

Attachment & Attachment Styles

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Our intimate relationships are shaped by the histories and experiences we bring to them. This is particularly the case for the attitudes and beliefs we have about close relationships because they are so strongly influenced by the emotional bond we formed as children with our primary caregivers. The proposition that this childhood emotional bond, known as *attachment*, plays such a critical role in our adult lives has been a topic of extensive research. This article reviews the basic theory and research about child attachment and then discusses the implications of child attachment in shaping the types or styles of attachment we develop as adults.

Attachment Theory

Bowlby's (1969, 1973, 1980) seminal research on child attachment established the initial conceptual basis for understanding adult attachment. In his studies, he explored the process by which bonds of affection are formed and broken between infants and their caregivers. More specifically, he investigated how infants become emotionally bonded to their caregivers and emotionally distressed when separated from them.

Bowlby hypothesized that the evolutionary basis of attachment is its capacity to provide a consistent developmental framework for children to explore their environments and foster close relationships with others (Dunn, 1996). He further postulated that the proximity seeking behavior involved in attachment provides children with what he called a "safe haven" to carry out these tasks. As they mature, he argued that children internalize their relationships with their attachment figures which enable them to develop schemas or mental models of these experiences in their attempts to establish what he termed as a "secure base." Children subsequently carry these mental models inside them in the form of multisensory images (faces, voices, smells, tastes, touches, etc.) that enable them to navigate the world around them.

As Siegal (1999) points out, the formation of these mental models is a fundamental way in which implicit memory in humans is formed and enables the mind to produce generalizations and summaries of past experiences. These models are then used to shape present cognitions for more rapid processing of ongoing perceptions, and also to help the mind anticipate what events are likely to happen next. In this way, forming mental models is the essential manner in which the brain learns from the past and then directly influences future actions and reactions. The attachment component of this neurological development provides one of the basic templates for humans to establish and manage closeness in their interpersonal relationships.

Types of Attachment

One of the most notable findings from Bowlby's research is that children manifest different types of attachment. The most prevalent type he found is what he called *secure attachment*. This kind of attachment developed from caregivers who were consistently attentive

* This article draws extensively from the attachment research summarized by S. Brehm, R. Miller, D. Perlman, & S. Campbell (eds.), *Intimate Relationships*, 2002, McGraw-Hill.

and nurturing to their children. As a result, these youngsters came to rely on others comfortably, learning that other people were trustworthy sources of security and kindness.

However, other children encountered different situations. For some, attentive care was unpredictable and inconsistent. Their caregivers were warm and interested on some occasions but distracted, anxious, or unavailable on others. These children developed fretful, mixed feelings about others. Bowlby labeled these children as forming *anxious attachment*. Being uncertain of their caregiver's behavior, these children become nervous and clingy, displaying excessive neediness in their relationships with others.

For still other children, attentive care was altogether lacking. For these children caregiving was provided reluctantly by resentful and otherwise inattentive caregivers. Such children learned that little good came from depending on others, leading them to withdraw from others with what Bowlby called *avoidant attachment*. These children were often suspicious and distrustful toward others, and did not easily form close relationships.

As a result of Bowlby's studies, different types of attachment became an important area of research. Ainsworth and her colleagues (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1987) developed a landmark experiment, called the Infant Strange Situation, to study these different types of attachment. In this experiment, one-year olds were separated and then reunited with their attachment figures in an unfamiliar environment. The idea was to study the different types of responses infants would have in being exposed to this situation (Siegel, 1999).

These researchers found that when securely attached children were faced with the strange environment after separation, they ran to their mothers, calmed down, and then began to explore the unfamiliar new setting. In contrast, anxiously attached children cried and clung to their mothers, ignoring their reassurances that all was well. And avoidantly attached children actually shunned their mothers, keeping their distance and evading close contact even when they were scared. Finally, these researchers also observed what they labeled as a *disorganized attachment* pattern in some children where they rapidly vacillated between anxious and avoidant responses. These children were the most agitated and the least able to be soothed by their mothers.

