

Attachment Theory Overview

Adapted from *Ava's Bedside: Making Sense through Attachment*

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Introduction

Attachment theory, as it is commonly referred to, was pioneered by John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth. The main points of the theory, as we understand them, are: (1) infants have an innate desire to form an affectional tie, referred to as “attachment,” with a small number of caregivers; (2) attachment is a developmental process which forms during the first few years of life but continues to develop throughout life; and (3) the attachment is a part of an integrated process for the individual, also including exploration and caregiving. While these might sound more or less commonsensical to some people, these ideas were developed in a context where other less commonsensical theories were dominant. It should also be pointed out that various consequences and implications of the above-mentioned points are very important for making sense of our lives. Here, we discuss the basics of attachment theory as well as some background on the development of the theory.

Considering the vulnerability of human babies, the ability to be taken care of must be the very first and most important quality of a baby. Then, it is not surprising that a human baby is born with a desire to form attachment to a few caregivers who are expected to protect her. This assumption has strong implications. The result of violation of the basic need for attachment can be seen in many cases of institutional maternal deprivation, for example, in Romanian orphanages. These children may never be able to be close to other people. The consequence is possibly irreversible. While this assumption emphasizes the innate aspect of attachment, it also underscores the impact of child rearing. This is because attachment formation is contingent upon the availability and the quality of caregivers. In this regard, attachment theory has a realistic view about how nature and nurture interact, unlike extremes such as nativism and “tabula rasa” (or “blank slate”).

As long as a baby is cared for by a small number of main caregivers, she will form attachment with the caregivers by the end of the first year (although the quality of the attachment will vary depending on the situation). However, the attachment with the caregivers will continue to develop after that period. Her attachment patterns will also be affected by different types of later close relationships. At the same time, later close relationships would also be affected by earlier attachment. The assumption that attachment is a developmental process is an important one. The need for attachment security may well be the number one human desire, even across the life span. As such, attachment problems even after the first few years of life would be crucial for our lives. We will discuss later how attachment patterns might continue and change. Although it is not as critical as in some other animals, such as geese, it seems that there is a sensitive period for forming attachment.

When we discuss attachment, we actually need to be more specific about three related aspects: attachment, exploration, and caregiving. Attachment behaviors are to seek proximity to a caregiver (by grasping, clinging, reaching, or crawling), cry, vocalize, and smile (e.g., as approaching a caregiver). These behaviors are in general activated when an infant (or any person, really) is frightened, distressed, ill, or tired. In this case, the attachment figure functions as the “safe haven.” Exploration behaviors are to play, discover new environments, and interact with peers. Strictly speaking, these behaviors occur only when the attachment needs are satisfied. In this case, the attachment figure functions as the “secure base.” We all need to explore for various reasons and also to feel safe and secure through attachment behaviors, although we may not realize such needs later in our lives. Thus, the balance between attachment and exploration behaviors is extremely important, much like the use of the accelerator and brake when driving a car. This attachment-exploration balance can also be seen as intimacy-independence balance and is closely related to the distinction between negative and positive emotions. In contrast, caregiving behaviors are to provide a safe haven (for proximity seeking) and a secure base (for exploration) for another person attached to the caregiver.

How would most individuals develop the innate attachment desire into balanced attachment and exploration behaviors? This question has been answered by Bowlby through the idea of the “internal working model” (IWM). That is, an infant begins to *internalize* the interaction with her caregivers as a basis for the interactions involved in all later close relationships. The mechanism is considered as a *working* model because it will be continuously modified throughout the person’s life. This is roughly how infant attachment affects later close relationships. Not just attachment, but other aspects of early emotional development can also affect one’s life tremendously. Then, it is not surprising that there are a variety of psychological and social consequences of early emotional development. Bowlby was specific about the impact of child rearing for later psychological well-being, studying the behaviors of many war orphans after World

War II. Furthermore, since the earliest memories are implicit (and thus cannot be recalled explicitly), we cannot normally realize how our earliest experience affects our close relationships and our lives in general. Even though attachment is only one fairly narrow aspect of life, it is nevertheless an extremely important one and relevant to many aspects of our lives.

Although Bowlby's idea may appear very reasonable nowadays, we need to understand a completely different environment where attachment theory was being developed. More specifically, attachment theory has been contrasted primarily with the Freudian psychoanalytic tradition of that time. Attachment theory shares with the psychoanalytic tradition the importance of unconscious parts of the mind. However, attachment theory emphasizes the importance of *real* relationships, including upbringing and interactions with parents¹ rather than fantasy. Also unlike some aspects of psychoanalytic tradition, attachment theory does not single out the importance of breast feeding. Attachment theory also contrasts with behaviorism. While behaviorists might characterize attachment simply as a sign of dependence, attachment theory emphasizes the balance between attachment and exploration as part of healthy development. In essence, attachment theory can be characterized by its emphasis on emotional/relational, realistic, and evolutionary/survival aspects.

