

13. Attachment Theory and Related Research On Mother-Child Bonding: Bowlby, Ainsworth, and Harlow

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A child's greatest psychological needs are for constancy and intimacy.
—Richard. Mosier¹

It should not hurt to be a child.
— Popular slogan

Earlier in the text saw the critical importance of infancy in the child's emotional development through the lens of psychoanalysis (Freud and Erikson), including certain parenting practices that are detrimental to child development (e.g., severe toilet training). But what about continuing patterns of neglect or abuse? Nadine Burke Harris is California's first Attorney General (Loudenback, 2019). Her important work on adverse childhood experiences (ACEs; Harris, 2019) has inspired new lines of research and treatment into this thorny, often unrecognized problem, which, in certain economically deprived populations reaches epidemic proportions; yet is it also more widely spread in the general population than is ordinarily imagined. ACEs children are characterized by a history of verbal, physical, or sexual abuse, abject neglect, or drug, alcohol, or mental health problems of the parents. As adults these children experience mental and physical health issues; including a greater propensity for cancer, heart disease, pulmonary problems, suicide ideation, and early deaths.

Attachment theory relates to the ways in which early child-parent bonding affects later personality, including personality disorders. The theory began with John Bowlby, a psychoanalyst, who was open to ideas from other areas of psychology. "The theory naturally spans several usually separate areas of psychology; personality, social, developmental, clinical, and

comparative” (Fraley & Shaver, 2008, p. 536). Ethology in particular stimulated Bowlby’s theorizing.

Bowlby’s Attachment Theory

Bowlby and Orphaned Children

John Bowlby’s, early work (1950/1995) for the World Health organization recognized the deplorable conditions of not only orphaned, but also homeless children in Europe following World War II. He studied the effects of these conditions on development. Bowlby, a British physician trained in psychoanalysis, stressed the importance of parental—but especially maternal—attachment to her children. Children of such neglect have problems forming appropriate attachments to others. They lacked the ability to love, and to be loved.

Attachment theory has its roots in ethology and evolutionary psychology. It is concerned with the emotional bond formed between an infant and its caregivers, but most especially to the mother. Children evolved to be “cute” in order to attract the attention of others, so smiling as well as crying aid in this endeavor. As with Lorenz’s goslings, there appears to be a critical period during which children learn to bond with their parents. Bowlby noted that toddlers will follow their mothers, paralleling that of the geese, although he was reluctant to label this “instinctual” behavior. They also experience stress when the mother or mother figure leaves them. This bonding is what is called infantile *attachment*. Laura Berk (2004) puts this nicely: “Watch babies of this age [infancy] and notice how they single out their parents for special attention. For example, when the mother enters the room, the baby breaks into a broad, friendly smile. When she picks him up, he pats her face, explores her hair, and snuggles against her. When he feels anxious or afraid, he crawls into her lap and clings closely (p. 185).” Note the role of mutual affection that is present in such bonding.

Bowlby believed that evolution played a part in this tendency to bond. Hunter-gatherers had a semi-nomadic existence in which they needed to move about in search of game and foraged food.

And children of course had to be taken along with the adults. Attachment behavior insured that the children were never too far from their parents during such travels. For the child's part, she needed to stay close to the mother; otherwise she would make an easy target for predators. So just as with chicks and goslings—and for the same reasons according to Bowlby (1969)—the child learned to follow, or stay close, to the mother.

Assuming Bowlby was correct, is there still reason enough for toddlers' needs to stay close to Mom today? True, predators are not in abundance in our current environments, but who's to protect the child from himself or from others; from the hot stove or the open window; the older sib, or the aggressive dog next door? Or from the well-meaning (or not so well-meaning) stranger?

Bowlby's (1969) Four Stages of Infantile Attachment

Newborns for the first few months of life attend to the sight of human faces or the sound of their voices by moving their heads in the direction of the stimulus. This appears to be an inborn trait, which characterizes the *preattachment phase*, so called because the child has not yet bonded with mother or others. Yet the infant practices instinctual *signaling behavior*. Aside from smiling, they babble, reflexively grasp fingers and breasts, laugh, pout, and cry; all ways of signaling their needs to the mother.

After about six weeks they begin to exhibit a "*social smile*" in response to human faces. For approximately the next six months, during this *attachment-in-the-making* phase the child learns to focus on familiar faces and reacts with pleasure at their sight.