Attachment Styles

Extending this type of research, Hazan and Shaver (1987) showed that similar orientations toward closeness, referred to as attachment styles, could also be observed among adults. Wide-ranging surveys have shown that about 60% of adults have secure attachment styles, 15% have anxious attachment styles, 20% have avoidant attachment styles, and 5% fall into the more troubled disorganized attachment style (2011 Levine & Heller, 2010; Schacter, Gilbert, Wegner, & Nock,).

It is now well established that attachment styles broadly influence our thoughts, feelings, and behavior in our close relationships. People with secure styles tend to be more satisfied with their close partnerships than people with insecure styles (Feeney, 1999). Avoidant people have a lack of faith in others that leads them to warily avoid intimacy; anxious people seek out such

closeness but nervously worry that it won't last; and anxious-avoidant people are the least secure and are agitated by both closeness and distance in their relationships (Shaver & Clark, 1994).

Parenting & Attachment Styles

While it is clear from the research that the quality of parenting has a major impact on children's attachment and attachment styles, it is also the case that children's temperament and personality have an important effect on the quality of parenting (Carver, 1997; Vaughn & Bost, 1999). As parents know, babies are born with various temperaments and arousal levels. Some newborns have an easy going temperament, whereas others are more fussy and excitable. These differences, together with inborn differences in personality, make some children easier to parent than others. Consequently, the quality of care a child receives can depend, in part, on the child's own personality and behavior. In this manner, attachment style is thought to be influenced by the child's inborn traits (Carver, 1997; Vaughn & Bost, 1999).

As it turns out, however, a child's temperament and personality have only a moderate effect on the kind of parenting he or she receives (Vaughn & Bost, 1999), and people do not seem to be genetically predisposed to develop certain types of attachment styles (Waller & Shaver, 1994). Instead, our early childhood experiences seem to play a larger part in shaping the styles we bring to subsequent relationships. For instance, mothers' behavior toward their infants predicts what styles of attachment the children will have when they are older (Isabella, 1998). In fact, it is possible to predict with 75% accuracy what attachment style a child will have by assessing the mother's style before her baby is even born (Fonagy, Steele, & Steele, 1991). Thereafter, the quality of parenting that adolescents receive predicts how well they will behave in their own romances when they are young adults (Conger et al., 2000). Youngsters apparently import the lessons they learn at home into their subsequent intimate relationships with others.

Changing Attachment Styles

Unlike children, we as adults are not the prisoners of our experience because our attachment styles continue to be shaped by the experiences we encounter (Carnelley & Janlff-Bulman, 1992). Having been learned, attachment styles can be unlearned, and over time, attachment styles can and do change (Baldwin & Fehr, 1995). A bad breakup of a relationship can make a formerly secure person insecure, and a good relationship can make an avoidant person less so (Kirkpatrick & Hazan, 1994). As many as a third of us may encounter real change in our attachment styles over a two year period (Fuller & Finham, 1995), and the good news is that the avoidant and anxious styles are more likely to change toward a more secure one (Davila, Burge, & Hammen, 1997).

Nevertheless, once they have been established, attachment styles can also be quite stable and enduring. One major reason for this is that people tend to enter into relationships that reinforce their existing tendencies (Scharfe & Bartholomew, 1994). By remaining aloof and avoiding interdependency, for example, avoidant people may never learn that some people can be trusted and closeness can be comforting--and that tendency perpetuates their avoidant style. In the absence of dramatic new experiences, people's styles of attachment can persist for decades (Klohn & Bera, 1998).

One of the main findings from this research is that our attitudes and beliefs about the nature and worth of close relationships are shaped by our experiences with them. In addition, our earliest notions about our own interpersonal worth and the trustworthiness of others emerge from our interactions with our major caregivers, and thus they start us down a path of either trust or fear. However, the journey never stops, and later obstacles or assistance from fellow travelers may divert us and change our routes. Depending on our interpersonal experiences, our learned styles of attachment may either change with time or persist indefinitely.

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