While Bowlby focuses on the normative aspects, attachment theory discusses individual differences as well. In this respect, the strength of attachment theory is also due to Ainsworth and colleagues' effort to devise a procedure to identify four different infant attachment patterns (described in the next section). These attachment patterns can be identified mainly by observing how well a parent responds to the infant's needs. However, since the parent's response is actually affected by the infant's behavior, it is more accurate to view the child-parent interaction as co-regulation, mutual regulation, or attuned communication/affect attunement.

Attachment Patterns

Ainsworth and her colleagues' careful observation of infants identified four different attachment patterns: secure, avoidant, ambivalent, and disorganized, as summarized in Table 1. In the following, we will use the table to look into the infant period of the four hypothetical people: Seca, Ava, Amba, and Disa. These characters are named after the four attachment patterns. That is, Seca is for **secure**, Ava is for **avoidant**, Amba is for **ambivalent**, and Disa is for **disorganized**.

Although we classify Ava, an adult, with respect to the attachment pattern in Table 1 (next page), these patterns are actually characterizations of infants. Thus, strictly speaking, Ava would have been classified as avoidant *when she was an infant*. For the sake of the discussion in this section, we assume that infant attachment patterns continue throughout life (more on this point in later sections). Looking at Table 1, we can guess how Ava would have behaved. For example, with her parent, she would have explored the environment actively, would not have cried even if she was in moderate distress (e.g., her parent leaving the scene), and would have even avoided/ignored the parent on return. This is a consequence of parenting, which is most likely rejecting, intrusive, and/or controlling.

On the other hand, a secure infant, such as Seca, would have cried when her parent left the scene but would have sought proximity and been soothed quickly upon reunion. The main source of secure attachment is emotional availability of the parent. This is probably an oversimplified description, and thus calls for more explanation. Especially during the first few years of Seca's life, her parents must have been available to her (probably most of the time), observed Seca very attentively, felt Seca's facial and bodily expression, and responded to Seca's needs in a timely and comforting manner. Her parent would be accepting, understanding, attending, consistent, and never be abusive or threatening. She would know Seca's various needs, such as hunger, thirst, and elimination, and would attend to frustration and fear. She would not force certain things just because of her convenience. To some people, this type of response might appear to be overindulgent. However, during the first year, there is no such thing as overindulgence. On the other hand, when Seca was a toddler, her parent may have given her more structure. Her parent might have taught Seca how to regulate herself and how to behave morally in a confident and consistent manner. Still, the parent must have done this based on secure attachment, i.e., first addressing and accepting Seca's needs.

An infant with ambivalent attachment, such as Amba, would have been clingy, would not have explored much, and would have tended to cry a lot. Her behaviors can be characterized as a combination of seeking intimacy and expressing hostility toward her parents. This is mainly due to the inconsistent behavior of her parents. They may have attended to Amba in a warm manner at some times but rejected her in other times. People like Amba would, as a result, become hungry for parental response.

An infant with disorganized attachment, such as Disa, would have manifested the conflicting behaviors of being

¹ Although the child-caregiver attachment can form between an infant and any adult, including a non-parent, we often use the term "parent" to refer to the caregiver.

Table 1: Attachment Patterns (Infant)

	Attachment Patterns			
	Secure	Insecure		
		Avoidant	Ambivalent or Resistant	Disorganized or Disoriented
	Organized			
When with parent (with little distress)	Explores actively	Explores actively	Little exploration, preoccupied with parent, clingy	May show fear, freezing, contradictory behaviors
When in distress (e.g., separation from parent)	Cries	Does not cry	Cries	<i>May fit in one of the organized patterns (left)</i>
Upon reunion with parent	Seek proximity, quickly soothed, resumes exploration	Avoids/ignores parent, focuses on toys	Continues to cry, fails to settle <i>and</i> explore	
Parent characteristics	Emotionally available	Rejecting, intrusive, controlling	Inconsistent	Abusive, threatening
	Good enough			Problematic
Distribution ¹	60%	20%	10%	10%

¹ These are hypothetical numbers based on *our* reading of the literature. Furthermore, the disorganized classification is usually given in addition to some organized classification; thus, the percentage figures in the literature do not necessarily sum up to 100%.

attracted to a parent (except for extreme cases) and trying to escape from the same parent. This is because the parent is both the attachment figure and the source of threat at the same time. Disorganized infants may also attempt to take control over the parent. Furthermore, people with disorganized attachment have a high risk of psychological problems. That is, Disa might be seeing a therapist and taking medication.