The next phase lasts for about the first three years, in which *true or clear-cut attachment* bonds are formed. During this time the young child experiences *separation anxiety* when the attachment figure is absent. There is a fear, whether conscious or unconscious, of being abandoned. This fear, too, is surely rooted in evolution, for the child at this age depends so much on the support and presence of its parents, who provide a *secure base*, allowing the child to wander and explore, knowing that the parent is never too far away. The infant now smiles mainly at familiar faces, accompanied by a *fear reaction to strangers*, which begins take place at around seven months.

In the fourth stage from about three years until the ending of childhood, under normal circumstances, the child begins to trust more when the caregivers are absent. The development of language helps to facilitate this understanding, as the parents are able to reassure the child that their absence is temporary and that they will return in due course. This stage is one of *partnership or reciprocal relationship* between the parent and child.

Homeostasis in a Broad Context: Stability vs. Thriving?

If you took a basic biology course you are probably familiar with homeostasis. This refers to the body's regulation of its own functioning. The analogy is often given of a rheostat for temperature control: too hot, turn on the cooler; too cold, switch the heater on. So it is that we eat when hungry, drink when thirsty, and so forth, but with little or no conscious thought about our needs and deeds. Our nervous systems, as well as our hormonal systems, do much of the regulating without any conscious awareness on our part at all.

Antonio Damasio (2018) has a broader view. He sees homeostasis not as stasis or balance "...but to a state in which the operations of life felt as if they were upgraded to well-being (p. 49)." For him the goal of homeostasis is not merely stability, but *flourishing*. This expanded view requires some conscious goal-setting. In Damasio's view, culture itself is a form of homeostatic striving. Our feelings (feelings are stressed in Damasio's theorizing) help us to identify our needs, and thus can direct our actions. And as social beings, we can foresee future needs, and therefore self-regulate in order to meet them. Tribes and later, whole societies, were formed on such a basis according to Damasio.

Given this framework it seems clear that children have not merely needs derived from deficiency, but also needs to thrive and flourish. The wise parent understands this implicitly.

Normal or secure attachment develops during his stages. In the third, when the child forms a strong and lasting bond with the mother or other primary care giver, she learns to depend on this bonding in order to feel safe and secure. But not all development proceeds normally, as Bowlby observed in his European study.

Ainsworth and Attachment Disorders

Mary Ainsworth was a protégé of John Bowlby who continued his work in attachment theory. His notion of separation anxiety played a major role in her psychology. Ainsworth considers three types of insecure attachment, based on her observations of children in her *strange situation* experiments. This ingenious methodology works as follows (Ainsworth and others, 1978; Berk, 2004) as a series of eight episodes.

First, the observer places mother and child in a room, then leaves. Next, the mother seats herself in a chair while the child plays with any of several toys surrounding her (“parent as a secure base”). Third (“reaction to an unfamiliar figure”), a stranger enters the room, takes a seat, and enters a conversation with the mother.

Fourth, the mother leaves the room and the stranger attempts to relate to the infant (“separation anxiety” is noted). Fifth, the mother returns and the stranger departs (“reaction to reunion” is observed). Sixth, the parent again departs (“separation anxiety” is again observed). Seventh, the stranger reappears and tries to give the child comfort (“ability to be reassured by stranger” is observed). And eighth, the mother returns and tries to comfort the baby, offer toys for her to play with, etc. (“reaction to reunion” is again observed).

So, what do these observations of the child’s behavior tell us? How well can we now assess the child’s security of attachment to the mother?

The *securely attached* child may experience distress when the mother leaves. She displays distress and may or may not cry, but she seeks contact comfort when the mother returns. But for

children with attachment problems the pattern may be different, as follows:

1. ***Anxious-avoidant attachment.*** The avoidant child has learned that she cannot trust the parent to provide for her need for succorance. She fails to seek warmth from the mother-figure; she doesn't cling, and is not particularly distressed by her absence. The child is not distressed by the presence of strangers, but may instead be indifferent to them, as well as to her mother's return after some absence.

