

## **Multiple Relationships Multiply Considered**

Ross A. Thompson

University of California, Davis, Calif., USA

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### **Key Words**

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The controversial status of the attachment theory in contemporary developmental science is reflected in the contributions to this special section. On the one hand, a consistent theme in the lead articles by Lewis, Suomi, Leavitt, and Takahashi (and the commentary by Weisner) is that the attachment theory is inimical to a social network approach to early social development. Owing to its emphasis on the mother-child dyad and its view that early experience in this relationship shapes enduring social dispositions and personality, the attachment theory is criticized as being both too narrow and too hegemonistic as a comprehensive portrayal of early sociopersonality development. On the other hand, commentaries by van IJzendoorn and by Waters, Corcoran and Anafarta allege that these criticisms overstate the claims of the attachment theory, which has the more limited purpose of understanding security in close relationships. To Waters and his colleagues, the expansive research literature relating attachment security to a host of outcomes derives not from the theory but from the intuitive hypothesis that ‘all good things go together,’ which may not be consistent with Bowlby’s original formulations.

Both the critics and the defenders of the attachment theory have their points. Most attachment researchers would agree with Levitt that attachment relationships are a subset of a larger social system for infants (and their caregivers) that shapes social development. However, while attachment theorists’ emphasis on the mother-child relationship has probably led to neglect the importance of attachment security with other social partners, it is not clear how the attachment theory has stymied vigorous literatures on family systems, peer relationships, and the effects of social institutions (like child care and schools) on sociopersonality development. Indeed, the research interests of the lead authors also seem congenial to the concerns of the attachment theory. Takahashi’s Affective Relationships Scale has many resemblances to Kobak’s Important People Interview to assess the hierarchy of attach-

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Ross A. Thompson, Department of Psychology  
University of California, One Shields Ave.  
Davis, CA 95616-8686 (USA)  
Tel. +1 530 754 6663  
E-Mail [rathompson@ucdavis.edu](mailto:rathompson@ucdavis.edu)

ment relationships [Kobak, Rosenthal, & Serwik, in press], and Levitt's probes for social convoy mapping in middle childhood are similar to the queries of Kerns's security scale for assessing attachment relationships in children of the same age [Kerns, Klepac, & Cole, 1996]. While not all social network members are attachment figures, of course, attachment figures provide social support and are thus important figures in any portrayal of the social ecology of childhood. We can agree that they are not, however, the only important figures.

The more trenchant criticism is that attachment researchers portray individual differences in a broad range of socioemotional and personality qualities as derivative of security in the mother-infant relationship. In this respect, differences in peer relationships, friendship, romantic partnerships, parenting, and other outcomes are viewed as products of early experiences of care rather than deriving from developmental influences that are specific to each relational system. To be sure, attachment theorists would agree with Lewis that 'the mother-child dyad can affect the peer system' but that peer relationships and other developmental outcomes are multiterminated. This view is consistent with the empirical literature showing that attachment security explains a meaningful but small proportion of variance in children's functioning in close relationships [Thompson, 1999]. Empirically as well as theoretically, therefore, it is unwarranted to regard variability in other developing relationships merely as byproducts of differences in early attachment security. The more interesting question is why early attachment security should be influential at all.