The finding that infants can be classified into these four patterns opens a way to discuss attachment from various perspectives. The patterns are important for discussing how an infant begins to internalize close relationships in her specific environment. With longitudinal studies, we can learn how early attachment affects one's later life. Since the earliest memories are implicit and cannot be recalled, knowing one's infant attachment pattern could tell her what was really going on when she was growing up. We will return in later sections to the topic of how we could tell our infant attachments without knowing our past.

Since attachment patterns are such an important concept and yet are rather difficult to grasp, we discuss some relevant points about the patterns. For example, the behavior of an avoidant infant would appear very independent, and thus may appear desirable, especially in Western culture. However, it is actually a sign of insecure attachment. As will be discussed below, insecure attachment is not necessarily a bad thing. However, there are certain consequences, for example, difficulty with both close relationships and making sense of their lives. Suppose that a parent trains an infant not to cry even when she is in distress, or leaves her to "cry it out," that is, to cry without responding to her. Then, the parent is promoting avoidant attachment. If an infant is securely attached to her parent, she would cry upon separation (distress for most infants), which might appear timid to some people. Nevertheless, the infant can grow *healthy* dependence, which will be important for attachment continuity (again, more in later sections).

Although disorganized attachment is considered problematic, the other three patterns are considered within the normal range and adaptive to relevant environments. They are also considered as a result of "good enough" parenting. In fact, there must be a niche for avoidant and ambivalent people. For example, in modern society, many jobs can be performed well without good relationship skills. In certain workplaces, socialization is strongly discouraged. On the other hand, certain artistic professions may be better performed with emotional bursts rather than stability. However, secure children tend to possess more "desirable" properties, for example, being popular in school settings. Secure attachment is thus associated with better quality of life.

When multiple caregivers are available, different attachment patterns can be observed for different caregivers. For example, infants can be securely attached to the mother while avoidantly attached to the father. This is because an attachment pattern is a consequence of child-parent co-regulation, and the interaction is unique to each pair. Infants

normally organize such multiple attachment patterns in a hierarchical manner. For example, if an infant is mainly taken care of by her mother, the attachment to her mother would naturally be the strongest. Furthermore, mixed attachment patterns may be associated with certain specific contexts. That is, even with a single caregiver, different patterns may be observed, for example, at home and outside the home.

Attachment patterns are mainly due to the balance between attachment and exploration behaviors. Each of these behavioral systems is already very complex, involving various factors including temperament and culture. Thus, there is always a possibility of those factors affecting the patterns. We will discuss the impact of temperament in a later section. As for culture, the distribution of attachment patterns is, in general, similar across cultures. However, there are reports of substantially different distributions, for example, more prevalent attachment insecurity in Kibbutzim in Israel and some parts of Germany. For the former, it may be due to the collective child rearing; for the latter, it appears to be due to the community's strong emphasis on independence from early years.

Strange Situation

Infant attachment patterns are most commonly identified by a well-designed laboratory procedure called the "Strange Situation." The main idea of the procedure is to induce moderate distress so that both attachment and exploration behaviors can be observed. To do this, the procedure more or less models a hospital waiting room with attractive toys, where the parent of the infant leaves the room and a stranger joins the company at varying times. The procedure contains increasing levels of distress so that exploration and attachment behaviors at various levels can be observed. The actual sequence of this procedure is shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Strange Situation

Episode	Key events	Child	Parent	Stranger
1		Introduced	Introduced	<i>n/a</i>
2		<i>present</i>	<i>present</i>	Introduced Plays with child
3				<i>Leaves</i>
4	First separation		<i>Returns</i>	
5	First reunion			<i>Leaves</i>
6	Second separation		<i>n/a</i>	
7				<i>Returns</i>
8	Second reunion			

Once we understand the basics of the attachment patterns as in Table 1, it is possible to predict the response of an infant. As long as the parent is present in the room, a secure infant would explore the environment, where there are a lot of attractive toys. When her parent leaves, the infant would protest and cry (attachment behaviors). Upon her parent's return, the infant would greet the parent and quickly be soothed (attachment behaviors), and then return to play (exploration). The balance between attachment and exploration behaviors is quite natural.