Alison Gopnik (2009, pp. 181-182; emphasis added) characterizes the avoidant child this way:

Some avoidant babies actively avoid interacting with the caregiver both when she leaves and when she returns. Rather than crying or celebrating, these babies simply look at their toys with extrastudious interest. You might think that these babies are simply less distressed than the secure babies. But it turns out that if you measure the heart rate during the separation the physiological signs indicate that inside the babies are miserable—*one of the saddest research findings I know*. These babies do notice that the caregivers are gone and are unhappy as a result, but they seem to have learned that expressing that unhappiness just makes things worse. They've learned that crying is more likely to lead to misery than to comfort, and so even at this very early stage they've learned to tamp down their emotions express them.

2. ***Anxious-resistant attachment.*** The child may be clingy and becomes angry when left alone. She may fail to explore the room and the toys. When the mother returns she is not easily comforted. She may aggressively act out by resisting or hitting the mother as “punishment” for her abandonment.

Still other “anxious” babies not only become very distressed when a caregiver leaves—they are also inconsolable when she returns. Instead of a quick return to calm happiness they continue to cling and cry to their caregivers. They may get mad, too, throwing away their toys and crying angrily at Mom even as they cling to her (Gopnik, p. 182).

3. ***Disorganized-disoriented attachment.*** This catch-all category includes children who are maladjusted, but who do not fit into the other categories of insecure attachment. Perhaps confused

is an apt adjective for these children, who are clearly not securely attached but whose behaviors are inconsistent from moment to moment. For example, such a child may cry in one instance and appear detached or depressed in another. Possibly some of these children suffered not merely neglect, but also abuse.

“Disorganized” babies are the worst off. These babies never develop a consistent set of expectations at all. Instead they veer unpredictably from one pattern of behavior to another. These babies are particularly vulnerable to later problems and difficulties (Gopnik, 2009, p. 183).

About 65 percent of US children are securely attached. About another 20 percent are avoidant, 15 percent are resistant, and 5-10 percent are disorganized (Berk, 2004). But attachment doesn't cease with childhood; rather it is an ongoing process that extends through the lifespan (Ainsworth and others, 1978). As will be seen next, attachment styles formed in childhood can affect the way adults relate to one another later on in life.

Attachment Style versus Temperament

Children are born with different temperamental dispositions, as was discussed in the chapter on traits. Could it be, as some have speculated, that attachment styles are merely another way of describing temperament? According to Fraley and Shaver (2008, p. 521), “...most studies that have examined measures of temperament and attachment classifications have found weak or inconsistent associations between them...” and that (p. 522) “...attachment classifications are not simply an alternative way of measuring temperament”; so they claim that these are indeed distinct phenomena.

However, Kagan and Fox (2006) state that “There is a lively controversy surrounding the contribution of inhibited or uninhibited temperaments to a child's reactions in the Ainsworth Strange Situation and, therefore, to the classifications of secure or insecure attachment (Connell & Thompson, 1966)”, p. 210), and

“...the empirical overlap between these behavioral domains [attachment theory versus studies of temperament] is greater than might be anticipated” (p. 211). As is often the case in social science, further research on this controversy, particularly in terms of possible interactions between temperament and attachment style, appears to be needed. Also, more research into caregivers’ personalities and cultural differences in child rearing and their effects on attachment style could benefit from further study.

Attachment Styles in Adulthood: Evaluating the Theory from the Standpoint of d\Development.

How does a child’s attachment style influence adult development? Two opposing tracts have been studied: the positive and negative effects of secure versus insecure attachment. It seems useful here to look ahead toward some of the concepts from humanism (Chapter 16) concerning parents’ granting of conditional versus unconditional positive regard toward their children. On the positive side, Fraley and Shaver state “Research supports the claim that secure individuals are more likely to exhibit all of Rogers’s (1961) defining features of the “fully functioning person”: openness to experience, existential living, organismic trust, experiential freedom, and creativity” (p. 535); and so on with generally positive individual and relational traits, including Maslow’s “B-perception.” These conclusions are gleaned from research by Mikulincer and Shaver (e.g., 2005), and others. Those who have experienced negative attachment styles, on the other hand, tend to remain insecure, with the associated consequences, such as inability to form close personal relationships, self-doubt, and in general with negative personality traits (psychopathology). Optimistically they Fraley and Shaver see attachment theory as:

In short, attachment theory offers a means to conceptualize a number of the qualities that have been emphasized in classical and contemporary research on personal adjustment and self-actualization. The theory does so within the same framework that is used to understand potential disorders of personality, thereby allowing the functional and dynamic aspects of

personality functioning to be understood *with a single set of concepts* (p. 536; emphasis added).

