

Attachment Theory Overview

The Purpose of Attachment in Infancy (John Bowlby, Mary Ainsworth, Rene Spitz, Harry Harlow)

- A caregiver's presence is necessary for the survival of infant primates and mammals (primates can cling or follow their caregiver from birth: humans cannot, so there must be another mechanism for keeping the child and parent physically together)
- Protection from predators and the elements
- Protection from being overwhelmed by negative arousal/distress (fear, separation, pain, excitement, hunger, thirst, cold) or by positive over excitement
- Supporting the infant in exploratory behaviors so that they become competent to care for themselves

The Purpose of Attachment Throughout Life:

- Attachment needs continue throughout life:
 - A "safe haven" for affect regulation
 - A "secure base" for exploration
- The attachment system is especially important when we are stressed, in danger, fatigued, ill
- Attachment behaviors continue throughout life

Attachment Behaviors:

Infant/child:

Following, arms-up signal, crying, calling-only language: "up", "mama" etc, non-nutritional sucking, gazing, reaching, smiling, clinging, grasping, cooing/babbling

Parent:

Carrying, kissing, hugging, rocking, holding, singing, smiling, soothing sounds/words, laughing, gazing, snuggling, talking

Secure Attachment

- child trusts in the reliability and availability of parent.
- uses parent as a secure base for exploration
- shows signs of missing the caregiver when separated, especially on repeat separations

Caregiver patterns:

- Prompt, consistent, attuned response to positive and negative arousal in child

Insecure Attachment Styles in Children

Ambivalent/Resistant Attachment

- Unable to rely on availability of parent
- No exploration in parent's presence
- Very distressed upon separation

Upon reunion: alternate bids for contact with signs of angry rejection of parent

About 10% of middle-class American samples

Caregiver pattern:

- Inconsistent caregiver availability and attunement leading to increase in attachment-seeking behaviors

Avoidant Attachment

- Unable to rely on availability of parent.
- Explores readily with little display of distress or secure-base behavior with parent
- Responds minimally to separation
- Little visible distress when left alone (actually just as physiologically anxious as the distressed child above, but has learned to ignore that arousal)

Upon reunion:

- Looks away from or actively avoids parent
- Often focuses on toys or other people in room
- If picked up may stiffen or lean away
- Seeks distance from parent

About 20-25% of middle-class American samples

Caregiver pattern:

- Consistently unavailable caregiver leading to early self-reliance and self-soothing (though physiological measures show that anxiety is present), depressed or distracted caregivers, neglect.

Disorganized Attachment

- Mix of avoidant and resistant behaviors
- Seems dazed, confused, or apprehensive in presence of parent

Caregiver pattern

- Parent alternates between comforting and frightening or hurting the child
- Caregiver may be psychotic, or fearful of the infant, or unable to protect the child from threat

Adult Attachment Styles (from the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI) data of Mary Main and colleagues)

Secure/Autonomous

- Valuing of attachment and able to objectively evaluate positives and negatives in life
- Consistent, coherent narrative style on the AAI and in therapy
- "I find it relatively easy to get close to others... I am comfortable depending on them and having them depend on me... I don't often worry about being abandoned or about someone getting too close to me."

Earned Secure

- Adults with a history of insecure attachment that has changed over time
- Coherent narrative style (see above sample quotes)
- Endured consistently harsh or ineffective parenting in their youth without becoming insecure

Preoccupied (parallel to anxious/ambivalent styles in children)

- Not coherent in their answers on the AAI or in therapy
- May use a lot of "filler" like "Yada Yada..."
- Long, vague, tangled narratives
- "I find that others are reluctant to get as close as I would like... I often worry that my partner doesn't really love me or won't want to stay with me... I want to merge completely with another person and this desire sometimes scares people away..."
- Preoccupied with past attachment relationships, and with hurts, injustices, criticism, and especially with rejection

Dismissing (parallel to Avoidant style in children)

- Not coherent in their attachment narratives
- Brief answers and little ability to substantiate their chosen adjectives
- Normalizing and generalizing
- "I am somewhat uncomfortable being close to others... I find it difficult to trust them completely and difficult to allow myself to depend on them... I am nervous when anyone gets too close, and my partners often want to be more intimate than I feel comfortable being..."
- Often idealize

Unresolved/disorganized (parallel to disorganized style in children)

- Narratives of loss or abuse on AAI and in therapy
- Lapses in reasoning or discourse
- Prolonged silences