Attachment theory

Attachment theory is a theory (or group of theories) about the psychological concept of attachment: the tendency to seek closeness to another person and feel secure when that person is present. Attachment theory has its origins in observation of and experiments with animals. Much early research on attachment in humans was done by John Bowlby and his associates.

Attachment theory assumes that humans are social beings; they do not just use other people to satisfy their drives. In this way, attachment theory is similar to object relations theory.

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### Attachment of Young Monkeys to Their Mother

A series of experiments with infant monkeys (Harlow & Harlow, 1969) has shown that attachment is not a simple reaction to internal drives such as hunger. In these experiments, young monkeys were separated from their mother shortly after birth. After that, they were offered two dolls which were thought of as surrogates to the mother. The first doll had a body of wire mesh. The second doll had a body of terry cloth and foam rubber. Both of these dolls could be made a source of food by attaching a milk bottle to its chest. The objective of the experiment was to see what would determine to which doll
the monkey would cling: the soft contact of the cloth or the source of food. It turned out that the monkeys would cling to the soft-clothed doll, irrespective of whether it provided food. The monkeys were also more exploring when the soft-cloth doll was near. Apparently, the doll provided them with a sense of security. However, the passive doll was not an adequate alternative for a real mother. Infant monkeys which were raised without contact with other monkeys showed abnormal behavior in social situations. They were either very fearful of other monkeys or responded with unprovoked aggression when they encountered other monkeys. There also showed abnormal sexual responses. Female monkeys who were raised in isolation often neglected or abused their infants. This abnormal behavior is thought to demonstrate that a bond with the mother is necessary for further social development.

Attachment of Children to Caregivers

Attachment theory led not only to increased attention to attachments as a psychosocial process, it also led to a new understanding of child development. Freudian theory suggested that as libidinal drives fixed on different objects, former attachments would be broken; failure to break an attachment effectively would constitute a sort of trauma that could lead to later mental illness. Attachment theory, however, suggested that growing children did not break former attachments, but rather (1) learned to become more active (or sovereign) within previously established attachments, and (2) added new attachments, which did not necessarily require a break with (and are not necessarily substitutes for) previous attachments.

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The Strange Situation

Mary Ainsworth is a developmental psychologist who devised a procedure, called The Strange Situation, to observe attachment relationships between a human caregiver and child. In this procedure the child is observed playing for 20 minutes while caregivers and strangers enter and leave the room, recreating the flow of the familiar and unfamiliar presence in most children's lives. The situation varies in stressfulness and the child's responses are observed. The child experiences the following situations:

1. Parent and infant are introduced to the experimental room.
2. Parent and infant are alone. Parent does not participate while infant explores.
3. Stranger enters, converses with parent, then approaches infant. Parent leaves inconspicuously.
4. First separation episode: Stranger's behavior is geared to that of infant.
5. First reunion episode: Parent greets and comforts infant, then leaves again.
6. Second separation episode: Infant is alone.
7. Continuation of second separation episode: Stranger enters and gears behavior to that of infant.
8. Second reunion episode: Parent enters, greets infant, and picks up infant; stranger leaves inconspicuously.

Two aspects of the child's behaviour are observed:

1. The amount of exploration (e.g. playing with new toys) the child engages in throughout.
2. The child's reactions to the departure and return of its caregiver.

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Attachment Styles

On the basis of their behaviours, the children can be categorized into three groups. Each of these groups reflects a different kind of attachment relationship with the mother. (It should be noted that Bowlby believed that mothers were the primary attachment figure in children's lives, but subsequent research has confirmed that children form attachments to both their mothers and their fathers. Bowlby, like many of his colleagues at the time, infused the gender norms of the day into otherwise "unbiased" scientific research).

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Secure Attachment

A child who is securely attached to its mother will explore freely while the mother is present, will engage with strangers, will be visibly upset when the mother departs, and happy to see the mother return.

Securely attached children are best able to explore when they have the knowledge of a secure base to return to in times of need (also known as "rapprochement", meaning in French "bring together"). When assistance is given, this bolsters the sense of security and also, assuming the mother's assistance is helpful, educates the child in how to cope with the same problem in the future. Therefore, secure attachment can be seen as the most adaptive attachment style. According to some psychological researchers, a child becomes securely attached when the mother is available and able to meet the needs of the child in a responsive and appropriate manner. Others have pointed out that there are also other determinants of the child's attachment, and that behavior of the parent may in turn be influenced by the child's behaviour.

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Anxious-Ambivalent Insecure Attachment
A child with an anxious-resistant attachment style is anxious of exploration and of strangers, even when the mother is present. When the mother departs, the child is extremely distressed. The child will be ambivalent when she returns - seeking to remain close to the mother but resentful, and also resistant when the mother initiates attention.

According to some psychological researchers, this style develops from a mothering style which is engaged but on the mother's own terms. That is, sometimes the child's needs are ignored until some other activity is completed and that attention is sometimes given to the child more through the needs of the parent than from the child's initiation.

**Anxious-Avoidant Insecure Attachment**

A child with an anxious-avoidant attachment style will avoid or ignore the mother - showing little emotion when the mother departs or returns. The child will not explore very much regardless of who is there. Strangers will not be treated much differently from the mother. There is not much emotional range displayed regardless of who is in the room or if it is empty.

This style of attachment develops from a mothering style which is more disengaged. The child's needs are frequently not met and the child comes to believe that communication of needs has no influence on the mother.

**Disorganized**

There is also a fourth category termed **Disorganized Attachment**. It would be wrong to call Disorganized Attachment a style as it is the lack of a coherent style or pattern for coping. While Ambivalent and Avoidant styles are not totally effective, they are strategies for dealing with the world. Children with disorganized attachment experienced their caregivers as both frightened and frightening. Human interactions are experienced as erratic, thus children cannot form a coherent interactive template. If the child uses the caregiver as a mirror to understand the self; the disorganized child is looking into a mirror broken into a thousand pieces. It is more severe than learned helplessness as it is the model of the self rather than of a situation.

**Attachment in intimate relationships**

Building on the work of John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth, other researchers have detected similar patterns of behavior in adult relations with romantic partners and spouses. Securely attached people are able to place trust in their partner which, in turn, means they can confidently spend time apart. People with an anxious ambivalent
attachment style may have difficulties because their way of behaving in relationships can be seen as needy or clingy by their partner. They are prone to worry about whether their partner loves them or whether they are valued by their partner. People with an avoidant attachment style are uncomfortable being close to others. They have difficulties in trusting other people and do not like to depend on others.

Such patterns are believed to develop in infancy, but can be modified as people enter into new relationships.

See also

- Mary Ainsworth
- Erik Erikson
- John Bowlby
- Melanie Klein
- Jerome Kagan
- Jean Piaget
- Sigmund Freud
- Object relations theory

References