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Attachment Theory and its Relationship with Anxiety

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Abstract

Attachment theory studies the emotional bonds between infants and their caregivers. The four types of attachment styles are secure, anxious, avoidant, and disorganized. Each affects the ways that children develop emotionally and can influence them into adulthood. Research has shown that secure attachment can help children to learn to regulate their emotions and cope with anxiety, which helps them to become well-adjusted adults who are capable of forming healthy relationships. In contrast, there is a positive correlation between individuals with anxious or avoidant attachment styles in infancy and the development of anxiety disorders when they are older. People with those insecure attachment styles also can struggle in groups and often need to be in groups that have high levels of cohesion to ease their anxieties. Overall, the research presented here examines the effects of the different infant attachment styles on anxiety in later life and evaluates the findings in the context of group dynamics.

Attachment Theory

Attachment theory is a widely studied phenomenon that examines the bonds that exist between infants and their caregivers. Researchers have extensively studied these bonds and determined that they affect children's development and relational patterns as they become adults. In addition, research has shown that insecure attachment styles can be correlated to anxiety disorders throughout the lifespan, whereas a secure attachment style can help people to regulate anxiety and other negative emotions. These principles can also affect groups, and therefore they are important to understand in a group dynamics context. Overall, the concepts in attachment theory affect individuals and groups due to the effects that attachment styles have throughout individuals' lifespans.

Attachment Styles

The origins of attachment theory stem from John Bowlby, who sought to learn about the connections between children and their caregivers and the anxiety that resulted from separation. Psychologist Mary Ainsworth further developed Bowlby's theories through empirical research, and she conducted what is known as the Strange Situation. In that 1970 study, Ainsworth and Bell defined attachment as a connection between two people, in which one person seeks to remain close to the other through contact or communication. To test her theories on attachment, she studied infants who were exposed to strangers both in the presence and absence of their mothers. The results indicated that the infants were more likely to explore their environments when their mothers were present, and they sought contact with their mothers after periods of separation. From this study, various attachment styles were developed.

Secure Attachment

Infants whose mothers nurture them and respond to their needs are thought to be securely attached. These infants believe that they can trust their mothers, so they feel free to investigate the world around them, knowing that they can return to their mothers if they need help (Simmons, Gooty, Nelson, & Little, 2009). In the strange situation, these infants did not explore their environments in the presence of the strangers, and they wanted contact with their mothers when they returned (Ainsworth, 1979). In adulthood, individuals who have secure attachment styles are able to form healthy relationships that allow them to connect with others while remaining independent (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991). In addition, Simmons et al. (2009) studied employees in assisted living centers and their supervisors and discovered that securely attached individuals experience greater amounts of trust and hope. With all of this evidence, it is certain that the secure attachment style is healthiest and often results in well-adjusted adults.

Avoidant Attachment

In the strange situation, infants with an avoidant attachment style resisted their mothers by distancing themselves or ignoring them (Ainsworth, 1979). These individuals are more likely to avoid loving relationships with others and withdraw from close connections with others. They also tend to dislike groups who are high in warmth (Santascy, Burke, & Dovidio, 2016). Furthermore, these avoidant individuals who distance themselves from close relationships often are psychologically or emotionally harmed from the lack of support that they receive. However, gender and age also play roles in determining the effect of an avoidant attachment style, because avoidant females are psychologically harmed more in young adulthood than they are in later adulthood, but the opposite is true for males (Li & Fung, 2014). Overall, avoidant attachment is characterized by a resistance of close relationships and isolation.

Anxious Attachment

Ainsworth (1979) found that in the Strange Situation, the group of infants who exhibited an anxious attachment style “[were] intensely distressed by separation; and in the reunion episodes they [were] ambivalent with the mother, seeking close contact with her and yet resisting contact or interaction” (p. 932). As children with this attachment style grow up, they are often afraid to get to know people and cling to parents or romantic partners (Cassidy & Berlin, 1994). One of the overarching concerns for adults with an anxious attachment style is that they are afraid of being abandoned by someone they love, so they are constantly looking for indications that that might happen (Campbell & Marshall, 2011). An anxious attachment style consists of ambivalence and fear.

