

Literature review on studies of john bowlby's attachment theory



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John Bowlby first proposed the term “ attachment” and thought its purpose could be evolutionary (Fraley, 2018). Bowlby suggested that infant behavior was dependent on the proximity and responsiveness of the caregiver. Infants, unable to verbally express their wants, perform certain actions in order to gain the attention of the caregiver. He suggested that this attachment is an innate drive in infants to ensure safety and survival. Bowlby also argued that the dependence infants have to their caregivers majorly impacts their psychological development. In his research, Bowlby concluded that from an early age, an infant’s first impressions of their environment are based heavily on their caregiver’s attentiveness, warmth, and responsiveness. Infants of caregivers who exhibit this attentiveness, warmth and responsiveness feel secure and confident when interacting with others and their environment (Fraley, 2018). Bowlby suggested that because the caregivers are attentive, the infant will explore and interact with little worry, understanding the caregiver will be dependent upon if trouble arises. However, if the caregiver is not attentive, warm or responsive, this negatively impact the infant’s worldview. Anxiety over possible dangers and an inconsistent caregiver could discourage a healthy development in terms of building relationships with others and the environment. Bowlby suggested that infants who routinely experience caregivers such as this can establish chronic anxiety, sadness and an inability to develop key interpersonal skills. Bowlby thought of attachment as long-term and long-lasting, describing it as “ cradle to the grave,” (Fraley, 2018).

Adding to John Bowlby’s research, Mary Ainsworth coined three terms to describe individual differences in types of attachment (Fraley & Shaver,

2000). In her infamous study Strange Situation study, Ainsworth determined there were three types of attachment that an infant can express. Secure, anxious-resistant, and avoidant. (A fourth type of attachment, disorganized, was later added to the original three.) According to Ainsworth infant with a secure attachment will explore their environment freely and be able to somewhat interact with others, cautiously (Hazan & Shaver, 1994). They are confident their caregiver will be present if danger occurs and can enjoy exploration of their environment. Infants with anxious-resistant attachment are extremely distressed when separated from their caregiver and they exhibit frustration and anger when the caregiver returns. Avoidant attached infants are neither upset nor happy when the caregiver returns. Following Bowlby's theory, Ainsworth suggested that the reason for the infant's behavior described above is due to the attentiveness, responsiveness, and readiness of the caregiver (Hazan & Shaver, 1994).

Bowlby suggested that attachments interact with the development of a child's internal working model, thus would have a great impact later in their lives. Areas such as quality of interpersonal skills, attitudes, and expectations others were said to be directly affected by an individual's internal working model. Children who experience warm and supporting parenting styles are likely to develop positive internal working models (Fraley & Shaver, 2000). They are then more likely to create and sustain healthy relationships as adults. Children who experience inconsistent or distant parenting styles were likely to develop negative internal working models, which then can predispose them to unhealthy expectations and attitudes in adult relationships. Although some research suggests that

therapy and major life events can modify attachments, research generally supports the idea that attachment styles are unlikely to transition (Hazan and Shaver, 1994).

Researchers Hazan and Shaver (1994) studied Bowlby's and Ainsworth's theories in adult relationships. They found similarities between infant-caregiver relationships and adults in romantic relationships, suggesting that attachment is involved in the quality of this adult relationship. They also support the concept that attachment is a long-term and almost permanent component to an individual's concept, attitude and perception of others.

" The attachment system is an organism-level system that is organized and regulated by social input, specifically by primary caregiver responsiveness to distress signals. On the basis of repeated interactions with the caregiver, infants learn what to expect, and they adjust their behavior accordingly. These expectations form the basis of mental representations (or to use Bowlby's term, internal working models) that can be used to forecast caregiver availability and responsiveness and that include interrelated models of self and attachment figure." (Hazan & Shaver, 1994, p. 5).

Unger and De Luca (2014) suggest that one major similarity between these two types of relationships is a key biological factor that ensures survival. In caregiver-infant relationships, this biological factor for need of attachment exists to ensure the safety of the infant. In adults, this need to develop close, romantic relationships can be seen as a biological drive to procreate and/or create a close bond to raise a child. Other similarities are suggested to exist as well. For example, Unger and De Luca (2014) write that the sense of

safety and consistency exist in both caregiver-infant and adult relationships. Further suggesting the idea that attachment is a long-term characteristic of how an individual will experience their world and the relationships they form in it.

