Secure Base	.54***	.14*	.01	.29***	
2. Father: Spouse as Secure Base	.70***	.70***	.32	.33***	.62
Father marital satisfaction					
1. Father: Spouse as Secure Base	.78***	.70***	.32	.60***	
2. Mother: Spouse as Secure Base	.14*	.14*	.01	.01*	.62

Note: β (entry into model) = β upon first appearance in the model. β (final model) = β in final model.

*** $p < .001$; ** $p < .005$; * $p < .01$.

important to note, however, that despite these patterns of unique prediction, inspection of the effect sizes (squared semi-partial correlations for the final model) indicates that it is the spouse's perceptions of his or her partner's secure base provision that accounts for the overwhelming amount of variance in marital satisfaction. More precisely, mothers' and fathers' scores for spouse as a secure base accounted for 32% of the variance in their respective marital satisfaction scores, whereas their partners' scores for spouse as a secure base accounted for no more than 2% of the variance in these scores.

In addition to our central questions, we also examined the correlations between parental romantic attachment and marital satisfaction. As can be seen in Table 1, the only significant correlation revealed that mothers who rated themselves as more avoidant in the couple relationship tended to rate themselves as less satisfied with their marriages. The inverse relation between fathers' avoidance and marital satisfaction approached, but did not attain, conventional levels of significance and the effect size was small.

Interrelations of perceptions of secure base in the family

First, is the extent to which mothers perceive their husbands as a secure base associated with the extent to which adolescents view their mothers as a secure base? Similarly, is the extent to which fathers perceive their wives as a secure base associated with the extent to which adolescents view their fathers as a secure base?

To address this pair of research questions, we conducted a pair of zero-order correlational analyses (see Table 1). According to Bowlby's (1988) theory, a parent who is able to turn to a partner as a secure base will be more available to provide a secure base to a child. As expected, the more a mother reported that she used her husband as a secure base, the more her adolescent perceived her as a secure base. Similarly, as expected, the more a father reported that he used his wife as a secure base, the more his adolescent perceived him as a secure base.

Second, are mothers' and adolescents' perceptions of their husbands/fathers as a secure base similar? Are fathers' and adolescents' perceptions of their wives/mothers as a secure base similar?

To address this pair of research questions, we conducted another pair of zero-order correlational analyses (see Table 1). As expected, there was a moderate, significant correlation between mothers' and their adolescents' perceptions of their husbands/fathers as a secure base. Moreover, as expected, there was a moderate, significant correlation between fathers' and their adolescents' perceptions of their wives/mothers as a secure base.

Third, does secure base provision to the adolescent by either parent depend on whether secure base interactions within the couple relationship are mutual and reciprocal? In other words, does the mother's ability to provide a secure base for her adolescent depend not only on whether she receives secure base support from the father, but on whether the father also perceives her as someone to turn to (above and beyond her own view of the father as a secure base)? Similarly, is the parallel true for fathers' secure base provision to his adolescent?

We addressed this complementary pair of questions by conducting a set of four hierarchical multiple regression analyses (see Table 3). Inspection of the beta weights indicates that, as expected, adolescent perceptions of the parent as a secure base were significantly higher when each parent reciprocally viewed the other parent as a secure base. Moreover, the significant beta weights in the second step (Step 2) indicated that both mothers' and fathers' scores for spouse as a secure base were unique predictors of adolescents' perceptions of the parents as secure bases. More precisely, after accounting for mothers' score for spouse as a secure base, fathers' score for spouse as a secure base uniquely predicted adolescents' scores for mother and father as a secure base. After

Table 3. Summary of four hierarchical multiple regression analyses predicting adolescents' parent as secure base scores from parents' spouse as secure base scores.

