

Attachment theory - the ties that bond

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ATTACHMENT THEORY - A CRITICAL ANALYSIS One of the key areas of interest for developmental researchers has been the "attachment theory", which proposes that the attachment of an infant to its caregiver/ mother is an evolutionary adaptive phenomenon, and has important implications for an individual's future emotional capacity to bond with others in adult life. Although far from perfect, the theory has found widespread support in academic circles, and in time could provide a more accurate understanding of our individual differences as adults with respect to our quality of our romantic attachments and relationship styles. It is generally accepted that there are three main attachment styles in adults and children - secure, ambivalent and avoidant. (Bower 1997, a). A national survey of representative samples of 8, 080 U. S. adults between 15 and 54 years of age (Bower, 1997, b) by Mickelson, Kessler and Davis, nearly all of the participants were found to conform to one of the three attachment groups. The survey concluded that attachment patterns are the central developmental factor responsible for subsequent personality and social development. While secure attachments, seen in about 59% of those surveyed, led to stable lasting relationships in later life, the 29 % displaying avoidance later developed fear or apathy towards emotional intimacy. Manipulative, distrustful behavior towards romantic partners was a feature of the remaining 11% or so, displaying ambivalent (or anxious) behavior. Finally, the study also pointed out the close association between insecure attachments in childhood and the occurrence of physical abuse or neglect, both of which can contribute to the development of mental illnesses. John Bowlby, the father of attachment theory, considered attachment as a biological necessity - he noted separation anxiety of young children and how

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babies needed to cling to their mothers in times of stress. However, as quality of parenting gradually has become an important topic in modern sociology, many authors and scientists stress upon the importance of parents to adopt good role models, irrespective of their own childhood experiences. To quote John Hoffman (1998) : " Always be bigger, stronger, wiser and kind. Whenever possible: follow your child's need. Whenever necessary: take charge".

Shemmings (2006) points out the trend in current attachment research to analyze the parent-'adult' child research as another important factor in explaining how attachment progress in later life. His study outlines the changing dynamics of 'filial' relationships as both children and parents grow older. In many instances, children themselves often become responsible care-providers to their older parents, and strong bonds develop at a later stage in life - a process referred to as the late activation of the 'attachment system.' This is an important study which highlights the necessity to view attachment as a dynamic process that continues through out our life, and although early childhood factors are no doubt important, they are by no means the 'only' factors which matter. As Shemmings points out, this is of great importance to administrators and counselors - and a way out of staying fixated in the past.

Finally, Turner (2005) provides a practical insight into how child life specialists (CLS) working in childrens' hospitals can gather valuable clues about a child's attachment to its primary care givers, by observing their responses to separation from their carers, combined with the effects of other stressors associated with hospitalization. This information could be put to use by understanding better a child's home circumstances, and make efforts

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to improve the attachment process with a view to changing his or her future quality of life.

To conclude, as our understanding of attachment theory has improved dramatically in recent years, it has become clearer, that attachment is a continuous developmental process starting in early life. However, there is emerging consensus from literature that this process can be influenced, with potentially positive outcomes for one's adult emotional and romantic life.

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