

## **Attachment as a Cultural and Ecological Problem with Pluralistic Solutions**

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### **Key Words**

Context · Culture · Life span development · Trust

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I stood next to a mother who was watching (through a one-way window) her child being assessed in the Strange Situation Procedure (SSP). The child was labeled ‘avoidant,’ according to the child’s behavior profile, at least as identified by the scoring and classification of the child’s attachment. But the mother proudly commented that: ‘This is what I have been working for by having him be with other kids and families while I am working. Look how independent he is! See how he can play by himself?’ This mother was a single parent by choice. She had told us about her goals for independence for herself and her child, the importance of living a pro-feminist kind of family life, as she defined it, and her efforts to establish an ongoing convoy of friends and caretakers for her child to provide relational support and security. The meaning of the behaviors revealed in the SSP were positive to her, and her construction of the situation reflected a valorizing of her child’s life path as well as the mother’s. For her, the behaviors she saw meant that they both were on a positive, adaptive, virtuous path. Her child was not in fact ‘at risk’ for ‘attachment disorder’ nor relational insecurity in her frame of meaning, whatever the scoring of her child’s behaviors might have been (and in fact, longitudinal follow-up through adolescence did not show any signs of risk either) [Weisner, 1996a, 2001; Weisner & Bernheimer, 1998; Weisner & Garnier, 1992].

Harwood, Miller, and Irizarry [1995] show more systematically than this case example that indigenous perceptions of desirable and undesirable attachment behaviors can and do differ from the labels given to them by the attachment theory. Their study compared Anglo and Puerto Rican mothers from working- and middle-class backgrounds. They found that mothers could prefer behaviors coded as insecure, and disapprove behaviors coded as secure, based on an SSP-type rating procedure. Using vignettes of SSP behaviors, they found that both socioeconomic status

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and culture influenced how mothers perceived and evaluated vignettes, and that overall

...Anglo mothers preferred that toddlers balance autonomy and relatedness, and they disliked clinginess; Puerto Rican mothers preferred that toddlers display respectfulness, and they disliked highly active or avoidant behaviors (p. 65).

The papers in this collection serve to redirect ‘...the study of social relations from a narrow focus on attachment toward a broader view that addresses the place of attachment figures within a larger network of developmentally significant relations’ [Levitt, this issue]. The studies advance our understanding of the study of socialization as ‘... the process of learning to become a member of...different networks’ that fill the world of the child and family [Lewis, this issue]. These networks include the child’s family, friends, teachers, and others, and they all are tied to social groups (class, kin) and cultural communities (neighborhoods, religions, ethnicities). Michael Lewis has advocated for such a social relational approach, to always think beyond the dyad, for a long time. Lewis argues that developmental research has been trapped in the dyadic model by classical attachment theories that argue for the initial primacy of the mother-child dyad, and by an ‘epigenetic view’ of developmental processes as depending on this mother-child dyad.

...according to the epigenetic view, peer relationships are the results of security of attachment to the mother. It is this, rather than earlier peer experiences, which affect later peer relationships.

Lewis’ social network model, on the other hand, finds the infant embedded in multiple, complex social networks from conception.

...different social objects (e.g., mother, father, peers) typically satisfy different social needs or functions, including protection, caregiving, nurturance, play, exploration/learning, and affiliation.

By age 3 or sooner, children already ‘... prefer parents when they need help, age-mates when they want to play, and older children for instruction’ [Lewis, this issue]. Different social networks provide functionally and relationally different experiences for children as they develop (peers, fathers, siblings, aunts and other relatives, other adult nonkin caregivers). Lewis also emphasizes that the influences on the young child of these relationally rich and complex networks can have direct or indirect effects of several kinds. He concludes not simply claiming the social network model is always right, but rather that the models each should be truly put to the test.

Appropriate as this empirical agenda is, I think the contextual, social relational model actually already is and would continue to be, the overwhelmingly clear winner. It is a much better representation of children’s social worlds. And further, it better represents the obvious fact that every feature of the social network (who matters to the child and others; resources they control; emotional connections to children and to each other; cultural and moral significance of networks; the time in development when networks are active; gender) that matters for children’s development differs around the world and across communities within nations. *The dyadic*

*attachment model severely limits the incorporation of such variations in children's social and cultural worlds into the analysis of attachments and close relationships.*

The social relational approach seems to me to be pluralistic, and open to empirical evidence, regarding what kinds of close relations, convoys, or attachments promote well-being and result in nonpathological mental and emotional development. Pluralism certainly is supported by cross-cultural evidence as well [LeVine & Norman, 2001].

...parents of a particular culture tend to promote infant behaviors they see as consistent with their culture's model of virtue, and further... they are successful enough on average that their children manifest selected behaviors at a 'precociously' early age by the standards of other cultures with different concepts of virtue.

This cultural interpretation of early social development, although recognizing species-typical features and constraints, departs from universalist models...as enculturation replaces the attempt to define a single norm of optimal development for all humans and its concomitant tendency to pathologize variations (p. 84).

'Secure' attachment (the label given to the presumptively nonpathological behavioral pattern in the attachment theory) may describe a cluster of behavioral attributes, but using the word 'secure' assumes that there is, in cultures everywhere, a positive valence for development associated with that behavior profile. LeVine and Norman [2001] sharply distinguish the behaviors observed in the SSP from the labels given to those behaviors. The label 'secure' does not have such a universal valence, but rather is

... a moral ideal, a concept of optimal development; 'maternal sensitivity' is not simply a causal influence in the development of attachment, it is a judgment on the adequacy of a mother – a way of distinguishing good from bad mothers (p. 100).