Criterion Variable Predictors	β (entry into model)	β (final model)	sr^2 (final model)	ΔR^2	Total R^2
Adolescent: Mother as Secure Base					
1. Mother: Spouse as Secure Base	.36***	.23**	.03	.13***	
2. Father: Spouse as Secure Base	.24**	.24**	.04	.04**	.17
Adolescent: Mother as Secure Base					
1. Father: Spouse as Secure Base	.37***	.24**	.04	.13***	
2. Mother: Spouse as Secure Base	.23**	.23**	.03	.03**	.17
Adolescent: Father as Secure Base					
1. Mother: Spouse as Secure Base	.33***	.19*	.02	.11***	
2. Father: Spouse as Secure Base	.24**	.24**	.04	.04**	.15
Adolescent: Father as Secure Base					
1. Father: Spouse as Secure Base	.36***	.24**	.04	.13***	
2. Mother: Spouse as Secure Base	.19*	.19*	.02	.03*	.15

Note: β (entry into model) = β upon first appearance in the model. β (final model) = β in final model.

*** $p < .001$; ** $p < .005$; * $p < .01$.

accounting for fathers' scores for spouse as a secure base, mothers' scores for spouse as a secure base uniquely predicted adolescents' scores for mother and father as a secure base. As can be seen, the amount of variance that parents' spouse as a secure base scores accounted for in adolescents' parent as a secure base scores ranged from 2–4%.

Links between family secure base use and adolescent outcomes

Are secure base perceptions within the family related to adolescent internalizing and externalizing symptoms?

To address this question, we conducted two sets of analyses. In the first set of analyses, we conducted a series of zero-order correlational analyses examining associations between adolescents' perceptions of the parent (mother and father) as a secure base scores and their CBCL internalizing and externalizing scores as rated by mothers (see Table 1). As expected, more negative perceptions of mother as a secure base were linked to higher scores on internalizing and externalizing problems. Moreover, as expected, more negative adolescent perceptions of the father as a secure base were also linked to more internalizing and externalizing problems. In light of these significant correlations, we conducted a set of four hierarchical multiple regression analyses to examine whether adolescents' perceptions of each parent (mother and father) as a secure base uniquely predicted their CBCL scores above and beyond the adolescents' views of the other parent (see Table 4). Contrary to expectations, when adolescent perceptions of the mother as a secure base were entered into the model first (these significant mother-related perceptions explained between 4% and 7% of the variance), adolescents' views of their father as a secure base did not account for any additional variance in either adolescent externalizing or internalizing symptoms. On the other hand, when adolescent perceptions of the father as a secure base were entered into the model first (these significant father-related perceptions explained between 4% and 6%

Table 4. Summary of four hierarchical multiple regression analyses predicting adolescents' externalizing and internalizing symptom scores from adolescents' parent as secure base scores.

Criterion Variable Predictors	β (entry into model)	β (final model)	sr^2 (final model)	ΔR^2	Total R^2
Adolescent: Externalizing Symptoms					
1. Mother as Secure Base	-.27***	-.19*	.02	.07***	
2. Father as Secure Base	-.14	-.14	.01	.01	.09
Adolescent: Externalizing Symptoms					
1. Father as Secure Base	-.25**	-.14	.01	.06**	
2. Mother as Secure Base	-.19*	-.19*	.02	.02*	.09
Adolescent: Internalizing Symptoms					
1. Mother as Secure Base	-.19*	-.11	.01	.04*	
2. Father as Secure Base	-.14	-.14	.01	.01	.05
Adolescent: Internalizing Symptoms					
1. Father as Secure Base	-.21**	-.14	.01	.04**	
2. Mother as Secure Base	-.11	-.11	.01	.01	.05

Note: β (entry into model) = β upon first appearance in the model. β (final model) = β in final model.

*** $p < .001$; ** $p < .005$; * $p < .01$.

of the variance), adolescents' views of the mother as providing a secure base did account for additional variance in adolescents' externalizing symptoms (2%), but not adolescents' internalizing symptoms.