An avoidant infant would explore the room like a secure infant. However, she may not cry when her parent leaves and may even ignore the return of the parent. That is, her normal exploration behaviors are matched by minimal attachment behaviors. An ambivalent infant would be clingy (attachment behavior) throughout the procedure and not explore much. A disorganized infant would exhibit behaviors such as some combination of approaching to and escaping from the parent, as described in the previous section.

The procedure is normally applied to infants at the age of 12 months, possibly as old as 18 months, but before substantial development of speech and other cognitive skills. After this period, the level of distress induced in the Strange Situation may become too different among children. For example, some children would be very accustomed to separation from parents. Furthermore, the procedure would have increasingly different meanings depending on cultures.

Due to the ingenious design, the Strange Situation is considered fairly robust. However, there are still some potential issues. For example, the procedure may not be as accurate for identifying attachment patterns with a father. This may be because fathers tend to encourage exploration more than mothers.

Attachment Continuity

One of the main theses of attachment theory is that infant attachment patterns could predict certain behaviors of the person

at later stages of her life, if no other significant impacts appear later in life. This qualification is important. Some opponents of attachment theory mistakenly argue that attachment theory proposes a kind of determinism. Bowlby and his colleagues explicitly reject such an idea. The richness of life makes it possible to overcome disadvantages in one's early life, or the other way around. Nevertheless, it is striking that attachment continuity in general has been demonstrated by research. In many cases, it may be due to the consistency of the child-parent interaction across the life span of the child. That is, even though the behavior of the child changes as she grows, the parents' response and other environmental factors may support continuity.

Attachment continuity can be seen in two ways: *intra-* and *inter-*generation, i.e., within a single generation (person) and across multiple generations, respectively. In the previous paragraph, we discussed the former. The latter aspect can be seen in how the attachment patterns of parents affect their children. It turns out that the attachment patterns of parents are the best predictor of the attachment patterns of their children. Again, since so many factors are involved, it is not at all deterministic.

Returning to the hypothetical characters, Ava's children and mother are also supposed to be avoidant. On the other hand, Seca's family is likely to consist of mainly securely attached people. Disa's family would experience disorganized attachment through generations. Abused children are more likely to become abusive themselves. Once again, these possibilities are not at all deterministic due to various factors in life.

Then, could Ava change from avoidant to secure attachment during her life? Not very likely. If the attachment pattern changes, it is not likely to occur in a short period of time. It would also require substantial experience. So, for many people, even after realizing one's own insecure attachment, it would not go away so easily, especially later in life. However, for some people, just realizing their own attachment patterns would be a life-changing event. For example, if Ava's child has a chance to raise a child after realizing her own avoidant attachment, she may be able to change her behavior and may be able to have secure attachment with her child. But this must be a challenge. Let us recall that attachment pattern forms during the first few years of life, when only implicit memory is available. Unless one makes an effort to learn her own attachment by carefully studying attachment theory, she may never really know what her attachment pattern is. That is, it is highly possible that one lives with no idea about one of her deepest behavior patterns.

However, in some cases, attachment patterns can change. For example, people with insecure (infant) attachment pattern may turn out to be like securely attached people, an occurrence referred to as "earned secure" attachment. In such a case, it is most likely that certain positive close relationships, for example, with some adult mentor, may have changed the attachment pattern. However, once a child develops insecure attachment with her parents, it would be a challenge to develop secure attachment with someone else due to the learned way of dealing with close relationships.

There are many potential problems with discussing attachment continuity. One is the status of adult attachment. Earlier, we noted that an infant may have multiple distinct attachment patterns associated with different caregivers. Then, how would the two parents' different attachment patterns affect the children? The current understanding in the field is that when a child becomes an adult, she integrates multiple, possibly different, attachment patterns into a single attachment pattern. This process most likely takes place during adolescence. In general, the attachment pattern with the strongest attachment figure, for example, the mother, would be the basis for one's adult attachment pattern.

Another problem with analyzing attachment continuity was the lack of a procedure to identify adult attachment patterns. A breakthrough was made by Mary Main, a student of Mary Ainsworth, and her colleagues; the procedure is called "Adult Attachment Interview" (AAI).

Adult Attachment Interview (AAI)

This procedure consists of a semi-formatted interview about the subject's childhood with an extensive analysis of the narrative. Types of questions used in the interview are shown in Table 3 (next page).

