

Attachment and Life History Theory: A Rejoinder

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ABSTRACT—*M. Del Giudice and J. Belsky (this issue) derive several provocative hypotheses from the application of life history theory to attachment, especially concerning the emergence of sex differences in insecurity in middle childhood. This commentary highlights the significant gaps in research knowledge that must be addressed before the merits of their proposals can be evaluated. It also examines the multiple meanings and functions of “attachment” as this term applies to child–parent and adult affectional relationships, and their association. Their ideas certainly deserve further exploration, especially in the broader context of elucidating the life-span implications of early attachment within the framework of life history theory.*

KEYWORDS—*attachment; life history theory; sex differences*

Attachment theory views parent–child relationships from both ontogenetic and phylogenetic perspectives. The conceptual generativity of this approach is reflected in Del Giudice and Belsky’s contribution (this issue), which enlists life history theory to derive provocative hypotheses concerning the emergence of sex differences in attachment in middle childhood. There are many strengths to their analysis, including its theoretical scope, the derivation of testable hypotheses, their careful attention to methodological issues, and their frank acknowledgment of the limitations and contradictory findings in existing evidence. Equally importantly, their analysis frames two fundamental questions for attachment theory. What is attachment? What is it for?

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Del Giudice and Belsky argue that attachment is concerned with both child–parent bonds and romantic couple relationships because each is important to reproductive success. By contrast, developmental attachment theorists have taken care to distinguish early caregiving attachments and adult romantic relationships because they have distinct evolutionary functions, motivational qualities, interpersonal dynamics, and relevant behavioral systems (e.g., Ainsworth, 1989; Bernier & Dozier, 2002; Sroufe, Egeland, Carlson, & Collins, 2005). According to these theorists, the romantic and sexual concerns of adult peer affiliations differ markedly from the caregiving system underlying the affectional bonds between dependent children and their parents. In accord with Bowlby (1969/1982), they have also viewed infant–parent attachment as an ontogenetic adaptation enabling the survival of young children to maturity but having no more enduring evolutionary function (Bjorklund, 1997), even though early security or insecurity has consequences for later developmental functioning (Thompson, 2008). Del Giudice and Belsky argue instead that the biologically adaptive processes mediating infant–parent attachment are consistent with the adaptive processes underlying couple bonding in adulthood.

Both views are consistent with life history theory, which holds that early experience conveys important cues concerning ecological support and predictability. But they differ in the association between early attachment and adult reproductive strategy. How, then, is early attachment relevant to later sexual maturity and reproductive strategy?

Considerable evidence indicates that early adversity—including parent–child conflict, poverty, and deprivation—is associated with earlier sexual maturity in girls (see Ellis, 2004; Simpson & Belsky, 2008). Although none of this research used measures of child–parent attachment security, Del Giudice and Belsky argue that the security of attachment is likely to be a reliable barometer of environmental adversity and thus should be predictive of the same outcome (see also Belsky, Steinberg, & Draper, 1991; Chisholm, 1996). But the evidence on attachment security as an index of environmental support or stress is mixed. The association between parental sensitivity and the security of attachment is modest (De Wolff & van IJzendoorn, 1997), and

parenting quality can exacerbate or buffer other sources of stress for young children (e.g., relational security in a context of economic deprivation). Attachment security is also dynamic, changing over time in response to changes in parent–child interaction and stressful circumstances, and thus reflects both developmental history and current experience in caregiving relationships (Sroufe et al., 2005; Thompson, 2006). Attachment security is a barometer of much more than just early adversity, and we need considerably more research to elucidate the association between early stress, attachment security, and pubertal maturation.

The association between early child–parent attachment and adult reproductive strategy also requires more thought. In this regard, we can distinguish at least two aspects of adult reproductive strategy. The first, which Del Giudice and Belsky emphasize, concerns intimacy and commitment in couple relationships. They analyzed studies using measures of adult romantic attachment to suggest modest sex differences in insecurity that raise the “developmental dilemma” of how these emerge ontogenetically. No studies, however, document a significant association between attachment security in infancy and adult romantic attachment. The second aspect of adult reproductive strategy concerns parental investment, manifested in responsiveness to offspring and commitment to their well-being. Assessments of adult attachment “states of mind” in the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI) are significantly associated with both responsiveness to infants’ attachment signals and the security of attachment in offspring (van IJzendoorn, 1995). Thus far, relevant research has failed to identify sex differences in adult attachment on the AAI (Hesse, 2008; van IJzendoorn & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 1996), so there is no developmental dilemma to be resolved. Interestingly, modest evidence exists for a longitudinal association between infant attachment classification and adult “states of mind” on the AAI, especially when ecological stresses remain consistent over time (Waters, Weinfield, & Hamilton, 2000). The question, therefore, of how early child–parent attachment is associated with adult reproductive strategy is complex, depending on how we conceptualize and assess differences in adult reproductive strategy. Considerably more research is needed, but viewing parental investment as an adaptive correlate of early attachment is probably a stronger conceptual avenue to follow.

In light of these considerations, it is difficult to know whether Del Giudice and Belsky’s provocative hypotheses offer promising leads. Further research may clarify whether early adversity influences female pubertal maturation in association with attachment security (the latter as a causal influence or an index of early stress) or independently of it (such as through the effects of stress on the duration of childhood immaturity; see Ellis, 2004), and whether similar processes occur in males. Moreover, despite our reliance on a common vocabulary (*attachment, security, avoidance*) to describe child–parent relationships, adult romantic relationships, and adult states of mind concerning attachment, these are very different affectional bonds with different relational and motivational characteristics, and future development of theory

and research must clarify their association. If early attachment security is indeed an ontogenetic adaptation, then the “developmental dilemma” that Del Giudice and Belsky profile is a non-issue because there is no reason to expect an association between infant attachment security and adult romantic attachment. If early security inaugurates lifelong evolutionary adaptations, then it is important to understand its ontogenetic significance for adult romance and parental investment. In short, these provocative ideas certainly merit further exploration.

Beyond framing questions about the nature of attachment and its function, Del Giudice and Belsky also highlight important issues concerning attachment in the context of life history theory. Life history theory is concerned with the cumulative construction of complex behavioral adaptations from early environmental cues, and attachment theory offers a complementary but different portrayal of the interaction of early and later experience in the development of complex relationships. Besides the different scope of their applications, these approaches differ in their regard for the potential of later experiences to reorganize the developmental impact of early adaptations, with attachment researchers having learned during the past quarter century of research how much early and later relational experiences are jointly important (e.g., Sroufe et al., 2005). In the intersection of these dual formulations concerning the impact of early experience, we might hope that a relational view of life-span development that encompasses both species-typical formative influences and developmentally dynamic relational effects will emerge.

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