Attachment theory: Too far gone/gone too far?

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Abstract

Attachment theory has informed the ways in which we think about the role mothers play in caregiving and in ensuring healthy infant, child, and adult development. While it is clear that behaviours associated with ‘attachment’ from caregivers’ and infants’ perspectives are seen in all cultures, interactions between caregivers and infants differ markedly among cultures. Western societies, through attachment and intensive mothering scripts, assume mothers will tackle the lion’s share of child care and for many, to do so alongside paid employment or other equally challenging circumstances. This paper critiques attachment theory by questioning its universality and recommends rethinking the theory’s impact on mothering practice.

Introduction

For well over half a century attachment theory has emphasized the critical role that ‘good mothering’ plays to ensure healthy child development. Attachment theory tells us how children will prosper in environments that are emotionally warm, nurturing, and stimulating, and also how children will benefit from being cared for by (m)others who are sensitive, accepting, cooperative, and always available to meet their needs. Relying heavily on essentialist notions of femininity and maternal instinct, these sorts of sentiments continue to define women’s roles in Western societies and they underlay what it means to be a ‘good mother.’ Not only has attachment theory irrevocably tied the well-being of children living in contemporary Western societies to unreasonable standards of mothering, it has privileged ways of being that undervalue cross-cultural variations in parenting practices and in developmental outcomes.

This paper opens with a brief discussion about classical attachment theory’s role in shaping mothering practice. Two of the problematics of attachment theory, namely its inability to effectively account for cross-cultural variations in parenting practices and its privileging of one particular attachment style will be briefly discussed in the remainder of the paper. Finally, the
conclusion to this paper calls for a re-thinking of attachment theory in a way that fully acknowledges the social and cultural structures in which parenting occurs.

The theory

What we understand as attachment theory stems from the work of Dr. John Bowlby. The theory took shape in response to the World Health Organization’s concerns for children who had been displaced from their homes during the Second World War (Bowlby, 1952a; United Nations Economic and Social Council, 1948). ‘Maternal deprivation’ became a primary focus of these investigations. It was a concept that had permeated Bowlby’s (1938 – 1950) early work in looking at juvenile delinquency. Bowlby (1952a) concluded that depriving a child of maternal care, “…may have grave and far-reaching effects on his character and so on the whole of his future life” (p. 46). While Bowlby emphasized the mother-infant relationship as the critical factor contributing to healthy child outcomes, other researchers at the time remained sceptical. These researchers noted how the context under which separation occurred and the circumstances under which the separation existed, were at least as important, if not more so, than the periods of separation from the mother (e.g., Andry, 1962; Bruch, 1952 cited in Mead, 1954; Lebovici, 1962; Mead, 1962; Robertson & Robertson, 1989; Sarmiento, 1953; Wootton, 1962).

These early criticisms had little impact on the theory. The 1950s were rife with warnings to mothers, circulated through academic and popular literatures, about the harmful effects of non-maternal child care and separation from the mother on child development (e.g., Bowlby 1952b, c, d; Bowlby, 1958; Bowlby, 1996/1953; Brayshaw, 1952; Etaugh, 1980). The exclusivity of a bond formed between mother and child, supported by Bowlby’s early theorizations, demanded a society in which women with children were expected to be full-time, selfless, and devoted mothers (Kaplan, 1992). Such sentiments were not only used to describe
what it meant to be a ‘good mother’ but they also became proscriptive: “people [have come to] believe not only that women are caring and nurturing but that women should be” (Cole, Jayaratne, Cecchi, Feldbaum & Petty, 2007, p. 212).