### **Internal Working Models**

As the scope of their research has expanded, attachment theorists have not been clear or consistent about how this question should be answered. Weinfeld, Sroufe, Egeland, and Carlson [1999], for example, have argued that early attachment relationships influence later development because of their effects on (a) neurodevelopment, (b) affect regulation, (c) behavioral regulation and relational synchrony, and/or (d) early representations (e.g., 'internal working models'). Waters, Kondo-Ikemura, Posada, and Richters [1991] have proposed that because attachment security indexes the broader affective quality of the parent-child relationship, a variety of socialization processes might be expected to be influenced by secure or insecure early relationships, such as identification, imitation, learning, cooperation and compliance, and prosocial motivation. It is easy to see how expansive interpretations of the effects of early attachment security on later development can arise from such views. This may help to explain why, in the empirical literature, attachment has been studied in relation to a dizzying range of outcomes. Attachment security has been studied to predict individual differences in relationships with peers, friends, and siblings, interactions with unfamiliar adults, parental sensitivity, exploration and play, cognitive and language development, frustration tolerance, self-recognition, behavior problems, curiosity, ego resiliency, math achievement, and many other outcomes [Thompson, 1998]. As Belsky and Cassidy [1994] asked, one might wonder if there is anything to which attachment security is *not* related! If such a question is seriously posed by developmental researchers, theoretical clarity is lacking.

Contrary to Waters and his colleagues, the problem is neither Bowlby's behavioral control systems theory nor the intuitive belief that 'all good things go together.' Rather, the attachment theory has provided a conceptual umbrella for a broad variety of formulations of how an early secure attachment *might* be related to later behavior. The reason these diverse (sometimes inconsistent) views exist within the attachment theory is because Bowlby's 'internal working models' construct is at once so heuristically provocative and so frustratingly vague [Thompson & Raikes, 2003]. The view that relational experience becomes affectively and dynamically represented in ways that are relevant to self-understanding and other relationships is one of the more productive contributions of the attachment theory to contemporary thinking about early sociopersonality development [see, for example, Carlson, Sroufe, & Egeland, 2004]. But as Hinde [1988] recognized more than 15 years ago, 'in the very power of such a model lies a trap: it can too easily explain anything' (p. 188). The difficulty is that Bowlby's concept of the internal working model is a conceptual metaphor, not a systematically defined theoretical construct, and it has failed to be elaborated and clarified by subsequent attachment theorists. Consequently, fundamental questions remain unanswered (e.g., how do internal working models develop? how do they relate to other developing conceptual systems of thought? what accounts for changes in the organization or quality of working models with further relational experience?), while the inclusiveness of this construct expands with every new empirical finding that is 'explained' with reference to it. The breadth and vagueness of the internal working models construct frustrates efforts to clarify the convergent and discriminant validity of the attachment construct and also complicates the interpretation of empirical findings. If a significant but modest association is revealed between attachment security and children's social initiatives with unfamiliar peers, for example, it is difficult to clarify if this owes to a direct association between them (e.g., working models of relationships), or instead derives from their mutual association with other influences (e.g., parental support; self-confidence).

In recent years, there have been efforts to conceptually link the internal working models construct to other conceptual achievements of early childhood [Bretherton & Munholland, 1999; Thompson, 1998]. Research on event representation, autobiographical memory, the growth of self-understanding, social schemas, theory of mind, and other cognitive advances can inform understanding of working models because they, too, are concerned with the encoding, representation, and interpretation of relational experience and its relevance to the self. Equally important, these literatures identify developmental influences on these conceptual achievements, such as the content and structure of early parent-child discourse, which are also likely to influence the development of working models. These theoretical and empirical efforts are valuable also because they can clarify some of the mediators between attachment security and the panoply of developmental outcomes studied by attachment researchers, and might contribute specificity to how attachment security influences emergent social capacities and self-understanding at different periods of growth [Thompson, 2000]. Because there is no reason to expect that internal working models emerge independently of other developing conceptual advances, such efforts may contribute to a developmental account of Bowlby's construct that clarifies its explanatory scope and limitations, and thus contributes to a better understanding of the association between attachment security and other

social and personality qualities. Such efforts can also be enlisted in the efforts of social network theorists to understand the representational influences that arise from relational experience.