In the second set of analyses, we conducted a series of zero-order correlational analyses to examine associations between parents' spouse as secure base scores and adolescents' CBCL internalizing and externalizing scores. As shown in Table 1, contrary to expectations, mothers' and fathers' spouse as a secure base scores were not associated with either adolescents' CBCL internalizing or externalizing scores. As can be seen in Table 1, post-hoc analyses showed no correlation between adolescent symptoms and either parental romantic attachment or parental marital satisfaction.

Discussion

The present study sheds light on three sets of questions related to the interconnections among family members' perceptions of secure base provision within the family, and to the links between these perceptions and adolescent psychosocial functioning. Findings related to each question are discussed below.

Links between parents' perceptions of the spouse as a secure base and parents' attachment-related anxiety and avoidance and marital satisfaction

Our first set of questions focused on links between marital partners' perceptions of one another as a secure base to two constructs theoretically related to secure base provision within the couple: (1) adult romantic attachment (both attachment anxiety and avoidance) and (2) marital satisfaction. Our hypotheses that parents high in attachment anxiety and avoidance would tend to *perceive* their spouses as a less secure base, and that parents high in attachment anxiety and avoidance would tend to *be perceived* as less available as a secure base by their spouses were partially supported.

Our finding that attachment insecurity was associated with perceptions of less secure base support from the partner is partially consistent with those of Collins and Feeney (2004), who found that both attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance were associated with lower perceptions of support. In addition, our finding that mothers' avoidance tended to be inversely associated with mothers' perceptions of the husband as a secure base was consistent with Collins and Feeney's (2000) finding that avoidance in one member of a romantic couple was associated with ineffective support-seeking behavior, such as hinting and sulking. It is conceivable that mothers high in avoidance tended to have difficulty perceiving the father as a secure base because the mothers were ineffective at signaling a need for care, and thus were not receiving desired care. Interestingly, however, in the present study the same pattern was not found for fathers as for mothers, whereas in the Collins and Feeney (2000) study, the same pattern emerged for both male and female partners. There were two non-significant correlations that approached but did not attain conventional levels of significance (the correlation between maternal attachment anxiety and wife's perceptions of him as a secure base and the correlation between paternal attachment anxiety and perceptions of the wife as a secure base). These non-significant correlations suggest that perhaps when mothers and fathers report greater attachment anxiety, their spouses are less likely to perceive them as a secure base, though it is difficult to interpret non-significant results, particularly when the correlations are low. Further research may help to shed further light on potential associations between attachment anxiety and perceptions of the spouse as a secure base.

Gender differences emerged in the present study (in which it was wives' attachment avoidance but husbands' attachment anxiety that related to perceptions of the spouse as a secure base) that did not emerge in the Collins and Feeney (2004) study. It may be that gender differences emerge when adults make global assessments of secure base provision (as they did in the present study) but not when making event-specific evaluations of secure base provision (as they did in the Collins and Feeney experimental study). Also, the present study focused on married couples in long-term, intact marriages, whereas the Collins and Feeney study examined relatively young, dating couples; it may be that gender-related patterns are different in these two groups. Feeney (1999) pointed out that attachment avoidance is inconsistent with the female gender role stereotype and that attachment anxiety is inconsistent with the male gender role stereotype. The results of the present study may indicate that attachment insecurity that is *inconsistent* with the respective gender role stereotype is associated with perceptions of the spouse as less able to provide a secure base. More research will be needed to better understand the gender differences found in the present study.

