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Sensitivity and Security: New Questions to Ponder

Ross A. Thompson

The conclusion that parental sensitivity is a reliable—but not highly robust—predictor of a secure attachment invites reconsideration of the nature of sensitivity and its impact on early psychosocial development. Future directions for inquiry include (1) renewed attention to the growth of attachment in the context of other developing features of the parent-infant relationship, including play and behavioral management; (2) the factors that moderate the impact of sensitivity on developing security (including the contexts of sensitive responsiveness, infant age, and the consistency of parental sensitivity over time); (3) the multifaceted and dynamic origins of individual differences in sensitivity; and (4) greater consideration of *why* sensitivity fosters attachment security, especially in relation to emergent working models of relationships and self.

INTRODUCTION

Parental sensitivity is an important but limited predictor of attachment security. This is the conclusion of De Wolff and van IJzendoorn's (1997) study, which, although it must be regarded in the context of the assumptions enlisted into their meta-analytic review (and some counterintuitive results), is very consistent with Goldsmith and Alansky's (1987) earlier meta-analysis of this literature, as well as the conclusions of other recent research reviews (e.g., Thompson, in press-a). Although the capacity of this central attribute of parenting to foster secure attachment is noteworthy, sensitivity is also a broad conceptual rubric encompassing a variety of interrelated affective and behavioral caregiving attributes. The conclusion that the association between parental sensitivity and a secure attachment, although fairly reliable, is not highly robust seems clearly established after more than 2 decades of research.

This is good news for attachment theorists because it confirms a central tenet of attachment theory. This is also somewhat disappointing news because it indicates that much remains to be explained about the development of a secure attachment. How can researchers improve the prediction of attachment security and strengthen their understanding of its origins? Four avenues seem worth pursuing.

First, renewed attention to the multifaceted features of early parent-infant relationships would help attachment researchers better specify the catalysts to a secure attachment. Bowlby (1969/1982) believed that even in infancy, attachment is only one of several components of the parent-child relationship. Parental roles as attachment figures are complemented by

their roles in feeding, play, instruction, and other activities that are guided by other behavioral systems. The parent's skill as a playmate does not necessarily have consequences for the attachment system. But little is known about how the development of attachment security intersects with these other features of parent-child relationships, or about the attributes of parenting that shape them.

There is evidence, for example, that parents begin to assume regulatory and disciplinary roles when young offspring achieve self-produced locomotion and are thus more likely to act in a dangerous or disapproved manner, assert independent intentions, and exhibit greater goal directedness (Campos, Kermoian, & Zumbahlen, 1992). Parental prohibitions and sanctions increase, along with positive affectional exchanges with offspring. At the same time that attachment security is taking shape late in the first year, therefore, the quality of the parent-child relationship is affected also by issues of behavioral management and compliance, and the experience of conflicting intentions and desires between parents and offspring is a significant catalyst for early psychosocial growth (as Vygotskian theory predicts). Attachment researchers have yet to explore systematically how the caregiving attributes contributing to the growth of security in infancy converge with those associated with this and other emergent dimensions of the parent-child relationship, and how the development of a secure attachment intersects with other features of early psychosocial growth. In short, how does parent-child attachment evolve in concert with other developing features of their relationship?

If attachment is only one aspect of the parent-child relationship, moreover, parental sensitivity may be

most influential in situations directly related to the development of security in offspring. Sensitivity exhibited when the child is fearful, anxious, or distressed might be more prognostic of a secure attachment than sensitivity displayed during nonstressful episodes of feeding, play, or routine care. Such considerations (conceived in light of Bowlby's behavioral systems analysis) might contribute to a more precise portrayal of the attributes of care (including sensitivity, but also other factors) that contribute to a secure attachment.

Second, the predictive power of parental sensitivity might be sharpened if the influence of sensitivity was portrayed more conditionally or contingently, moderated by important factors. Whether infants experience a sensitive response from caregivers in alarming or stressful situations, rather than just in the context of routine care or play, is one such contingency. Another is the infant's age. Although current research is unclear whether sensitivity experienced earlier or later in the first year is more predictive of a secure attachment, it is certainly true that the quality of sensitive responding varies considerably with the infant's age. Quick and appropriate responsiveness to infant crying may be more central to sensitive responding earlier in the first year, for example, whereas the careful scaffolding of assistance during challenging or threatening experiences may be a more crucial feature of sensitivity by the end of that year. How the changing characteristics and needs of developing offspring alter the contexts and qualities of sensitive responsiveness over time—and its implication for assessing sensitivity in age-appropriate ways—thus merits further study.

