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History of Attachment Theory



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Synonyms

[Bond](#); [Relationship pattern](#)

Definition

The bond between two persons, often between an infant and his/her caregiver.

Ethological Beginnings

Ethologists were the first to notice that all species exhibit particular biologically programmed attachment behaviors. These behaviors ensure that adults will care for their young and increase their chances of survival. Current attachment theory was formed by examining the research conducted by ethologists on animals. For instance, an ethologist, Konrad Lorenz (1935), studied imprinting in ducklings and goslings. Imprinting is a phenomenon in which a duckling or gosling will follow a moving object. Imprinting is believed to be innate and most likely to happen

during a sensitive period shortly after birth. Harry Harlow's (1958) extensive research with infant and mother monkeys also paved the way for current attachment theory. Harlow separated infant monkeys from their birth mothers and placed them with surrogate "mothers." Infant monkeys were then raised by either a wire-mesh mother who supplied them with a bottle of milk or a wire mother wrapped in a soft cloth. Harlow found that monkeys spent much more time with the cloth mother, especially when the infant monkeys were scared or when they were encountering new surroundings. Harlow's studies directly tested the hypothesis that young infants form attachments to their mothers because they are the source of food, rather than affection. In fact, the behavioral viewpoint at the time proposed that mothers should limit their affection toward their children (Watson 1928/1972). Harlow's finding that infant monkeys used the cloth mother as an attachment figure emphasized the importance of contact comfort to the attachment process. In addition, Harlow's work found that infant monkeys would use their cloth mothers as a secure base when exploring new situations.

Bowlby's Attachment Theory

Basing much of his work on imprinting and non-human primate studies, John Bowlby (1958) is credited with introducing the notion of attachment from an ethological perspective to the field of

developmental psychology. Bowlby proposed that attachment is a bond between an infant and caregiver which increases the likelihood that an infant will survive. Human infants, in particular, are born depending on their caregivers for survival. Bowlby proposed that attachment evolved to keep the infant safe from predators and exposure to outside elements. To ensure that the infant survives, he/she must exhibit behaviors that will elicit attention from a parent and create a need to keep the infant safe. These attachment behaviors can be as simple as a smile, a coo, or a babble early on. As infants get older, they are more likely to show proximity-seeking behaviors such as crawling, walking, following their caregivers, and using visual social referencing. Developmental psychologists believe that this proximity-seeking behavior is later related to separation and stranger anxiety as infants begin to become more independent of their caregivers. It is also believed that evolution has created a biologically predisposed need for caregivers to want to attend to their young. Adults find that they want to attend to their infants' smiling and babbling and to keep them safe. Lorenz (1943) even discussed how the cuteness of many baby mammals, including humans, draws in adults and elicits caregiving behaviors. Unlike imprinting, Bowlby (1969) believed that human attachment develops gradually. It is not until approximately 6 to 9 months of age that the infant discriminates and prefers to remain in contact with his/her attachment figure. The final stage of his four-stage theory, goal-corrected partnerships, does not happen until the infant is at least 3 years of age. Attachment does not fully develop until the infant has the communication skills necessary to foster a reciprocal interaction between caregiver and infant in which each understands the other person's emotional responses. Bowlby also proposed that an important cognitive mechanism arises as a result of the infant and parent attachment relationship. He called this mechanism an internal working model, a memory of the attachment bond that creates a cognitive representation of the infant's relationships with others. If the attachment relationship was one in which the parent was consistent and responsive to the child's needs, the infant

would have an internal working model that people can be trusted. If instead the parent was inconsistent, insensitive, and unresponsive, the child would have a distrustful internal working model for relationships.

Empirically Measuring Attachment

The notion of attachment is a difficult emotional construct to define. Mary Ainsworth (Ainsworth 1973) is credited with creating an empirical examination to describe the attachment bond between a caregiver and infant/toddler between the ages of 12 and 24 months. Infants and caregivers are observed in a Strange Situation paradigm, especially identifying the attachment behaviors of proximity-seeking and using the caregiver as a secure base (Ainsworth et al. 1978). The Strange Situation paradigm is a series of eight contextual episodes which places the infant and caregiver in various situations, each lasting 3 min. In each situation, the infant interacts with his/her caregiver or a stranger or is left alone in an unfamiliar room. Ainsworth classified an infant/caregiver attachment by closely watching for how the infant uses the caregiver as a source of comfort. Secure infants (sometimes referred to as Type B), when distressed, will turn to their caregivers for support and comfort. They will exhibit proximity-seeking behaviors either visually or physically and explore the room after checking in with their caregivers. Caregivers will also reciprocally meet the needs of their infants, whether it be for comfort or to foster independence. Connecting this to Bowlby's ideas, it is hypothesized that securely attached infants have developed a trusting internal working model after many months of consistent and sensitive parenting responses. The other three categories of attachments are classified as insecure. Infants with insecure-resistant/anxious-ambivalent (sometimes referred to as Type C) attachments respond to the strange situation by exhibiting anxious, resistant, and contradictory behavior toward their attachment figure. They may, at one point, seek comfort from the parent by clinging but moments later show anger and push the parent

away. Infants with insecure-avoidant (sometimes referred to as Type A) attachment show little emotion and distress when separated from their parent and disengage and avoid contact when they return. Empirical research has since discovered an additional attachment style category, the disorganized (sometimes referred to as Type D) attachment (Main and Solomon 1986). Infants who exhibit disorganized attachment behaviors may exhibit anger, calm play, cry hysterically, stare blankly, or sometimes freeze or move slowly. More recent developmental theorists have proposed another classification, reactive attachment disorder, for children who have been significantly maltreated or institutionalized (Zeanah et al. 2004).

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