Attachment and Child Abuse

Physical abuse and adult attachment

Unger and Luca (2014) found that adults who had experienced physical abuse were less likely to describe supportive adult relationships. Additionally, they found that in their sample of 848 participants, those who had experienced childhood physical abuse were less likely to have positive, supportive adult relationships. Adult attachment was analyzed in this study as a mediating variable between childhood physical abuse and quality of adult relationships. Adult attachment mediated the relationship between this abuse and negative perceptions of self and others. Unger and Luca (2014) suggest that those who experienced childhood abuse are less likely to express emotion, have difficulty confiding in others and minimize experiences that have profound impacts on them. They stress that attachment is a major predictor in the quality and type of adult relationships, giving importance to the development of attachment at an early age (Unger & Luca, 2014). Gragtmans and Muller (2008) specifically studied adult attachment as a mediator between childhood physical abuse and adult social support. They found that view of self and view of other successfully mediated the relationship between childhood abuse and perceived social support as adults. Their research also studied the relationship the participants had with

authority figures. Participants with non-secure attachments had more negative feelings toward and perceived less support from authority figures (Gragtmans & Muller, 2008). Widom, Czaja & Kozakowski (2015) suggest that childhood physical abuse can impact adult attachment styles years later in their longitudinal study. Specifically, their study found that adult attachment mediated childhood physical abuse and adult mental health. Those with non-secure attachments were more likely to have mental health diagnoses. The researchers discuss secure attachment as protective factors. The researchers give importance to attachment theory and its relevance to conceptualizing clients who may be exposed to adverse experiences. Additionally, research supports the theory that attachment is a longstanding characteristic of how an individual experiences close relationships.

Sexual abuse and adult attachment

Survivors of childhood sexual abuse are more likely to perceive less adult self- and other social support. Additionally, they are more likely to experience lower self-esteem and difficulty forming close, sustaining and supportive relationships as adults (Liem & Boudewyn, 1999; Aspelmeier, Elliott & Smith, 2006; Hoof, Lang, Speekenbrink, Ijzendoorn & Vermerien, 2015). Research also supports the idea that childhood survivors of sexual abuse create internal and external “expectancies” that create difficulty in forming positive relationships with others. Liem and Boudewyn’s (1999) suggest survivors of childhood sexual abuse may form unhealthy adult relationships due to their need of approval from others and their dependency of others in social relationships. They also suggest that these factors put survivors of abuse at a higher risk of engaging in abusive relationships (Liem <https://assignbuster.com/literature-review-on-studies-of-john-bowlbys-attachment-theory/>

and Boudewyn, 1999). Aspelmeier et al. (2006) supported previous research in this area and found that survivors of childhood sexual abuse were more likely to have non-secure adult attachments. However, they also found that secure attachments were a protective factor for survivors of sexual abuse. Participants in their study that had a history of childhood sexual abuse, but possessed secure attachments were more likely to experience less negative interpersonal interactions and a greater perception of social support.

Emotional abuse and adult interpersonal processes

Childhood emotional abuse has been linked to negative internal and external thought processes. Research suggests that these negative internal processes can cause maladaptive interpersonal relationships (Hernandez, Trout & Liu, 2016; Massing-Schaffer, Liu, Kraines, Choi & Alloy, 2015). Massing-Schaffer et al., (2015) also found that childhood emotional abuse and adult depressive symptoms was mediated by maladaptive interpersonal processes. In their study, behaviors such as excessive reassurance seeking, negative feedback seeking and rejection sensitivity were examined. They found that the participants who endorsed these behaviors were not only more likely to have had emotional abuse as children, but they expressed more depressive symptoms as adults. In this study, they also found that dysfunctional interpersonal processes mediated childhood emotional abuse and depressive symptoms as adults. Hernandez et al., (2015) suggest that those who had experienced childhood emotional abuse were likely to internalize negative episodes. This internalization is likely to impact future adult relationships, specifically in heightening sensitivity to negative adult interpersonal experience. Although little research exists that incorporates <https://assignbuster.com/literature-review-on-studies-of-john-bowlbys-attachment-theory/>

adult attachment with childhood emotional abuse, from what has been studied on childhood emotional abuse and adult functioning, there are many similarities with physical abuse, sexual abuse and adult relationships. Because of these similarities, one can infer that emotional abuse during childhood can have similar consequences due to attachment.

Importance of study

Harford, Yi and Grant (2014) found that childhood abuse predicted adult interpersonal aggression and suicide attempts. Although adult attachment was not measured or incorporated into this study, the research suggests childhood abuse impacts.

Historically, attachment theory has been reported to be a psychological concept that has been relatively cross-culturally competent (Agishtein & Brumbaugh, 2013). However, little research has been done to support this claim. In addition, what constitutes as “ normal” behavior which would assign an individual with a “ secure attachment” can differ across cultures and ethnicities (Brown, Rodgers & Kapadia, 2008), (Agishtein & Brumbaugh, 2013). In a similar regard, research also suggests that behaviors such as reliance on others and passive coping can assign an individual with a Research continues to show that an individuals attachment can look differently and be understood differently in a clinical context depending on their ethnicity and culture (Brown, Rodgers & Kapadia, 2008).

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