The development of AAI was a really innovative idea. The AAI analyzes not only the content of the narrative but also its delivery. The applicability of such an analysis comes from the connection between mental organization during the first years and mental activities throughout one's life. In particular, AAI applies principles in linguistic pragmatics proposed by Paul Grice, called Maxims of Conversation. The main points of the principle include the following. When people are engaged in a conversation, they are supposed to cooperate in a way that their contribution is optimal with respect to truthfulness, amount of information, relevance, and clarity. If one violates any one of these, one is actually trying to convey some hidden meaning not explicit in the message. People with secure attachment tend to be able to follow Maxims of Conversation well, through internalization of their early relationships with their parents. On the other hand, people with insecure attachment tend to violate Maxims of Conversation, even when they are not trying to convey hidden meaning. For example, preoccupied/ambivalent people tend to be too long while dismissing/avoidant people tend to be too brief in their comments.

Table 3: Adult Attachment Interview Questions

1. To begin with, could you just help me to get a little bit oriented to your family—for example, who was in your immediate family, and where you lived?
2. Now I'd like you to try to describe your relationship with your parents as a young child, starting as far back as you can remember.
3. Could you give me five adjectives or phrases to describe your relationship with your **mother** during childhood? I'll write them down, and when we have all five I'll ask you to tell me what memories or experiences led you to choose each one.
4. Could you give me five adjectives or phrases to describe your relationship with your **father** during childhood? I'll write them down, and when we have all five I'll ask you to tell me what memories or experiences led you to choose each one.
5. To which parent did you feel closer, and why?
6. When you were upset as a child, what did you do, and what would happen? Could you give me some specific incidents when you were upset emotionally? Physically hurt? Ill?
7. Could you describe your first separation from your parents?
8. Did you ever feel rejected as a child? What did you do, and do you think your parents realized that they were rejecting you?
9. Were your parents ever threatening toward you—for discipline, or jokingly?
10. How do you think your overall early experiences have affected your adult personality? Are there any aspects you consider a setback to your development?
11. Why do you think your parents behaved as they did during your childhood?
12. Were there other adults who were close to you—like parents—as a child?
13. Did you experience the loss of a parent or other close loved one as a child, or in adulthood?
14. Were there many changes in your relationship with parents between childhood and adulthood?
15. What is your relationship with your parents like for you currently?

Note that these characteristics are not always present. They are activated especially when people are engaged in or reflecting upon close relationships, for example, during an AAI about their parents. Thus, it is inappropriate to extend this type of interpretation to other forms of written and spoken expressions. Analysis of adult attachment using the narrative obtained during an AAI session is shown in Table 4. The most important point is that AAI classification matches Strange Situation classification very well.

Table 4: Adult Attachment Patterns

	AAI classification			
	Secure or Autonomous	Dismissing	Preoccupied	Disorganized or Unresolved
	Corresponding Strange Situation classification			
	Secure	Avoidant	Ambivalent	Disorganized
Content	Objective (not idealizing), balanced, integrates self over time	Overgeneralizes, lacks evidence, not remembering, dismissing relationships	Preoccupied with past, blurring past/present/future	False belief (e.g., about deceased person), unresolved loss, contradictory
Delivery	Reasonably detailed, coherent, consistent	Excessively brief, inconsistent	Excessively long, overly emotional	Fearful, cries, prolonged pauses, incomplete sentences
Impact on personality	Balanced	Analytical, bullying	Emotionally unstable	Pathological

Again, returning to the hypothetical characters, Ava (avoidant/dismissing) shows a few characteristics consistent with the dismissing pattern. When she discusses her childhood, she refers to it as good, without providing evidence. In general, she is brief when she talks about her childhood. Furthermore, she does not remember her childhood well. Other dismissing responses include: “nothing” and “I don’t know.” In general, an infant with avoidant Strange Situation classification would grow to be an adult with dismissing AAI classification. In turn, she is most likely to raise children with avoidant attachment. Since the root of the dismissing attachment pattern is the avoidant pattern in infancy, avoidant/dismissing people like Ava won’t be aware of the cause of her attachment-related issues.

In contrast, Amba (ambivalent/preoccupied) would easily get very emotional. Her comments would generally be longer. She would also mix up the grammatical tense, i.e., past and present. The narrative of Seca (secure) would be more balanced and coherent. She could refer to her childhood objectively. Although not listed in the table, her empathetic conversation style would not be possible without fully conforming to Grice’s Maxims of Conversation. Finally, Disa (disorganized) would demonstrate certain characteristics of her attachment pattern, for example, pauses and incomplete sentences. Probably the most striking aspect would be her false belief, which could be told in a matter-of-fact manner: Disa could talk about her dead parents as if they were alive.