**Intensive mothering**

Fast forward to today and we see how the theory continues to influence contemporary Western ideas about mothering practice through both attachment parenting and intensive mothering scripts. “It’s hardly even a matter of debate anymore that the demands of American motherhood have spiraled out of control” (Warner, 2012, p. 53). Today the ‘intensive mothering’ (Hays, 1996) discourse is used not only as a way to foster children’s attachment security but also other aspects of their emotional, intellectual and cognitive development (Quirke, 2006). Intensive mothering, like attachment parenting, is child-centric, emphasizes the importance of ‘bonding’, and tends to put the needs of children ahead of parents (Liss & Erchull, 2012). Largely, the mandate for intensive and attachment parenting falls to the mother. Even in the most egalitarian couples, attitudes about who is best suited to be the primary caregiver tend to shift following the birth of a child. Men’s and women’s beliefs about gender roles become more traditional when they enter into parenthood; such beliefs include notions that women are better able to fulfill the parenting role and perhaps more critically, that the role of mother should be of central importance to women (Liss & Erchull, 2012; Liss, Shiffrin, Mackintosh, Miles-McLean, & Erchull, 2013). In support of this shift in ideology, Green and Groves (2008) found, for groups of parents adhering to attachment parenting ideology, the attachment parenting was largely done by mothers. Many of the ‘attachment mothers’ interviewed by Green and Groves (2008) indicated that they were doing all of the attachment parenting. And many of these same mothers reported never having left their infants in the care of others, including the infants’ fathers.
Ironically, contemporary mothers in Western societies spend more time raising children today than was ever the case in the past, regardless of whether they are single or partnered, stay-at-home mothers or working full-time outside of the home. And, as noted earlier, mothers today are not just responsible for raising happy, healthy, and secure children but they are also accountable for their children’s intellectual, behavioural, and psychological development (Clarke, 2010; Wall, 2010). The ‘new brain research’ also emphasizes the importance of intensive mothering for optimizing brain development and consequently for children’s intellectual futures (Wall, 2010). Where attachment theory had loosely framed itself within scientific discourses, the ‘new brain research’ paired with mothering advice “borrows from the language and authority of neuroscience to frame children’s brains as technologically complex machines that need the correct inputs in order to attain maximum efficiency at a later time” (Wall, 2010, p. 254). Like attachment theory before it, ‘new brain research’ discourses are firmly entrenched in the popular media, supporting a neo-liberal rationality emphasizing individual responsibility, self-management, preoccupation with planning and control, and future success (Wall, 2010).

The acceptance of intensive mothering ideals has far reaching implications for all women who have, or plan to have children as well as for the children. Reflecting middle-class Western values intensive mothering ideology “positions children as vulnerable, passive, and lacking agency, and good mothers, in relation to this, as those who take on the task of developing the potential in their children” (Wall, 2010, p. 255). Related to this, as a natural outcome, is a relative loss of freedom and autonomy for children who are being raised in a culture that view children as increasingly vulnerable. The generation who have had the most experience being ‘attachment parented’ are just now becoming adults. Results thus far reveal that over-parenting
among college students is related to their low self-efficacy (Bradley-Geist & Olson-Buchanan, 2014) and poor life satisfaction (Schiffrin, Liss, Miles-McLean, Geary, Erchull, & Tashner, 2014). And perhaps most importantly from mothers’ perspective, the intensive mothering agenda places unreasonable demands on women to dedicate large amounts of time and energy, regardless of their employment situation, to nurturing children’s emotional and intellectual development. The result, for many mothers, of adhering to an intensive mothering script can be increased levels of stress, impatience, loneliness, feelings of loss, vulnerability, guilt, shame and bitterness (Hays, 1996; Johnstone & Swanson, 2006, 2007).

For many mothers in Western society “anxiety, isolation, and a sense of overwhelmedness … go hand in hand with [these] toxic levels of intensive mothering” (Warner, 2012, p. 53). Contemporary women feel extreme pressure to abide by Western cultural standards that demand this sort of highly involved parenting (Liss et al., 2013). Obviously, the intensive mothering ideology favours women in middle- and upper-class families who have the physical resources to provide the necessary material supports for their children. However, with this new ‘moral code’ for motherhood “all mothers, regardless of their income, share particular challenges in their efforts to be good mothers today” (Gazso, 2012 p. 27). Mothers are giving up work, sleep and relaxation in order to engage in intensive mothering (Wall, 2010). In short, mothers are still expected to “submerge their own needs and interests in those of their children, a degree of self-effacement which in relationships other than the mother-child one, would be judged pathological” (Phoenix & Woollett, & Lloyd, 1991, p. 36).

An alternative to ‘attachment parenting’: cooperative care

While attachment theory has always interpreted the mother-infant dyad as the most critical factor for ensuring healthy child development, there is much contrasting evidence
showing how “cooperative child care characterizes many (if not most) cultures around the world, cutting across geographic, economic, political, and social boundaries” (Crittenden & Marlowe, 2013, p. 68). In non-Western cultures childrearing often involves a wide range of primary caregivers (Crittenden & Marlowe, 2013; Meehan & Hawkes, 2013; Sagi, Lamb, Lewkowicz, Shoham, Dvir, & Estes, 1985; Seymour, 2013). In fact “[m]ost societies around the world do not expect mothers or parents to rear children alone” (Seymour, 2013, p. 115). Caring for infants and children is a task taken on by multiple caregivers all over the world and is a “universal practice with a long history, not a dangerous innovation” (Lamb, 1998 cited in Seymour, 2013, p. 116).