From the above quotation it seems to me that these theorists are attempting to stretch their theory to do a little too much work. Granted, they are not claiming that secure attachment *guarantees* a well-adjusted adulthood; only that it may help to facilitate such an outcome, particularly when secure adults are contrasted with insecure ones. But their summary of the work of Bowlby and Ainsworth certainly is sound. This work stands the test of time: secure and insecure attachment styles have “securely” found their place in contemporary psychology by generating vast amounts of research (mostly) confirming the arguments and predictions of the attachment theorists.

Effects of Child Neglect: The “Still Face” Experiments

What would your 2½ year child do if you placed her in a high chair, played with her, showed her lots of affection, and then for a period of three minutes or so you just looked ahead with a straight, expressionless face?

Edward Tronic and his colleagues (1975) tried such an experiment and the results were remarkable—and disturbing. The distress reactions of the child were heartbreaking². The baby becomes restless in attempting to attract the adult’s attention, but becomes increasingly upset resulting in crying, perhaps a tantrum. The child’s hear rate increases as does production of the stress hormone cortisol. The implications for child development and parenting are clear enough!

Harry Harlow

Unlike Bowlby and Ainsworth, Harry Harlow was a comparative (animal) experimental psychologist. He may seem a

little out of place at this point in the text because he was not particularly interested in ethology or evolution, but rather, he studied animals (rhesus monkeys) in a lab setting. However, his work is important for its influence on mother-child attachment and bonding, and especially on the problems of parental neglect on child development; albeit in monkeys rather than humans. But his results are easily generalizable.

Harlow's (e.g., Harlow & Zimmerman, 1959) experiments involved separating young monkeys at birth, then studying their development under varying conditions of deprivation. While his work was considered very important in the history of psychology it was also, by today's standards, quite unethical—some conditions were even cruel, such as raising some of these infant primates in total darkness and isolation.

His most important work, however, involved studying “love” or what should more precisely be called attachment. He referred to this as phenomenon as “contact comfort.”

Ingenuously, he created two artificial mother surrogates made of cloth, wire, and simulated monkey faces. The wire “mothers” had bottles for nursing attached to their breasts, and so they were the ones who supplied nutrition. Cloth mothers, however, provided warmth. When exposed to a frightful “fear stimulus” the infant monkeys invariably retreated to the comfort of the cloth mothers, clinging tightly to them. They only went to the cloth mothers for feeding. Thus he demonstrated that childhood attachment was not a function of physiological need, but rather something more fundamental.

In other studies he showed that, similar to the Bowlby-Ainsworth results, infant monkeys who were totally separated from either a real or a cloth mother became neurotic and unsociable. As parents themselves they could be abusive and cruel, even to the extent of crushing their baby's skulls or biting off their toes (Blum, 2002). But what might this suggest to us about human abusive parents?

Part of the context for Harlow's work was to demonstrate the problems inherent in the then popular behaviorist movement. Remember (Chapter 10 on learning theory) that Skinner and other did not believe that there was any place for emotion or cognition in

psychology. And also there was Watson's injunction, not to "spoil" children with excessive cuddling, not to be mawkish and sentimental, etc. Freud also thought cuddling to be narcissistic and unnecessary. Clearly after Harlow, Bowlby, and Ainsworth, love (attachment) could no longer be overlooked in our field as a crucial variable in human development. Babies, whether human or otherwise mammalian, require more than milk to thrive. Oddly, in the thirties, many people in the US (partly under the influence of psychologists such as Watson) came to believe "spare the rod, spoil the child" ought to be their guiding principle. Fortunately, Harlow set out to prove them wrong.

"Love at Goon Park: Harry Harlow and the Science of Affection"

This book, a best seller in its time, was written by Deborah Blum (2002), a Pulitzer Prize winning science writer. Harlow's lab address was 600 N. Park, which when handwritten was sometime mistaken for "Goon Park," hence the title of the biography.

The book is a difficult read, especially when encountering the worst cruelties Harlow exposed his monkeys to. Yet he felt redeemed by his results; harming a few monkeys psychologically, he thought, justified the knowledge gained that could be applied to our own species.

According to Blum, Harlow himself was unfortunately a damaged man; a drinker, and a poor parent, at least with his first family. He offended feminists, too, by insisting the mother's place was in the home, taking care of their children. Perhaps we can see how his own experimental results helped him to reach this conclusion.