It valorizes one kind of mothering (presumably promotive of 'child-centered freedom') as over against others (presumably promotive of parentally or group-imposed 'order').

The premature focus on labeling one kind of dyadic attachment as 'secure' is a judgment about cultures' ideals about mothers and their practices of parenting and family life. However, communities promote different kinds of trust and emotional bonding in different ways. Presuming that there is only one kind of secure behavioral profile implies that 'generative tension' in relationships is the cultural relational schema underlying successful development. But there are other ways of organizing a child's developmental pathways that presume other relational schemas, such as 'symbiotic harmony' in Japan [Rothbaum, Pott, Azuma, Miyake, & Weisz, 2000], a strong and early socialization for autonomy and separateness in Bielefeld, Germany [LeVine & Norman, 2001], or 'socially distributed' caretaking and support, a pattern that is widespread in sub-Saharan Africa and elsewhere [Serpell, 1993; Weisner, 1987, 1996b]. Each of these ways of organizing developmental pathways differ from the Western model of conjugal care and parenting attached to the mother, with supplemental friendship through peer/school associations.

Socially distributed cultural relationship models, for instance, assume that caretaking and close relationships include siblings, cousins, and others, along with parents. They emphasize less intense affective and maternal ties in favor of rela-

tionship nets spread amongst many more people. Learning how to get and give support in such relational networks is part of learning how to survive in often harsh, uncertain and impoverished circumstances for children around the world today. Sibling caretaking, a common feature of socially distributed care, is a very common context for children throughout most of the world, for example. Sib care promotes what Margaret Mead long ago called 'pivot roles' in childhood, in which developmental pathways afford the child the roles of being taken care of and then being the caretaker of other children near in age. This is an expectable, and culturally valorized experience during development in many communities. Children learn all sides of nurturance, dominance, and responsibility while young. They recognize that the intimate attachments of caregiving can and will extend to noncare contexts and that such reciprocity is at the center of 'socially distributed supports' within a wide network of relationships. Children in each of these kinds of social relational pathways, become adults differently, but no less competent and healthy than others. They have relational security of a different kind.

James Chisholm [1999] argues from evolutionary and life history theory that the attachment behavior patterns we see, as well as temperamental profiles, have evolved in past environments filled with risk and uncertainty. It is likely that humans everywhere are prepared to recognize and desire positive signals of emotional support and approach. But this does not lead to just one pattern of adaptive security. The varied prepared behavioral profiles seen in the SSP could only be judged absolutely 'good' if we also know the ecological and resource situations (harsh or easy; stable or unpredictable; high or low parental and caretaker mortality; few or many caretakers available) that presumably shaped those behaviors in the past. In the context of harsh, threatening and unpredictable ecocultural circumstances (famine, disease, war), with high caretaker mortality (circumstances which exist in fact for millions of children around the world today and did in the past as well), varied early relational predispositions and behaviors (including the patterns currently labeled secure, insecure, avoidant, or resistant), all might well have been, and still be in some circumstances, adaptive for children making it through the social world and surviving to reproductive maturity.

Hence the problem of close relationships and social supportive attachments explored in these essays is an ecological and *cultural problem*, not only an individual or dyadic one. The cultural problem of attachment might be thought of as the life-long, complex, and varied answers to the infants' initial separation distress at 10 months (and earlier experiences). The baby can be thought of as 'saying' to its intimate, as yet small social world at that point: 'Whom can I trust? How will I know the signs when I experience them? What will help me survive?' These questions persist throughout development and take varied forms throughout life. Cultural communities, in turn, offer different, pluralistic solutions to this universal problem of trust and security, around the world.

Takahashi succinctly asks the question for psychology emerging from this cultural pluralistic perspective: 'Aren't psychologists caught in the trap of assuming conventional concepts of the mother and caregiving systems?' What parents value as goals for good development, and what kinds of relational and behavioral styles count towards that shared goal clearly varies widely. As Levitt says, 'As role-based expectations are often life stage related and culture specific, they tend to vary across age and culture,' and '...culturally defined role expectations play a part

in defining working models of relationships.’ These essays recognize that social relational systems can contain *different cultural goals* for close relationships and trust. How we construct others’ behaviors depends on understanding such goals and including them in analyses of attachment. If we value signs of respect and deference, for instance, we construe such behaviors as signs of potential affiliation and support and signs of a valued person for potential close relationships, rather than as signs of distance. The cultural meaning of relationships affects attachment because cultural communities are interested in socializing children (and adults) for appropriate trust in particular local cultural and social contexts. Takahashi’s Affective Relationship Model illustrates this through the finding that a different pattern of affective relations (a core focal figure was a same-gender friend in middle childhood and adolescence; a romantic partner in college; the spouse for married informants) and different types of preferences (friend; family; Lone-Wolf) are found across contexts and across the life span.

Dyadic attachment does not represent such complex, changing social worlds of relationships well, even in the USA and Europe, and much less in the rest of the world. The apparent situation regarding the acquisition of such relationship models that emerges from these essays is that patterned expectancies are formed in local, diverse cultural communities, and children and adults strive to *construct* a close attachment world, often blending multiple individuals who match different functional needs across development. We are not prisoners of single-strand dyadic relational models frozen in time, disconnected from the varying cultural pathways provided for us. The social-relational models in these articles not only challenge the dyadic attachment theory and offer new methods for the study of emotionally close relations across the life span. They challenge the monocultural assumptions of good development that are also part of classical attachment paradigms, and open up to our view the plural pathways cultural communities provide for the socialization of trust in children.

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