An example taken close to home shows how caregiving among Indigenous peoples in Canada often consists of shared parenting, with multiple people caring for children (Neckoway, Brownlee, & Castellan, 2007). Caregivers can be made up not only of extended family members, but sometimes elders, leaders, and other members of the community (Gfellner, 1990; Neckoway et al., 2007). As such, Indigenous caregiving practices are often at odds with mainstream parenting practices that are based on attachment theory and its exclusive focus on the mother-child dyad (Neckoway et al., 2007). Because so many cultures do not promote the same sort of intensive mothering scripts that dominate Western societies the cross-cultural relevance of attachment theory remains questionable (Behrens, Hesse, & Main, 2007; Bornstein, Haynes, Azuma et al., 1998; Broussard, 1995; Fouts, Roopnarine, Lamb, & Evans, 2012; Leyendecker, Lamb, & Scholmerich, 1997; Posada, Carbonell, et al., 2004; Posada, Jacobs, Richmond et al., 2002; Quinn & Mageo, 2013; Rothbaum, Pott, Azuma, Miyake, & Weisz, 2000; Sroufe, Egeland, Carlson, & Collins, 2005; Stern & Kruckman, 1983; van IJzendoorn & Kroonenberg, 1988). Neckoway, Brownlee, Jourdain, and Miller (2003) describe the problems with trying to fit attachment theory where it is not compatible:
The frustration of many cultural groups was and is that psychological theories go too far in assuming the homogeneity of families. Some of the issues, then, are the preoccupation attachment theory has revealed with singular, dyadic attachments, the overextended application of attachment theory across cultures, and the perception that attachment theory is defined and enforced by those outside the culture group. (p. 114)

**Attachment security**

Other cultures manage to parent and raise psychologically healthy children without the exclusive focus on all-encompassing motherhood; and they do so with significantly less emphasis on attachment ‘security’. Keller (2013) has argued that attachment ‘security’ has become more than just a marker of healthy child development, “it is also a moral ideal” (Keller, 2013, p. 181). Thus, in addition to assumptions about the importance of the mother-infant dyad in determining child outcomes, using security of attachment as the principal benchmark of healthy development is also problematic. The emphasis on ‘secure’ attachment as the optimal outcome of mothering practice ignores the fact that “there is a wider range of normal emotional development than has been imagined in attachment theory” (Chapin, 2013, p. 145). Child-rearing practices can be interpreted as the strategies used by individuals within societies to shape culturally consonant people (Barlow, 2013; Chapin, 2013; Mageo, 2013; Quinn, 2013). How infants and young children learn to approach caregivers and how, in turn they are responded to, largely depends upon the priorities societies place on the behaviours and emotions of its members to meet their “cultural organization” needs (Gaskins, 2013, p. 57). Some cultures value independence and autonomy and will use childrearing practices to promote these attributes; others place emphasis on communal qualities and will use childrearing strategies to achieve these social and cultural goals.

Evidence from recent studies using the Strange Situation procedure (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978) to assess infant attachment styles show how infants living in non-Western
societies can display different attachment patterns from those brought up in Western societies. Almost two thirds of Western (US) infants display a ‘secure’ attachment pattern (61.7%) with the remaining third distributed between ‘insecure-avoidant’ (14.8%), ‘insecure-resistant’ (8.7%), and ‘disorganized’ (14.8%) (van IJzendoorn et al., 1992 cited in Archer, Steele, Lan, et al., 2015, p. 486). In contrast, other studies have shown how almost no Korean (Jin, Jacobvitz, Hazen, & Jung, 2012) or Japanese (Takahashi, 1986) infants display the insecure-avoidant attachment pattern. On the other hand, German infants were more likely to engage in the insecure-avoidant pattern of behavior (i.e., 49%) and less likely to display a secure pattern (i.e., 33%) compared to other cultural groups (Grossmann, Grossmann, Huber, & Warner, 1981). In some studies a third of Chinese infants have been classified by ‘insecure-resistant’ or ‘disorganized’ styles, combined (Hu & Meng, 2003, cited in Archer et. al, 2015, p. 486). From an evolutionary perspective, insecure attachment patterns, in contrast to secure patterns, can be viewed as different adaptations to different environments, and not as indicators of suboptimal development (Keller, 2013). It is important to recognize and acknowledge the ethnocentricity involved when examining policies and encouraging behaviours based on Western mainstream cultures that in fact are inappropriate for non-Western segments of the population.