Changes in the requirements of sensitive responding impose changing demands on parents. It is quite a different task to respond sensitively to a 12-month-old than to a 3-month-old, and different still with a 2-year-old. Indeed, parents may find that the challenges of responding sensitively to an older infant are more daunting than those of a younger baby (or the reverse), and therefore changes in sensitivity might be expected over time. This would be consistent with a broader literature indicating only moderate stability in parental attitudes or behavior over time or across situations (Holden & O'Dell, 1995), and changes in parental sensitivity may be one catalyst for changes in the security of attachment over time. Consequently, sensitivity may be most influential in the development and maintenance of attachment security when infants experience reliable responsiveness over time, which constitutes yet another contingency in the association between sensitivity and security.

Third, new perspectives to the role of sensitivity in the development of attachment security might be achieved by considering sensitivity as a graded rather than a threshold phenomenon, and understood in terms of its origins. Despite the frequency with which mothers of securely attached infants are generally portrayed as "sensitive" and mothers of their insecure counterparts as "insensitive," a survey of studies assessing maternal sensitivity (using Ainsworth's original rating procedures) reveals that in research conducted since Ainsworth's pioneering study, the mothers of insecurely attached infants have consistently averaged well above scores of 3 ("insensitive") on her measure (Thompson, in press-a). Clearly, mothers of insecure infants are insensitive *relative* to the mothers of securely attached infants, but many do not appear markedly insensitive in an absolute sense. Most parents are adequate caregivers.

It is also striking how little we know about the origins of individual differences in parental sensitivity. The catalysts for sensitive responsiveness must be diverse, influenced by a personal history that shapes conscious and unconscious schemas of parenting, cultural values that affect goals for childrearing, belief systems about the responsibilities of parents, the needs of young children and attributions of responsibility for child behavior, cultural ethnotheories that shape concepts of children and notions of age-appropriate conduct, and immediate situational stresses and supports that affect how easy it is to respond promptly and appropriately to the demands of young children. Sensitivity is also shaped by the social ecology of parenting, including the quality of the marital relationship, working environment, and broader community values and supports. Elucidation of this remarkably broad and potentially dynamic network of influences on parental sensitivity might enable attachment researchers to better understand the catalysts that render some parents more capable, relative to others, of responding sensitively to their infants—and why sensitivity might vary in different situations, or with the changing needs of developing offspring.

Finally, there should be greater attention to *why* parental sensitivity fosters a secure attachment. Does its influence derive from the infant's rudimentary social expectations for the caregiver? the development of an enhanced awareness of personal effectance or agency? the growth of particular social skills or predispositions? other catalysts? Theoretical and research attention to his question might help to crystallize the features of sensitive responsiveness that are most formative of a secure attachment (Lamb, Thompson, Gardner, & Charnov, 1985). This is par-

ticularly important in light of current interest in the representational features of attachment, drawing on Bowlby's concept of internal working models of relationships, caregivers, and self as central features of early psychological growth. The earliest representations of a 12-month-old are unlikely to provide the conceptual foundations for the more sophisticated and complex representations of self and relationships to emerge in later years (conceptions of one's worthiness of love can only dimly, at best, be foreshadowed in the earliest proto-working models of infancy), yet they are important (Thompson, in press-b). Understanding why sensitive responsiveness contributes to a secure attachment, and how this is associated with later working models of self and relationships, may be the most important theoretical problem for attachment researchers in the years to come.

These issues, taken together, suggest that rather than regarding parental sensitivity as a personality attribute with generalized benefits for the development of attachment security, it may be more useful to regard sensitivity as a behavioral quality with multifaceted origins whose effects are situationally and developmentally specific. Portrayed in this way, there are many exciting new questions to ponder in understanding the development of attachment security.

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