

Attachment Theory: Evolving Models of Human Connection

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Whereas Bowlby was inspired by Piaget's insights into children's thinking, current attachment scholars utilise insights from contemporary literature on implicit knowledge, theory of mind, autobiographical memory and social representation. Psychoanalyst/psychologists Peter Fonagy and Mary Target have attempted to bring attachment theory and psychoanalysis into a closer relationship through cognitive science as mentalization. Mentalization, or theory of mind, is the capacity of human beings to guess with some accuracy what thoughts, emotions and intentions lie behind behaviours as subtle as facial expression. This connection between theory of mind and the internal working model may open new areas of study, leading to alterations in attachment theory. Since the late 1980s, there has been a developing rapprochement between attachment theory and psychoanalysis, based on common ground as elaborated by attachment theorists and researchers, and a change in what psychoanalysts consider to be central to psychoanalysis. Object relations models which emphasise the autonomous need for a relationship have become dominant and are linked to a growing recognition within psychoanalysis of the importance of infant development in the context of relationships and internalised representations. Psychoanalysis has recognised the formative nature of a child's early environment including the issue of childhood trauma. A psychoanalytically based exploration of the attachment system and an accompanying clinical approach has emerged together with a recognition of the need for measurement of outcomes of interventions.



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One focus of attachment research has been the difficulties of children whose attachment history

was poor, including those with extensive non-parental child care experiences. Concern with the effects of child care was intense during the so-called "day care wars" of the late 20th century, during which some authors stressed the deleterious effects of day care. As a result of this controversy, training of child care professionals has come to stress attachment issues, including the need for relationship-building by the assignment of a child to a specific carer. Although only high-quality child care settings are likely to provide this, more infants in child care receive attachment-friendly care than in the past.

Another significant area of research and development has been the connection between problematic attachment patterns, particularly disorganized attachment, and the risk of later psychopathology. A third has been the effect on development of children having little or no opportunity to form attachments at all in their early years. A natural experiment permitted extensive study of attachment issues as researchers followed thousands of Romanian orphans adopted into Western families after the end of the Nicolae Ceaușescu regime. The English and Romanian Adoptees Study Team, led by Michael Rutter, followed some of the children into their teens, attempting to unravel the effects of poor attachment, adoption, new relationships, physical problems and medical issues associated with their early lives. Studies of these adoptees, whose initial conditions were shocking, yielded reason for optimism as many of the children developed quite well. Researchers noted that separation from familiar people is only one of many factors that help to determine the quality of development. Although higher rates of atypical insecure attachment patterns were found compared to native-born or early-adopted samples, 70% of later-adopted children exhibited no marked or severe attachment disorder behaviours.

Authors considering attachment in non-Western cultures have noted the connection of attachment theory with Western family and child care patterns characteristic of Bowlby's time. As children's experience of care changes, so may attachment-related experiences. For example, changes in attitudes toward female sexuality have greatly increased the numbers of children living with their never-married mothers or being cared for outside the home while the mothers work. This social change has made it more difficult for childless people to adopt infants in their own countries. There has been an increase in the number of older-child adoptions and adoptions from third-world sources in first-world countries. Adoptions and births to same-sex couples have increased in number and gained legal protection, compared to their status in Bowlby's time. Issues have been raised to the effect that the dyadic model characteristic of attachment theory cannot address the complexity of real-life social experiences, as infants often have multiple relationships within the family and in child care settings. It is suggested these multiple relationships influence one another reciprocally, at least within a family.

Principles of attachment theory have been used to explain adult social behaviours, including mating, social dominance and hierarchical power structures, group coalitions, and negotiation of reciprocity and justice. Those explanations have been used to design parental care training, and

have been particularly successful in the design of child abuse prevention programmes.

Biology of Attachment

Attachment theory proposes that the quality of caregiving from at least the primary carer is key to attachment security or insecurity. In addition to longitudinal studies, there has been psychophysiological research on the biology of attachment. Research has begun to include behaviour genetics and temperament concepts. Generally temperament and attachment constitute separate developmental domains, but aspects of both contribute to a range of interpersonal and intrapersonal developmental outcomes. Some types of temperament may make some individuals susceptible to the stress of unpredictable or hostile relationships with caregivers in the early years. In the absence of available and responsive caregivers it appears that some children are particularly vulnerable to developing attachment disorders.

In psychophysiological research on attachment, the two main areas studied have been autonomic responses, such as heart rate or respiration, and the activity of the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis. Infants' physiological responses have been measured during the Strange Situation procedure looking at individual differences in infant temperament and the extent to which attachment acts as a moderator. There is some evidence that the quality of caregiving shapes the development of the neurological systems which regulate stress.

Another issue is the role of inherited genetic factors in shaping attachments: for example one type of polymorphism of the DRD2 dopamine receptor gene has been linked to anxious attachment and another in the 5-HT_{2A} serotonin receptor gene with avoidant attachment. This suggests that the influence of maternal care on attachment security is not the same for all children. One theoretical basis for this is that it makes biological sense for children to vary in their susceptibility to rearing influence.