Related to these cultural concerns, many of the studies that have looked at attachment security in Western societies have focused on white, middle class, two biological parent families (Keller; 2014; Posada, 2013). While security of attachment is hypothesized to be continuous throughout the life course due to the early foundations of sensitive mothering, research has found that stability in pattern of attachment even from 12 to 18 months of age is not more than 60% in samples of low socioeconomic, poorly educated mothers (Egeland & Farber, 1984). This finding has largely been attributed to differences in parenting practices between middle class and low
income families with the latter tending to be somewhat less responsive to infant needs and
displaying responses contingent on their own needs in relation to those of their infants
(Letourneau, Hungler, & Fisher, 2005). Such characteristics, while appropriate for the
circumstances in which low income mothers parent, are antithetical to secure infant-parent
attachment. As well, the Strange Situation procedure is “attuned to conditions prevailing among
middle class Americans and cannot be used intelligibly in other groups without naturalistic
assessments of their prevailing conditions of infant care” (Levine & Miller, 1990, p. 73).

Further evidence that security of attachment should not continue to be the principal
benchmark of healthy development comes from neurobiology research. For example, infants
rated as having difficulty in adapting to change (Umemura & Jacobvitz, 2014), having excitable
amygdalas (Kagan, 2011), or having a particular type of serotonin-transporter-linked
polymorphic region (Raby, Cicchetti, Carlson, Cutuli, Englund, & Egeland, 2012) related to the
type of insecure attachment infants displayed. Genetics predicted whether or not attachment
pattern remained the same throughout the lifespan (Raby, Cicchetti, Carlson, Egeland, & Collins,
2013). Finally, even when their mothers were sensitive and responsive, very premature infants
had a greater risk of showing disorganized attachment due to neurological damage (Wolke,
Eryigit-Madzwamuse, & Gutbrod, 2014). These results suggest a strong role of biology in
attachment patterns, over and above maternal behaviour, which indicates that maternal
sensitivity may not be as crucial as has been claimed.

Thus, it would appear that attachment ‘security’ should not be considered as the
benchmark defining optimal child development outcomes across different cultures and
socioeconomic groups; and mothering practices should not be the sole focus in attempting to
understand and explain attachment outcomes. Further, Weisner (2014) claims that there are at
least 20 different evolutionary modes that support child survival and has wondered why
attachment continues to be used as the dominant explanatory variable.

**Conclusion**

Decades of criticism of attachment theory has been ignored. Quinn and Mageo (2013) note that for those invested in the paradigm the benefits of preserving the theory are attractive and represent an “academic industry” (p. 27). These authors also suggest that because some of these critiques are written by scholars who are not attachment researchers or psychologists, publishing findings in journals that attachment theorists are not likely to read, the criticisms become easier to ignore. A recent article published in *Current Opinions in Psychology*, in which Keller (2016) argues for a re-imagining of attachment, focusing on “what is adaptive and what is maladaptive” (p. 62) suggests that the tides may be slowly turning. While there is little doubt that caregiver(s)’ sensitivity and responsiveness are important factors that impact a child’s development, what is questioned here is the narrow, Western focus of attachment theory on the mother-infant dyad and on the privileging of a secure attachment style. Notwithstanding evidence to the contrary, the bias towards exclusive mothering continues to dominate Western psychology. Although over the years there has been much research questioning the universality and applicability of attachment theory (e.g., Rogoff, 2003), researchers in the field are continuing to expand and apply the theory with little modification. In a recent study focused on personality psychology research, Cortina, Curtin, and Stewart (2012) argued that in order “to understand a person’s behavior, one must understand not only that individual but also the social structure in which he or she is embedded” (p. 259).

The sensitivity and responsiveness of other people close to infants and children clearly have an impact on their development, as do children’s personal makeup and the community and
culture in which they live (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Further, the broad cultural acceptance of intensive mothering ideals has far-ranging implications for all mothers and those who are considering becoming mothers. Some will be judged as adequate; some as inadequate. Some will feel the physical, economic, and emotional burdens resulting from this mothering ideology more intensely than will others. Ironically, “[d]espite what appears to be widespread consensus about the value of intensive mothering, mothering itself remains both culturally and politically devalued” (Damaske, 2013, p. 438). It is long past time for psychologists generally and attachment theorists specifically to seriously consider the implications of ignoring culture and context: to focus so exclusively on the mother-child dyad and on attachment ‘security’ is unhealthy for individuals and for societies.
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