However, he remains a seminal figure in the history of psychology whose work, though it could not be performed today, forever altered our field.

Working and Single Parent Families and Child Care

If attachment to a maternal figure is so crucial to a child's developing personality, what happens when both parents or the mother or father in a single parent family, work outside the home?

Today this model of family life prevails in much of Western societies. In the mid-20th century the most common practice for a two-parent family was to have a bread-winning father and a stay-at-home mother, who attended to the growing children's needs. But today for many families having both parents working has become an economic necessity. This means separation from the children at increasingly early ages. So either a surrogate parent (sometimes a grandparent) steps in or is hired, or the child is sent to a pre-school or daycare center while the parents are away at work. It is also increasingly common to find some families with a stay-at-home Dad who tends the housework and cares for the children. So how do these changing scenarios affect the child's attachment needs?

My, How Families Have Changed!

Sometimes we may hear notes of nostalgia about the "good old days." If you are a senior citizen you may recall them, fondly or otherwise, in the ways family life was presented in TV sitcoms from the 1950s. Examples include "The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet," "Father Knows Best," "The Donna Reed Show," and "Leave it to Beaver." These all-American families were White and middle class. Father was the bread-winner and head of the household. His word was law (except when the rest of the family members found ways of circumventing him). The wife was responsible for housekeeping and raising the children. TV ads promoted sleek, modern appliances to make life easier and happier for "the little woman," who perhaps greeted the kids when they came home from school with cookies and milk. Families with two

working parents? This was unthinkable—and in that era it was un-American.

Problems in these shows were always situational: that annoying neighbor who wouldn't return the tools; the car that needed maintenance; those "bad hair" days, and so forth. Never themes about problems of alcohol or drugs, juvenile delinquency, or God forbid, mass shootings! Instead people lived carefree lives of suburban splendor, with a happy ending for each and every episode.

Today's family situations feature minorities as well as White people, with themes ranging from single parenting and divorce, gay and lesbian romance, to student protests to whatever might be happening in the news. This is not to deny that some shows still promote "politically correct" cultural propaganda. But at least they have varied the venue to reflect some newer realities of everyday life. The "good old days" never existed except in fantasy land. So how realistic are today's features? We may not know until the next generation arrives to tell us.

Role of the Father and Others

By tradition people think of the child's mother as the primary care giver. But (with the possible exception of breast feeding) the child may, and often does, form equally strong bonds with the father. But in the US and in many other cultures, fathers tend to relate more playfully, even in a rough-and-tumble manner, with babies; whereas mothers are more likely to attend to physical needs and affection sharing (e.g., Lamb, 1987). As usual, however, averages do not speak to individuals, and it is not a good idea to stereotype fathers or mothers "across the board." Bowlby (1969) himself recognized that infants may form multiple attachments to others, such as grandparents and siblings, as well to the mother.

Day Care and Pre-school

At an appropriate time (this varies according to the child's developmental level, including social skills—as well the possible need for both parents to work) pre-school or day care may take up

a large part of the child's day. It is imperative that parents be thoroughly familiar with the facility in which they place their child. They should get to know the owners, teachers, and volunteers, and their philosophy of child care, for abuse in such facilities is not unheard of. A really good facility with a knowledgeable working staff can be a gold mine for both parents and children. Look for proper accreditation. In the US this could be the National Academy of Early Childhood Programs, or the National Association for Family Child Care (Berk, 2004). Of course word of mouth from other parents you know and trust can be a factor too.

For Thought and Discussion

1. Do you have a family of your own, with children? Consider sharing your experiences with the class regarding their attachment to you and others.
2. How has TV and the movies affected you and your family when growing up? Or today? Think primarily about how the role of families are or were portrayed.
3. This is a tough one: did you as a child experience parental abuse or having been abused by any other adults? If so, do you care to share your experience(s) with the class?
4. If you have very young children, can you share something about their temperaments (e.g., anxious, relaxed, aggressive, etc.)? If you have more than one child, how do they differ temperamentally?

Notes

1. Lecture notes, UC Berkeley, to graduate philosophy class, ca. March, 1977.
2. Here is a link that demonstrates the Tronick “Still Face” experiment:
<https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/she-the-people/wp/2013/09/16/affects-of-child-abuse-can-last-a-lifetime-watch-the-still-face-experiment-to-see-why/>
Warning: You may find this video quite disturbing!

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