### **Multiple Relationships**

The expansiveness of the attachment theory is somewhat surprising because, as noted by Waters and his colleagues, it concerns only one facet of close relationships. Attachment security does not exclusively define the mother-child relationship. Even in infancy, mothers and other caregivers are not only attachment figures but also play partners, teachers and models, and socializers. During the developmental period when attachment security is taking shape, for example, the concurrent emergence of self-produced locomotion in offspring fosters increased parental control efforts and parent-child conflict [Campos, Kermoian, & Zumbahlen, 1992]. Attachment researchers have been slow to explore how the development of security interacts with other facets of the developing parent-child relationship, although doing so might better explain how attachment security is related to children's functioning in other relationships.

As a social network analysis affirms, moreover, mother-child relationships are not the only attachments from which young children derive security. Attachments to mother, father, and possibly also to grandparents, child care providers, and others constitute the normative social ecology that the attachment theory must address. As Levitt noted, there is no consensus within the attachment theory about whether working models derived from multiple attachment relationships are hierarchically organized, influential in a domain-specific fashion, or become integrated developmentally, perhaps in middle childhood [Raikes & Thompson, in press]. This lacuna is problematic because as attachment security becomes increasingly representational and characteristic of persons (rather than relationship specific) it is likely to reflect diverse relational experiences. Understanding how attachment security is related to other facets of social development requires understanding better how the influences of multiple attachment relationships become incorporated into attachment security.

But how are attachment relationships distinguished from other affectional relationships, and what distinguishes an attachment figure from other close partners? In a world in which family relationships become reconstituted by divorce and remarriage, understanding how a new caregiver (such as a stepparent) may become an attachment figure and how an attachment relationship (such as with an absent father) changes with limited continuing contact becomes important for theoretical and practical reasons. Dozier's research on infants in foster care placements seems to suggest, for example, that the reorganization of attachment security around a new caregiver in early childhood can occur surprisingly rapidly [Dozier, Stovall, Albus, & Bates, 2001]. It may be, as Levitt suggests, that the boundaries between attachment relationships and other close relationships are flexible and become more permeable with increasing age as attachments change and as close relationships serve diverse needs in childhood and adolescence. This is important to examine for theory development, and for better understanding the association between attachment and children's other close relationships.

Systematically examining this issue also requires understanding how the nature of attachment itself evolves with psychological growth [Thompson & Raikes, 2003]. Many of the caregiving and protective functions of early attachment relationships become less relevant as the child matures, for example, and as the changing roles and relative responsibilities of parent and child alter the initial functions that attachment relationships serve in infancy. However, there has been little theoretical explication of developmental changes in the organization and functioning of attachment relationships beyond infancy. Ironically, even though the domain of attachment research has extended throughout the life course, measures of the security of attachment in childhood, adolescence, and adulthood maintain very close fidelity to the fourfold attachment classifications that were developed to categorize infant Strange Situation behavior. The idea that attachment could change organizationally with psychological development is rarely considered within the attachment theory, even though it seems apparent that the nature and function of close relationships evolve in important ways with the child's psychological growth. These remain, therefore, significant issues for theory development, especially because they can contribute to greater clarity concerning how attachment security should be related to children's functioning in other relationships at different ages.

## **Conclusion**

Is the mother-infant relationship the only formative influence in early social development? Are other social relationships merely derivative of attachment security? Attachment theorists and social domain theorists can agree that the answers to these questions are negative. However, these are not the most important questions for understanding the place of attachment in the multidimensional social ecology of early childhood. More important is understanding why early caregiving relationships should matter at all, what are the representational processes bridging early and later relational experience and experiences with different partners, and how the psychological changes of childhood and adolescence alter the nature and functioning of attachment relationships, and of other close relationships.

It is noteworthy that neither the attachment theory nor social network approaches are currently equal to this challenge. Social network theories have hardly begun to tackle the developing representational features of relational experiences and their relevance to personality development. The attachment theory has done so, but largely through the prism of Bowlby's original theorizing that has failed to be substantively updated by new knowledge of children's conceptual and psychological growth of the last 35 years. Unless new and updated theoretical insights can guide empirical inquiry into close relationships, we will continue to debate issues concerning mother-child relationships and social networks 20 years from now.

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