

ATTACHMENT

(An Overview)

By Don Corrington

Today Attachment is typically defined as “A close emotional relationship between two persons, characterized by mutual affection and a desire to maintain proximity.” and is further described as possessing four characteristics;

1. *Seeking proximity*, the desire to be close to the person to whom you are attached.
2. *Separation anxiety*, the distress that results from being separated from that person.
3. *Pleasure when reunited*, relief and observable joy when reunited with them.
4. *General orientation of behavior towards the caregiver*, the child’s awareness of where the person is, and the reassurance they feel by them being close.

Perhaps one of the first attempts to identify and understand the relationship between a child and the caregiver, who is typically the mother, was looked at by Sigmund Freud. He put forward a concept of *Object Relations* as a psychoanalytic instinct theory.

The "object" of an instinct is the means through which the instinctual aim is achieved, with the infant's first object being its mother. Freud postulated that the infant's initial relationship was primarily oral in nature.

John Bowlby, a child psychoanalyst developed his own theories with regards to attachments and maternal deprivation in 1969. These theories were influenced by Freud’s theories and the experiments of Konrad Lorenz, an Austrian zoologist, regarding the establishment of bonds through the imprinting of wild geese. Bowlby combined elements of these two distantly different disciplines and created his evolutionary theory of attachments in an attempt to fit in the attachment process with Darwin’s theory of natural selection.

Bowlby believed that attachment is instinctive and adaptive. He felt that everyone is born with an inherited need to form attachments which help us survive, the newborn infant is helpless and relies on its mother for nutrition and warmth. The mother also inherits a genetic blueprint that predisposes her to loving behavior towards the infant.

Bowlby stated that an attachment promotes survival in 3 ways:

1. Safety: the attachment keeps mother and child close to each other. Separation results in feelings of anxiety.
2. Safe base for exploration: the child is happy to wander and explore (necessary for its cognitive development) knowing it has a safe place to return to if things turn nasty. This also develops independence necessary in later life.
3. Internal working model: This was based on Freud’s idea of the mother-child relationship acting as an example for all future attachments with this first relationship forming a model and representation of what a relationship is. The child then uses this as a template in developing other relationships and parenting skills in later life.

The components of Bowlby's theory of attachments included;

A Sensitive period

A period in which attachments were most likely to develop, similar to the critical period for imprinting but unlike a critical period as seen in imprinting, a sensitive period suggests a time when they are most likely to occur. Bowlby believed that for human infants this was between the fourth and sixth month, after which it would become increasingly more difficult for the child to form a first attachment.

Irreversible

Once made the attachment cannot be broken.

Social releasers

The child has inborn abilities for engendering care-giving behavior from parents. Children have 'baby faces' and their noises and facial expressions such as smiles which encourage engagement of their parents and adults are genetically predisposed to respond to these releasers by offering care and affection.

Continuity hypothesis

The internalization of early attachments by the child are reflected in later relationship types. A secure attachment as a child leads to greater emotional and social stability as an adult. An insecure attachment is likely to lead to difficulties with later relationships. Parenting styles when the child matures, and has children of their own, are also greatly influenced by the attachment model which was internalized as a child.

Monotropy

There can be one primary attachment and all other attachments are subjective to that attachment, however this main attachment does not to be the mother.

Within the scientific community experiments, studies and research have occurred attempting to better understand and identify physiological and biological aspects of attachments. Empirical evidence seems to suggest that the type of attachments formed in infancy create significant contributing factors which influence the overall short and long term well being of individuals.

In the late 1950's, Harry Harlow, an American psychologist, was using rhesus monkeys in his research regarding learning. He observed that many of the young monkeys who were kept in isolation became distraught when he cleaned their cages. It appeared that the young monkeys were forming an attachment with towels used to line the bottom of the cages.

This prompted him to conduct experiments to determine whether food or comfort was more important in developing attachments. The young isolated monkeys were provided surrogate mothers constructed from wire frames, with some frames being covered with a soft terry cloth material. In one variation of the experiments the young monkeys were provided food only from the wire framed surrogate mother while the cuddler cloth

covered mother provided no nourishments but provided comfort because of the softness of the covering. Both mothers were always present in the cage.

It was observed that the monkeys would spend most time clinging to the cloth mother and occasionally feeding from the wire mother. When stressed by external stimuli such as a mechanical toy banging a drum, the monkeys would always run to the cloth mother for safety indicating an attachment.

