

CHAPTER 28

Attachment Theory

Fact or Fancy?

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After initial resistance, attachment theory has become the leading theory of social-emotional development since its first formulation during the 1960s–1970s. It proposes that during ancestral times selective pressures resulted in children developing an emotional bond with one or a few caregivers during the first year of life in order to promote protective security. The quality of the attachment relationship is regarded as dependent upon parenting quality, specifically sensitive responsiveness to an infant's signals. In addition, this relationship organizes the child's further psychological development (Bowlby, 1969). Attachment is regarded as universal in its meaning, its developmental sequence, the conditions of its emergence, its qualities, and its predictive power for developmental consequences.

The majority of attachment researchers continue to claim validity of the original formulations 50 years later (e.g., Cassidy, 2016). Recently, some attachment scholars have argued that 21st-century attachment theory has developed from its origins and is substantially different from the original (Duschinsky, van IJzendoorn, Foster, Reijman, & Lionetti, 2020; Thompson, 2017). However, they mainly refer to topical extensions, such as from a focus on the infant–caregiver relationship to relationships and development in general, including psychopathology, and to diverse fields of application (for an overview, see Cassidy & Shaver, 2016). Attachment theory thus serves as an umbrella for attachment mini theories. Yet, attachment researchers also acknowledge that the theory was flawed from the beginning, with fuzzy definitions of core conceptions. Ross Thompson,

who argues for the relevance and applicability of attachment theory as it is now conceptualized, acknowledged its shortcomings when he said that on some issues, “it is difficult to indicate definitively what attachment theory currently claims” (2017, p. 303). This conclusion is shared by critics of attachment theory in general and its change over the last 50 years in particular, such as Marga Vicedo, who asks, “And, what *is* attachment theory today?” (2020, p. 153).

In the following paragraphs I briefly summarize the major problems of attachment theory with respect to three theses:

1. The basic assumptions are mainly ambiguous and fuzzy or wrong.
2. Attachment theory is a purely monocultural theory that cannot claim universality.
3. Attachment theory does not meet the criteria for a good theory.

I will conclude that the description, explanation, and prediction of children’s development in terms of attachment theory are not appropriate for many children on this planet and, therefore, not only are they unscientific but also ethical implications have to be taken into consideration (e.g., Rosabal-Coto et al., 2017).

The Basic Assumptions Are Mainly Ambiguous and Fuzzy or Wrong

The problematic aspects of attachment theory start with its definition. What is attachment as an emotional bond? Is it a relational strategy between a child and a particular caregiver? Is it a trait or a characteristic of the child that gives rise to predictions for further development (competence assumption)? Also problematic are ill-defined conceptions of sensitive parenting important to the quality of attachment relationships and the mechanisms by which this relationship becomes important to a child’s development. Parental sensitivity is based on implicit assumptions about a particular cultural model of development and, related to this, favorable developmental outcomes. These implicit assumptions are tied to a particular conception of the person in a particular cultural historical time. Internal working models of relationships (are they a cognitive schema? an emotional bias?) are assumed to derive from children’s attachment relationships, but there is little consensus among attachment researchers about how these models develop and how they function, as attachment researchers themselves have pointed out (Thompson, 2017).

It is stated that attachment evolved as an adaptation during the evolution of humankind and is therefore universal. Attachment theory—as it is understood and applied—is about children’s well-being; evolutionary

theory, however, is about reproductive success. Evolution does not pursue particular goals, such as security of attachment, and adaptation does not imply universality. Moreover, rhesus monkeys, with an extensive mother–child caregiving system, are taken as the primate model for human attachment development. But rhesus monkeys are just one primate species among many and therefore not representative of human development in different social ecological contexts (Vicedo, 2017). Moreover, variability is the human condition, so one model can never apply to all.

Another bias in the formulation of attachment theory is that Bowlby was informed and impressed by clinical cases of postwar traumatized children and conceptualized children’s normal development from a deficit perspective. Thus, developmental resources and resilience are underestimated.

Attachment Theory Is a Purely Monocultural Theory That Cannot Claim Universality

The emergence of attachment theory must be understood in the historical context of the postwar Western world, as Marga Vicedo (2017) has convincingly argued. Several implicit assumptions are inherently part of this socioecological context and this historical epoch. The most important of these implicit assumptions starts with the credo that adults need to be the caretakers of small children. This assumption is tied to the prevalent family model in this context, specifically the two-generation nuclear family with a small number of children. These adults need to have time and resources to care for a baby in a particular way, including to be exclusively available and attentive to the baby and responsive to all the—even subtlest—signals. The preferred communication channel is face to face, which necessitates a dyadic mode of interaction, following a dialogical structure with the infant having the lead (e.g., German middle-class mothers react to the increased wakefulness around age 2 months with increased face-to-face contact and smiling; see Kärtner, Keller, & Yovsi, 2010; Wörmann, Holodynski, Kärtner, & Keller, 2012). Verbalization and mentalization of the infant’s inner world (feelings, cognitions, intentions, preferences, wishes) lead to emphasizing particular dimensions of development, especially the development of a separate sense of self and an autobiographical embodiment of the self. Emotion expression, especially maintaining positive emotionality, is considered as crucial for children’s healthy development. This socialization strategy is based in higher formal education and is associated with an inward turn, specifically reflecting about one’s inner world and mental states (Eksen, 2010). The intensive dyadic social encounters are complemented by an equally important focus

on infants learning to rely on themselves. Therefore, infants are referred to objects rather than to people because many people are regarded as overstimulating to an infant and distract the infant from him- or herself. This socialization strategy is aimed at reaching early psychological autonomy in terms of a self-sufficient, self-contained, and separate self. Secure attachment would enable the child to become such an independent agent pursuing his or her own interests and intentions (Keller, 2007; Keller & Kärtner, 2013).

