Attachment Styles and Peer Relations

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1. Types of Attachment formed in Childhood

Disillusioned by Kleinian psychoanalysis theorizing about infants’ subconscious fantasies, John Bolby laid the theoretical groundwork for Attachment Theory by focusing on intergenerational transmission of attachment on the phenomena of separation and loss. Mary Salter Ainsworth, collaborating with Bolby, developed the Strange Situation classification system which empirically measures infant reunion behavior after temporary separation from the mother (Bretherton, 1992). It comprises originally three classifications for attachment and was later complimented by a forth (Ainsworth et al., 1978).

In secure attachment, the parent acts as a secure base from which the toddler explores the world. The toddler is happy to play with toys when the mother (attachment figure) is present, protests when she leaves the room and is happy when the mother returns. In insecure-avoidant attachment toddlers show minimal or no interaction with the mother and display no response on the mother leaving the room and returning. Some toddlers avoid being picked up by their mum. In insecure-resistant attachment, baseline exploration- and play-behavior is reduced, the toddler appears more distressed when the mother leaves and displays ambivalent behavior when she returns, expressing signs of both relief and rejection (Arnett, 2012, p. 209). The first three categories are attributed to the influence of autonomous-secure, preoccupied and dismissing mothers differing in maternal sensitivity (Bretherton, p.769). In disorganized-disoriented attachment toddlers appear dazed and detached when the mother leaves, accompanied by outbursts of anger, and react fearful when she returns. Some freeze their movement in odd poses. Latter attachment often related to autism, Down syndrome, substance abuse during pregnancy or severe underlying psychological problems (Van Ijzendoorn et al., 1999).

2. Cultural Background and Attachment

Although secure attachment is the most commonly shared attachment style across cultures (Itzendoorn & Kroonenberg, 1988, Posada & Jacobs, 2001), cross-cultural differences such as the dominance of insecure-avoidant attachment in most individualistic cultures versus dominance of insecure-resistant attachment in many socio-centered cultures appear to reflect differing cultural norms. It is hypothesized that Western values of autonomy and independence put early pressure on the child making insecure-avoidant attachment more likely (Van Itzendoorn & Kroonenberg, 1988). Children in close-knit traditional families and typically highly attentive mothers are unlikely to develop insecure attachment (Arnett, p.214). The argument of cultural bias states that attachment theory implies a Western, monotropic bond to a single caregiver as the norm whereby in many socio-centered cultures alloparenting and multiple caregiving constitute cooperative childrearing systems, warranting a multi-disciplinary extension of Bolby-Ainsworth’ original theory (Keller, 2013, p.182-186).
3. Attachment and Social Development in Adulthood

Secure attachment is correlated to an adult’s belief in worthwhile and valuable relationships, the capacity to emotionally connect and confidence dealing with others’ emotions (Sroufe et al., 2011, p.468); to love and trust (Arnett, p.210). Insecure attachments during infancy are thought to model future relationships as an adult by forming early compromised internal working models. Insecure attachments are associated with depression (Duggal et al, 2001).

Avoidant attachment is related to future conduct problems, based on the experience of alienation and hopelessness leading to e.g., personal indifference and carelessness in adulthood.

Resistant attachment is related to anxiety disturbances, based on the experience of anxiety and helplessness leading to e.g., overdependence in relationships (Sroufe, 2005, p.360-361).

Disorganized attachment is correlated to high hostility and aggression in adulthood with comorbid cognitive disorders and psychopathology, most likely based on neurological dysfunction (Arnett, p.211). Attachment styles scaffold the emerging personality, for example a clingy and insecure person is more likely to have experienced insecure-resistant attachment. Attachment patterns require to be interpreted in the moderating context of continuing social changes (McConnell et al., 2011, Sroufe, p.162-165).

4. Developmental Changes in the Role of Family and Peer Relationships

During early childhood social relationships expand from caregivers to other children. At 18-36 months specific friendships are formed while peer interactions in the preschool years involve solving moral conflicts and improving social control. In late childhood the number of peers increases while children learn to deal with others’ variance. Theory of Mind skills flourish in children’s friendships (Miller 2006). Same-sex cliques emerge in middle-childhood and children spend gradually less time with their family. Friendships in adolescence emphasize on intimacy and self-disclosure. Subsequent restructuring of cliques leads to relations to opposite-sex cliques, dating relationships and increasingly heterosexual peer composition. Before the age of 11, crowds replace friendship-based cliques. Crowds are held together by reputation, shared attitudes, values, fashion and beliefs (Parker et al., 2006, p. 100-104). During emerging adulthood, about 18-25 years of age, adolescents explore new identities and future skills ideally with their home as secure base from which to explore (Arnett, 2000), resonating positive attachment.
References