Disorganized Attachment

Main and Solomon (1990) devised a fourth attachment style known as the disorganized style, which represents a lack of pattern in attachment. Children who exhibit this attachment style do not know how to cope with separation from their caregivers, so they react in various ways (Kennedy & Kennedy, 2004). In addition, research has shown that there is a possible connection between a disorganized attachment style and symptoms of oppositional defiant disorder (Forslund, Peltola, & Brocki, 2019). In further research, Beeney, et al. (2017) found that this form of attachment is correlated to psychopathology in adults. Overall, disorganized attachment is characterized by a lack of consistent patterns in response to absent caregivers and can result in difficulties in later life.

Attachment Theory and Anxiety

Some attachment behaviors are related to anxiety. Nolte, Guiney, Fonagy, Mayes, and Luyten (2011) state, “[Attachment theory] responds to the stress provoked by environmental

threats by promoting strategies that best maintain proximity to the caregiver” (p. 7). For example, people who are experiencing fear or stress might become distraught when separated from an attachment figure (Sbarra & Hazan, 2008). In addition, people who have a secure attachment style can control their anxiety through connections to attachment figures or remembering methods of coping with anxiety in the past (Diamond & Aspinwall, 2003). Similarly, Hill (2009) states that children who are securely attached are able to comprehend their emotions and ways of thinking, which can help them in regulating their thoughts.

In 1997, Warren, Huston, Egeland, and Sroufe studied the correlation between anxious attachment styles and childhood and adolescent anxiety disorders, because they hypothesized that “chronic vigilance and anxiety may set the stage for the development of an anxiety disorder later” (p. 638). To research this, they studied anxiety experienced by new mothers in high risk family situations and attachment styles of their one-year-old children. When those same children were around 17.5 years old, they were assessed to determine various anxiety disorder diagnoses. The results showed that the majority of adolescents who had anxiety disorders had an anxious attachment style in infancy. However, these results could not also be applied to those who had an avoidant attachment style, which suggests that an anxious attachment style might be the most important attachment-related predictor of anxiety disorders later in life.

Similar research performed by Bosquet and Egeland (2006) hypothesized that infants who had insecure attachment styles would have difficulties regulating their emotions, poor relationships with peers, and anxiety as they grew up. In a replication study of Ainsworth’s (1970) Strange Situation, 155 infants were studied to determine their attachment styles. Those same participants were later studied when they were of preschool age to determine their abilities to regulate their emotions in frustrating situations. In kindergarten, first grade, sixth grade, and at

age 16, the children were evaluated on their social competencies, peer relationships, and levels of anxiety. The results found relationships between insecure attachment styles, negative relationships with peers, and anxiety in both childhood and adolescence. These results indicate that both anxious and avoidant attachment styles affect children throughout the years that they are growing and can lead to poor emotional regulation and anxiety.

To further study the relationship between attachment theory and anxiety, Colonnese et al. (2011) performed an analysis of 46 studies that explored the correlations between those two factors. They studied both types of insecure attachment, which includes both anxious and avoidant attachment styles. The results indicate that the correlation between insecure attachment and anxiety is most potent in the teenage years, which is the time that attachment styles and feelings of anxiety begin to become more consistent. These findings suggest that both types of insecure attachment can be related to anxiety.

Application to Group Dynamics

The principles of attachment theory often affect groups, because members' attachment styles affect the ways that they relate to the rest of the group. Rom and Mikulincer (2003) found that anxiously attached individuals who think negatively about themselves also tend to negatively react to group interactions. Similarly, they found that individuals with an avoidant attachment style tend to distance themselves from the group and instead prefer to rely on only themselves to achieve goals. However, groups that are cohesive "will give anxious members a sense of security and mitigate attachment effects" (Markin & Marmarosh, 2010, p. 119). Therefore, it is important that group members understand attachment theory, because it can have a significant effect on member contributions and interactions.

Conclusion

Attachment theory was essentially created by John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth, but it has been studied by many other researchers, and it has been shown to play an important role in development. The secure attachment style leads to emotionally healthy, well-adjusted adults in many cases, and it has been found to combat anxiety. In contrast, insecure attachment styles – both anxious and avoidant – are correlated with anxiety disorders and other emotional and relational difficulties in childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. This can also affect group functioning, because individuals with insecure attachment styles sometimes avoid group interactions or isolate themselves, which can impede the group's methods of completing goals. Overall, attachment theory affects both individuals and groups, and it also has a relationship with the development of anxiety disorders.

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