Harlow concluded that warmth and comfort rather than food were more important in nurturing an attachment and stated that this provided scientific evidence against prevailing theories that attachments were principally associated with the need of nutrition.

A year long study was conducted by Rudolph Schaffer and Peggy Emerson in Glasgow, Scotland. It was designed to ascertain at what age attachments started and the intensity of them. 60 babies were observed every four weeks during the first year of life and then again at 18 months.

They measured the strength of attachment by noting the onset of separation anxiety of the infant when separated from the main caregiver suggesting an attachment had been formed and the manifestation of stranger anxiety, when the child was left alone with an unfamiliar person which indicated when the child could recognize familiar and unfamiliar people.

They concluded that human attachments develop in three distinct stages.

Asocial which occurred in from 0 to 6 weeks The infant presented attention seeking behavior such as crying and smiling which was not directed at anyone in particular, suggesting attachments could be made with anyone at this point..

Indiscriminate attachment which occurred from 6weeks to7 months. The infant sought attention from anyone and was happy to receive attention from anyone. However, preferences were shown to familiar faces which brought out a greater response from the infant.

Specific attachments which occurred from 7 to 11 months. The child was primarily attached to the main caregiver. If they were separated the child became distressed and the child was wary of strangers.

Mary Ainsworth, an American psychologist, was probably best known for her “Strange Situation” study, which was conducted in the 1970s. Earlier in her career she had worked with John Bowlby in London, England and expanded on that work. Her study involved observing and assessing children between the ages of 12 to 18 months as they experienced the 5 steps of the “Strange Situation”

1. Parent and child are alone in a room.

2. Child explored the room without parental participation.
3. Stranger enters the room, talks to the parent, and approaches the child.
4. Parent quietly leaves the room.
5. Parent then returns and comforts the child.

The expectation was that a child's would experience Separation Anxiety when the mother left the room, Stranger Anxiety when child was alone with a stranger and Reunion Behavior when the Mother returned. The child's reactions were observed and assessed. Ainsworth concluded that there were three major styles of attachment as evidenced by the children's responses the three variables.

The *Secure Attachment* style:

Separation anxiety: The child is distressed when mother leaves

Stranger anxiety: The stranger is able to offer some comfort

Reunion behavior: The child runs to mother and greets her enthusiastically.

The *Ambivalent-insecure Attachment* style:

Separation anxiety: The child displays intense distress when mother leaves

Stranger anxiety: The child avoids the stranger.

Reunion behavior: Child approaches mother but resists contact, may even push her away.

The *Avoidant-insecure Attachment* style:

Separation anxiety: The child shows no sign of distress when mother leaves

Stranger anxiety: The child is okay with the stranger and plays normally when stranger is present.

Reunion behavior: The Mother and stranger are able to comfort infant equally well.

Her conclusions have been supported by other studies duplicating the "Strange Situation" model. However an additional type of attachment style had been added;

The *Disorganized-insecure Attachment* style in which the child's behavior is inconsistent and shows signs of indecisiveness and confusion. Sometimes the child will freeze or rock back and forth.

On going research conducted by Allan N. Schore indicates there are neurobiological associations of brain development as human attachment occurs. The human limbic system myelinates during the first year and a half and the early-maturing right hemisphere which is deeply connected into the limbic system is undergoing a growth spurt at this time, attachment experiences specifically impact limbic and cortical areas of the developing right cerebral hemisphere. Two months of age appears to be the onset of a critical period during which synaptic connects are formed.

In conclusion, interactions between the caregiver and the infant create a template, having psychological, physiological and neurological components. Once an attachment is made to the first or primary caregiver, that attachment is permanent. All other attachments and relationships are modeled on that original template and are processed and viewed though

that paradigm. The style of attachment that the child develops is mostly determined by the ability of the caregiver to respond to the child's requests for comfort, stimulation and nutrition. When the caregiver's actions are attuned to the requests of the infant, physical and neurological processes occur that provide, within the child, a sense of safety and reassurance that needs will be met. This typically establishes a secure attachment style for the infant.

Some feel that the process of attachment actually begins in prior to birth as the developing fetus becomes familiar with the sound of the mother's heartbeat, responds to the various hormonal chemical changes that may occur within the mother and is acquainted with various sounds around the Mother including voices.

The style of attachment that one has, greatly influences our ability to form and maintain successful relationships. Promoting situations and education that provide for creation of secure attachments in future generations would seem significant and necessary for a well functioning society.