This socialization strategy contrasts sharply with the ideas and practices that families value in many other parts of the world. However, there is not a single other strategy, but substantial cultural psychological and anthropological evidence to infer many different parenting strategies in different social ecologies (e.g., Lancy, 2005). A variety of family models exists, with variations in composition with related and non-related members, different structures, and different functions. Different family systems necessitate different caregiving arrangements compared to the nuclear family that provided the context used by attachment theorists. Rural subsistence-based farming community households (which comprise four to six times the number of people in Western middle-class households) have especially clear boundaries between children's and adults' worlds (see, e.g., Madagascan villagers in Scheidecker, 2017). In these small-scale farming communities, primary caregivers of small children are mainly other children, and there is not one or two main caregivers but a caregiving network. The biological mother may be an important part in this network, but she may also be one of several caregivers with equal responsibilities, or she may have a circumscribed role only (e.g., only breastfeeding). Children experience substantial amounts of body contact and motor stimulation, which emphasize different socialization goals than the Western middle-class philosophy. In many contexts, children are expected to suppress emotions in the presence of adults (but maybe not in children's groups), so that stranger anxiety does not appear in the behavioral repertoire (for an extensive discussion of cultural conceptions and differences in parenting strategies, see Keller & Chaudhary, 2017). Instead of an early differentiation between the self and others (such as the development of a categorical self), children are supposed to grow into a relational network with a conception of the self as a part of a social unit. It is within this socially symbiotic unit that, together with an emphasis on motor development, children become self-reliant and responsible members of the household at an early age. This parenting strategy is built not on children taking the lead but on caregivers structuring and leading.

Knowledge about socialization strategies from other contexts than the Western middle-class world is still restricted. There is some systematic research from subsistence-based farmers (e.g., Gottlieb, 2004; Keller,

2007; Otto & Keller, 2014; Quinn & Mageo, 2013), which has been briefly summarized before. There are singular studies from hunter-and-gatherer and pastoral societies (e.g., Morelli, Henry, & Spielvogel, 2019). Much more culturally informed research is needed to derive a more comprehensive picture of children's development globally. In any case it can be concluded that the socialization goals and strategies that attachment theory claims are universally valid apply, if at all, only to a small part of the world's population. As discussed before, many children are raised in relational networks that are differently organized and structured compared to relationships in small nuclear families.

Attachment Theory Does Not Meet the Criteria for a Good Theory

A good theory consists of clearly defined interrelated theoretical assumptions that can be tested and accepted or rejected. One of the problems of attachment theory is that many of its core concepts are not clearly defined and, therefore, are subject to multiple interpretations. Attachment researchers appear more interested in confirming the theory than in testing it (see Mesman, Chapter 30, this volume). Researchers with results that do not fit their assumptions do not question those assumptions and possibly modify their theory but instead explain them post hoc in cultural or contextual terms. In a study by Agrawal and Gulati (2005) with an Indian urban middle-class sample, 100% of the children were classified as securely attached in the Strange Situation Procedure. The results were explained post hoc as expressing close proximity of Indian babies with their mothers during day and night. The influence of continuous body contact on the development of attachment security, however, was not tested. Another explanation that is offered to dismiss results that don't fit the theory concerns methodology. For example, Mesman, van IJzendoorn, and Sagi-Schwartz (2016, p. 871) concluded "that in many cases the coding is done by researchers who have not been formally trained by experts, which makes the quality of the classifications unclear." The experts are Western attachment researchers. The cultural knowledge of local coders, which may have influenced their coding, is regarded as disturbing.

Moreover, attachment researchers only accept research evidence that has been assessed with methods that have been developed by attachment researchers themselves and that are recognized by them, like the Strange Situation Procedure and the Attachment *Q*-Sort. This implies the confound of theory and method (see, e.g., Lamb, Thompson, Gardner, Charnov, & Estes, 1984). It also means that cultural evidence about local conceptions and practices of childrearing is ignored intentionally.

Conclusion

Children grow up in different learning environments and develop within the cultural scripts of their caregivers. Concomitant to their early experiences, pathways of development are constructed and co-constructed that differ from each other with respect to the timing, the structure, and the results of developmental achievements (Keller & Kärtner, 2013). The logical consequence is that attachment as defined in the Western middle-class culture cannot be regarded as a universal phenomenon. Nevertheless, health care services, parenting support programs, and interventions, as well as the educational systems in multicultural Western societies and their outreach in other parts of the world, rely on attachment theory as the gold standard for children's well-being and education. Yet, evaluating one system with the standards of another system leads to invalid results. For example, caregiving arrangements with relational networks of other children and very restricted contact with the mother and adults in general (cf. Scheidecker, 2017), cannot be evaluated as a deficit *per se* and corrected with intervention programs focusing on the mother and positive parenting derived from attachment theory (for scientific and ethical problems involved, see Morelli et al., 2017; Rosabal-Coto et al., 2017; Serpell & Nsamenang, 2014).

The formulation of attachment theory was an important paradigmatic shift in Western developmental sciences and will continue to represent a historical scientific landmark. However, 50 years later attachment theorists and researchers should not only acknowledge cultural differences in raising children and ideas about children's healthy development, but also take these differences seriously. Moreover, the conceptual and theoretical flaws of attachment theory that are widely recognized should be remedied. Researchers as well as practitioners should accept the ethical responsibilities that are an inherent part of their professions.

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