In terms of being *perceived by the partner* as providing a secure base, the only significant finding was that higher avoidance in wives was associated with a lower tendency for their husbands to view them as a secure base. It is reasonable to expect that husbands who perceive that their wives are uncomfortable with closeness and with people depending on them (as reflected in their avoidance scores) would lack confidence in their wife's availability in times of need. The fact that the parallel connection did not emerge for husbands' avoidance (i.e., that husbands' avoidance was not linked to their wives' perception of them as a secure base) may again reflect gender stereotypes. Men are typically viewed as more distant than women, which may interfere with wives' consideration of individual variation on this dimension. Although either men or women may play the pursuer or distancer role (Betchen & Ross, 2000), some researchers have identified common situations that tend to elicit a male distancing/female demanding pattern (Christensen & Heavey, 1990; Heavey et al., 1993). Or it may be that men's provision of care is often of the sort that is unrelated to their avoidance (e.g., instrumental support) such that wives' experiences of receiving care when needed do not vary as a function of their husband's avoidance (e.g., men high on avoidance may be comfortable providing care when their wives ask for help about problems with the house or car).

Next, we hypothesized that both *perceptions of the spouse as a secure base* and *being seen by the spouse as a secure base* would be associated with marital satisfaction, and these hypotheses were supported. In fact, our finding that both perceiving the spouse as a secure base and being perceived by the spouse as a secure base uniquely predicted marital satisfaction for husbands and wives suggested that marital satisfaction is associated with a give and take of secure base provision. It is not enough to receive care from the spouse; marital satisfaction depends both on receiving and providing secure base behaviors. Provision and use of secure base were each predictive of marital satisfaction above and beyond the other. It is important to note that these results were not simply reflective of reporting bias because marital satisfaction was related to *both* spouses' reports of secure base. This finding was consistent with prior research indicating that a mutual exchange of secure base provision is associated with a variety of positive relational outcomes, including greater marital satisfaction (Collins & Feeney, 2000; Crowell et al., 2002; Feeney, 2004; Kirkpatrick & Davis, 1994; Mikulincer, 1998). It is impossible, however, to infer causality from these correlational findings, and more research will be needed that incorporates an intervention in order to examine causation.

Interrelations of perceptions of secure base in the family

Our next set of questions shifted from a focus on the marital dyad to a focus on a broader family context that included the parents' adolescent child. As expected, family members (parents and adolescents) tended to agree about other family members' abilities to serve as a secure base. Both adolescent–mother and adolescent–father dyads tended to view the other parent/spouse similarly. The expected relations between the family members' perceptions of one another as a secure base provided important evidence for the validity of the Spouse as Secure Base Measure. The fact that the relations found are moderate in size is not surprising. These significant relations provide evidence for underlying qualities that may help to explain secure base behaviors across relationships, and perhaps even for relational schema about secure base provision and use. At the same time, these moderate relations allow for some individual variation within relationships.

Most importantly, however, our findings supported Bowlby's (1988) proposition: when mothers perceived the father to be a more secure base, their adolescent children perceived the mothers to be a more secure base, and the results were the same for fathers. These findings are consistent with the theory that a parent who can rely on his or her spouse for comfort and support during times of distress will be more regulated and thus more prepared to offer an adolescent child what is needed to feel that the parent is a secure base in times of trouble. Moreover, as hypothesized, regression analyses showed that not only did mothers' and fathers' scores for spouse as a secure base *together* account for a significant amount of variance in adolescents' perceptions of the *mother* and the *father* as a secure base, but mothers' and fathers' scores for spouse as secure base each *individually* accounted for a significant and unique amount of the variance in predicting adolescent perceptions of both the *mother* and the *father* as a secure base. Together, these results are consistent with the notion that parent–child dyadic relationships do not occur in a vacuum, but rather are influenced in important ways by the family relationship context. Specifically, the results are consistent with a structural family systems approach in which the functioning of the spousal subsystem is thought to influence the functioning of the rest of the family, including the parent–child subsystems (Minuchin, 1974).

Another body of research that converges with our findings of links between secure base provision between the parents and adolescents' perceptions of their parents as secure bases includes studies indicating that when the marital relationship is functioning well, children tend to have greater attachment security (Belsky & Isabella, 1988; Durett et al., 1984; Egeland & Farber, 1984; Goldberg & Easterbrooks, 1984; Howes & Markman, 1989; Jacobson & Frye, 1991; Tomlinson, Cooper, & Murray, 2005; but see Zeanah et al., 1993, for contradictory findings; see Belsky, Rosenberger, & Crnic, 1995, for a review). This previous research suggests, as does the present study, that the quality of one attachment relationship within the family (i.e., the spousal dyad) may influence the quality of another attachment relationship (i.e., the parent–child dyad).

