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Undergraduate Researcher Article

## Attachment theory predicts the formation of romantic relationships.

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This essay reviews the literature on attachment theory. Attachment theory and the methods used to assess attachment systems are critiqued. The usefulness of attachment theory for predicting romantic relationships is also examined. Attachment theory is found to be a valid and reliable construct, especially that of secure attachment. In contrast non-secure attachment systems are less reliable. The secure attachment system is also shown to be a significant predictor of acquiring a stable romantic relationship in adulthood. Directions for future research are provided, especially with regard to refining non-secure attachment constructs.

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The quality of mother-child (or primary caregiver) attachment is regarded as a pervasive factor in the development of an individual's relational psychology throughout the entire lifespan (Bowlby, 1982; Freud, 1932). This essay reviews the literature concerning the validity and reliability of attachment theory, and the extent to which attachment systems predict behaviour in romantic relationships. Attachment theory and its categorical systems will be defined, followed by an analysis of the research regarding its validity and reliability within the literature. Psychometric variables such as temperament and personality will be compared and contrasted with attachment systems in order to illustrate construct validity. The reliability of attachment will be examined by comparing and contrasting the evidence concerning attachment assessment methods. Finally, this essay will examine the evidence concerning how attachment predicts romantic relationships in adulthood. To begin, the history of attachment theory as postulated by Sigmund Freud (and later modified by John Bowlby) will now be provided.

### *Attachment Theory*

Sigmund Freud (1932) postulated that mother-child attachment, that is, the nature of their bond, remains within the unconscious and becomes the

impetus for a pattern of relationship behaviours throughout the entire lifespan. Bowlby (1982) broke away from psychoanalytic thought, which assumed an unconscious drive for physical gratification was the causal basis of attachment, and proposed an ethological theory of attachment. Bowlby used the term *internal working models*, comparable to schemata, to define the underlying cognitive model behind attachment (Crowell & Treboux, 1995; Peterson, 2004). This perspective preferred inherent survival instinct as the causal basis for attachment. The underlying assumption is that attachment system formation depends on the formation of trust in the infant. This trust results from the level of sensitivity the caregiver provides during times of stress. Subsequently the infant will produce an adaptive response, for example, proximity seeking (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978; Bowlby, 1982; de Wolf & Ijzendoorn, 1997; Waters, Kondo-Ikemura, Posada & Richters, 1991). Ainsworth and colleagues (1978) empirically demonstrated the existence of different attachment systems in laboratory studies with infants using the *Strange Situation* procedure.

The Strange Situation procedure involved observing a child's behaviour when separated from their primary caregiver. Thus, different types of attachment were classified in regard to the observed strength of the bond between the infant and caregiver (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Berk, 2007; Peterson, 2004). Generally, in both ethological and psychoanalytic approaches, attachment systems have been considered to be unconscious personality dispositions, largely consolidated by approximately 24 months of age. Further, disruptions in child-caregiver relations at this early sensitive period are theorised to remain a significant predictor of the quality of future relationship formation (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Bowlby, 1982; Colin, 1996; Hazan & Shaver, 1994). Although there is evidence attachment systems can in fact be expressed on a continuum, the four distinct attachment systems identified in the literature will be defined categorically, as this is how they are commonly represented (Fraley & Spieker, 2003).

### *Attachment Styles*

The most common attachment system is that of secure attachment, which accounts for approximately 60 to 70 percent of the population cross-culturally (Ijzendoorn, 1995a; Peterson, 2004). Secure attachment is traditionally measured in terms of separation anxiety (Ainsworth et al., 1978). Separation anxiety is observed when the infant protests the departure of the primary caregiver. Strangers generally fail to reduce separation anxiety in securely attached infants. Securely attached infants are rapidly comforted on

the return of their sensitive and responsive primary caregiver. Securely attached infants also exhibit confident exploration of the environment using the primary caregiver as a secure base (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Bowlby, 1982; Peterson, 2004). The second most common attachment system is known as avoidant attachment.

Avoidant attachment contrasts secure attachment in that the infant does not generally display separation anxiety and is usually indifferent towards the primary caregiver. This system accounts for approximately 20 percent of cases in North America (Peterson, 2004). It is theorised that avoidant attached infants distance themselves from the caregiver as an adaptive response, because it is assumed the caregiver produces stress on the infant which the infant seeks to avoid (Crowell & Treboux, 1995). Cross-culturally non-secure attachment systems have greater variation, Germany having higher avoidant attachment in contrast to collective cultures like Japan, having higher resistant attachment (Alonso-Arboil, Balluerka, & Shaver, 2007; Behrens, Main, & Hesse, 2007; Berk, 2007). The remaining two systems are anxious and disorganised attachment.

Ten to fifteen percent of infants in North America display anxious (resistant) attachment (Peterson, 2004). Anxious attachment is comparable to secure attachment in that the infant clings to their primary caregiver and displays separation anxiety (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Berk, 2007; Peterson, 2004). These behaviours, however, in contrast to the securely attached are more pronounced, so much so that secure exploration is inhibited. Anxious infants are also not comforted rapidly, rather, aggressive behaviours are exhibited upon the caregiver's return. This is considered to be an adaptive response that draws the attention of an unresponsive caregiver (Cassidy & Berlin, 1994). Although the observed behaviour of both insecure attachment patterns suggest less distress in the Strange Situation, they are still comparable to securely attached infants in physiological measures of distress, for example, elevated heart rate (Cassidy, 1994). The fourth classification is disorganised (or disorientated) attachment.

Disorganised attachment system accounts for five to 10 percent of cases (North American data) (Berk, 2007). The behaviours generally exhibited by the disorganised infant are confused and contradictory. These infants also have difficulty displaying emotion and can be quite rigid, lacking a specific adaptive strategy. This is theorised to be due to a caregiver that also displays confusing and contradictory responses to the child (Berk, 2007; Hazan & Shaver, 1994). This essay will not examine this construct due to the fact this attachment system is rare and there is little research on its effect on romantic

relationships. This essay will now explore the evidence in the literature concerning whether attachment is a valid and reliable construct.

### *The Validity of Attachment*

In the literature, the validity of the overall attachment constructs centre around the debate regarding whether the attachment systems are learnt or inherent (Belsky & Rovine, 1987; Cassidy, 1994; Ijzendoorn, 1995a). The question here is in regard to the direction of causality, that is, the assumption that temperament causes attachment. Kagan (1984; cited in Belsky & Rovine, 1987) argued that the infants inherent temperament (measurable prior to birth and regarded as being stable over time) elicit whether or not the primary caregiver responds to the child with sensitivity. Belsky and Rovine (1987) examined several longitudinal data sets based on the Strange Situation to investigate this issue. They found that the traditional three-factor model of attachment (secure, anxious, and avoidant) was not affected by infant temperament. However, temperament predicted how infants would express their distress in the Strange Situation under the four-factor model (secure, anxious, avoidant, and disorganised). Attachment behaviour was separated from typical temperamental behaviour. For example, a securely attached yet difficult temperament child would express their insecurity by crying, approaching, and clinging to the caregiver. In contrast, an easy temperament child that is securely attached would greet the mother and engage in distal interaction (Belsky & Rovine; 1987; Cassidy, 1994). Mangelsdorf, Gunnar, Kestenbaum, Lang, and Andreas (1990) also found no main effect of temperament on attachment in their study of 66 mother-child pairs. However, they did find that secure attachment can be predicted by an interaction between temperamental distress levels and the mother's personality. This suggests that there is slight variance accounted for by inherent behaviour and that attachment does not completely discriminate. As a result, temperament is not a causal variable but a moderating one in attachment formation.

Ijzendoorn (1995a) conceded that the significant degree to which an infant adopts the same attachment system as the caregiver is not solely reliant upon the caregiver's level of sensitive responsiveness, that perhaps this variance can be explained by temperament. In a study by van den Boom (1994), the construct validity of attachment systems was illustrated via experimental intervention. This study sampled infants assessed as irritable at birth. These infants with their mothers were randomly assigned to either a control or intervention group. The control group received no intervention. In the intervention group, mothers received training throughout the infants' first

three to nine months of age. The training enhanced the mothers' skills at attending and being responsive to their children. The infants in the intervention group were significantly more securely attached than those in the control group at 12 months of age. Although this study was limited in the demographics of its sample, it illustrated that attachment systems can be a learnt internal disposition dependant on the caregiver's sensitive responsiveness (van den Boom, 1994). This study supports the idea that attachment is a separate construct to temperament: if temperament was the basis of attachment style, then the direction of causality would be from the child to the caregiver. Furthermore, Benoit and Parker's (1994) study that produced correlations between scores on the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI) with the Strange Situation across three generations, found that attachment systems are largely predicted by the caregiver's own attachment style; thus indicating further that attachment is a learnt response and not inborn. The construct validity of attachment has therefore been established. However the stability/reliability of attachment systems must also be addressed.