It is important to distinguish inter-parental secure base provision in the family from two related but distinct concepts. One of these is the concept of emotional security. Davies and Cummings (1994) proposed that inter-parental conflict is related to child adjustment because the inter-parental discord threatens children's emotional security about the future continuity of the parents' relationship. These authors theorized that the lack of emotional security resulted in a number of maladaptive reactions that were related to later problems with child adjustment, and this theory has been empirically supported (e.g., Cummings, Schermerhorn, Davies, Goeke-Morey, & Cummings, 2006). Emotional security differs from secure base provision because emotional security as they define it specifically pertains

to children's perceptions of the risk to the continuity of the parental relationship. Secure base provision, on the other hand, concerns perceptions of a specific person who provides care when needed.

A second concept that is related but theoretically distinct from the secure base concept is co-parenting, which has also been empirically linked to child adjustment (for a review on the co-parenting alliance, see Gabel, Belsky, & Crnic, 1992). The concept of co-parenting pertains to the ways in which parents support or undermine one another in terms of parenting issues with their children. Co-parenting is distinct from secure base provision because secure base provision is related to emotional support for the partner in general, particularly in times of distress. Co-parenting, on the other hand, concerns parental support for one another specifically on parenting issues. Empirical studies will be needed to determine both the overlap and the uniqueness of these constructs.

Links between family secure base use and adolescent outcomes

The final set of questions addressed in the present study concerns associations between family members' perceptions of one another as a secure base and adolescents' internalizing and externalizing symptoms as described in mothers' CBCL reports. These questions are important because they allow us to consider whether variation in perceptions of secure base use matter with respect to important outcomes for adolescents. Results showed that contrary to expectation, mother and father perceptions of the spouse as a secure base did not predict CBCL. Because inter-spousal perceptions of secure base are related to adolescent perceptions of the parent as a secure base, it is not clear why no relation was found between mothers' and fathers' perceptions of the spouse as secure base and adolescent symptoms, at least as rated by the mother.

Consistent with expectations, however, adolescent perceptions of the mother and father as a secure base were positively correlated with adolescent CBCL internalizing and externalizing scores. Together, adolescents' perceptions of the mother and father as a secure base accounted for 9% of the variance in their externalizing symptoms. Moreover, adolescent perceptions of the mother as a secure base uniquely accounted for a small, but significant, amount of variance in their CBCL externalizing scores above and beyond father as secure base scores. In contrast, scores of father as a secure base did not explain a significant amount of variance in externalizing symptoms above and beyond scores of mother as a secure base. Unlike the results for externalizing symptoms, although both adolescent perceptions of the mother and the father were correlated with internalizing symptoms, neither parent's secure base provision appeared to explain unique variance above and beyond the other parent. The relations found between adolescent perceptions of the parents and both externalizing and internalizing symptoms suggests that perhaps when adolescents feel they have someone to turn to for support in times of trouble, incipient problems can be addressed by parent and child together, and the risk of developing behavior problems may be lower. Further, given that parents who are able to provide a secure base are also viewed as being warmer, more accepting, and more understanding (Dykas et al., 2007), this generally positive parenting may be associated with lower risk.

It may be that perceptions of the mother, but not the father, uniquely predicted adolescent externalizing symptoms because the mother was the rater of adolescent symptoms, such that there may be greater correspondence between the child's perceptions of the mother and her rating of symptoms than between the child's perceptions of the father and the mother's rating of symptoms. That is, the question remains whether

perceptions of the father contribute less to explaining variance in adolescent externalizing symptoms than do perceptions of the mother, or whether the source of the description of the child's symptoms accounts for the findings here.