There is conflicting data in the literature concerning the reliability of attachment. This issue is compounded by the wide variety of assessment techniques and the diverse terminology used to define attachment systems (Crowell & Treboux, 1995). Aside from the Strange Situation (an observation measure), adult attachment system measurement relies on either interviews or self-report questionnaires (see Crowell & Treboux, 1995, for a description of these measures). To date, the AAI (Crowell & Treboux, 1995; Ijzendoorn, 1995a), a categorical measure, has been shown to be the most valid and reliable assessment measure cross-culturally for assessing adult attachment styles. The AAI rating scales reflect relational terms such as loving, neglecting, pressuring, or uninvolved. The resulting categories are entitled secure, dismissing, preoccupied, or unresolved (Crowell & Treboux, 1995). The other most common and reliable of these measures is the Adult Attachment Styles scale (AAS, Hazan & Shaver, 1994), which specifically assesses attachment concerning romantic relationships. This measure uses continuous Likert scales assessing the three major attachment systems; that is, secure, avoidant, and anxious (Crowell & Treboux, 1995). The major limitation concerning attachment measures centres on the lack of convergent validity between measures due to the differences in terminology and methodology, with only secure attachment being an exception (Bartholomew & Shaver, 1998; Crowell & Treboux, 1995). Aside from measurement issues test-retest reliability is also a cause for criticism.

Baldwin and Fehr (1995) examined the test-retest reliability on a sample of 159 undergraduate students with the AAS. Their results indicated a 30 percent change in attachment styles over time. The length of time between tests did not significantly affect the results. Notably, it was the insecure attachment systems that were significantly more susceptible to situational changes. Their sample was also limited in that it contained twice the amount of women as men. Scharfe and Bartholomew (1994) also found  $r > .7$  with regard to the stability of adult attachment systems using the AAI. Another study by Davila, Burge, and Hammen (1997), which featured a sample consisting entirely of women, revealed a significant correlation between women with adverse relational histories and stable insecure attachment patterns having fluctuations in their attachment self reports. This body of research suggests greater strength for the argument that it is insecure attachment that is less reliable in terms of test-retest reliability and more susceptible to environmental variables (Baldwin & Fehr, 1995; Davila et al., 1997). This essay has critiqued the theory and assessment of attachment systems; the final part of this critique will now examine attachment as a predictor of romantic relationships in order to draw the literature together.

### *Attachment and Romantic Relationships*

A romantic relationship is defined as a lasting, significant, intimate, and committed relationship shared between two individuals (Peterson, 2004). Romantic relationships are commonly initiated with passionate affection (Reber & Reber, 2001). Hazan and Shaver (1987) pioneered research in attachment styles and attitudes towards romance. Their study consisted of a sample of 620 participants; the ages of the participants ranged from 14 to 82 years, with two thirds of the participants being female. Significant differences were found in attitudes: securely attached individuals were more likely to endorse a belief in lasting romantic relationships in contrast to the insecurely attached participants. In line with the theory, it was also found that the avoidant category was the least likely to believe in the possibility of lasting romantic relationships due to not wanting close intimate relationships. Ambivalent style was unique, in that they reported significant feelings of loneliness, indicating that there is conflict between the desire for romance and the ability to obtain lasting relations due to anxiety (Hazan & Shaver, 1987, 1994). This research provided support for attachment theory in that it is a lasting unconscious disposition formed in infancy and carried throughout the lifespan. Miller and Hoicowitz (2004) recently conducted a study with 118 undergraduate psychology students in order to re-examine predictors of

romantic attitudes. The findings were consistent with prior research. It was found that an avoidant attachment style was generally negatively correlated with length and quality of romantic relationships. There was no correlation found for length of relationship with an anxious attachment style; however the quality of the relationships were negatively correlated with anxious attachment. In contrast to prior research, infant-parent attachment for avoidant attachment was only negatively related to the length of romantic relationships when anxiety scores were also high for those individuals. There was no effect when anxiety scores were low for the avoidant participants. Comparable with attachment theory, parental attachment did predict the quality; however, length of relationship could not be predicted (Miller & Hoicowitz, 2004). In another study, anxiety was also significantly correlated with emotional jealousy towards the romantic partner (Knobloch, Solomon, & Cruz, 2001). This research was able to identify situational and perhaps temperamental variance in length of relationships, due to the use of a continuous scale.

### *Conclusion*

In conclusion, attachment theory is a valid and reliable construct in terms of learnt dispositions regarding relationships. Attachment systems, especially the secure type, remain robust throughout the lifespan. Secure attachment is associated with a belief in, and commitment to, a lasting romantic relationship. The insecure domains of attachment theory, however, are highly affected by situational events. This does support the general insecure theory that the infant-caregiver relationship lacked sensitive responsiveness. It has been identified that attachment theories and measures require refinement due to the fact that non-secure systems are measured using diverse terminologies, which may account for the instability of these constructs. Future research could factor analyse the diverse attachment assessments described, from both psychoanalytic and ethological fields. Thus, the creation of a universal psychometric assessment for attachment can be applied for improved clarity of inference. Finally in regard to research into causation of learnt or inherent dispositions and their affect on personality, further research should continue to investigate how temperament is expressed in sub-types of attachment systems. This can be achieved by comparing continuous attachment measures with temperament.



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