It is striking, however, that although the mother is the reporter of symptoms on the CBCL, the correlations between internalizing and externalizing symptoms and perceptions of the mother as a secure base were essentially equivalent to correlations found between symptoms and perceptions of the father as a secure base. Alternatively, perhaps perceptions of the mother as a secure base are particularly important for adolescents in avoiding externalizing problems. Markiewicz et al. (2006) found that adolescents used their mothers as a secure base consistently more than fathers or peers across all the age ranges they examined (12–15, 16–19, and 20–28), and regardless of whether or not the adolescents had romantic partners. Further research will be necessary to examine the replicability of the present findings. Clearly, the results indicate that fathers are important, as perceptions of both the father and the mother as a secure base were related to child psychosocial functioning. Further, neither perceptions of mothers nor of fathers as a secure base were uniquely predictive of internalizing symptoms above and beyond the other parent, although perceptions of mothers and fathers as a secure base were significantly associated with lower adolescent internalizing symptoms.

Validity and reliability of the secure base scales

The present study joins the Dykas et al. study (2007) in providing support for the validity of the Parent as Secure Base scales. The Dykas et al. study reported evidence of the construct validity of the scales by demonstrating theoretically-expected relations to adolescent perceptions of parenting and adolescent attachment. Additional evidence of the construct validity of the scales emerges from the present study's finding of links between parental perceptions of the spouse as a secure base and adolescents' internalizing and externalizing symptoms. Adequate reliability for the Parent as Secure Base scales also emerged. In addition, the current study also provides initial evidence for the Spouse as Secure Base Scales. Support for the construct validity of these scales includes theoretically-predicted relations to adult romantic attachment, marital satisfaction, and adolescent children's perceptions of the parents as a secure base. The Spouse as Secure Base Scales demonstrated adequate reliability.

Limitations and suggestions for future research

The data from the present study are correlational, so it is impossible to be certain about causation. Despite the fact that theory would suggest that parents who feel that their spouse serves as a secure base are more available to their children, we cannot be certain that this was the case. It is possible that parents who provide a secure base for their children are more secure themselves and tend to select a more secure mate who is better at providing them with care. Perhaps such parents would provide a secure base for their children regardless of whether they had a supportive mate. Only further research will be able to tease apart causal factors and the direction of effects. Another limitation of the study was the fact that the study focused on heterosexual, married couples with long-term, intact marriages. Future research could examine patterns of secure base use in other family constellations, including for example, remarried couples with blended families, families in which the grandparents have a significant caregiving role, and families headed by gay and lesbian parents.

Clinical implications

Results of the present study suggest that a therapeutic focus on improving the parents' marriage (specifically by assisting parents in learning to seek and give care within the marital relationship) may contribute to improvements in adolescents' perceptions of their parents as secure bases, and ultimately to the adolescents' adaptation. This suggestion is consistent with a variety of family therapy approaches (e.g., Bowen, 1978; Minuchin, 1974, 1985; Shaw, Criss, Schonberg, & Beck, 2004), which suggest that a treatment focus on improving the relationship between the parents often leads to positive outcomes for children. Experiencing secure base provision within the context of the couple relationship is a deeply gratifying experience for both members of the couple (Johnson & Whiffen, 2006). The results of the present study suggest it is also an experience that has profound implications for the children as well. Moreover, because adolescent perceptions of the parents as secure bases are linked to adolescent internalizing and externalizing symptoms, any intervention that might contribute to these adolescent perceptions is important to pursue, even when direct links between inter-parental secure base use and provision and adolescent symptoms are lacking. In sum, the present study provides support for the idea that it is important to consider secure base provision and use in the context of multiple relationships within the family and that clinical attention to these various relationships might contribute to the well-being of the parents and their children.

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Note

1. Details of analyses incorporating gender and all two-way interactions involving gender are available from the first author.

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