

Accounting for Varying Attachment Presentations:

A Limited Literature Review

Patrick K. Stinson

California Institute of Integral Studies

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Abstract

This literature review aims to provide a chronological overview of peer-reviewed research which assess the capability of attachment theory to account for the variance in an individual's presentation of attachment styles in different social contexts. It stands on the assumption that an individual may present, for example avoidant with one person and anxious with another, and asks what variables *account for* such variance. This review hypothesizes that this variance exists and is accounted by variables outside the current scope of attachment theory. It was found in research spanning from 2002 to 2016 that attachment style has a limited capacity to account for triadic attachment dilemmas, that a secure dyadic presentation may morph to an insecure triadic presentation, and that attachment style may in fact be a part of the systemic concept of differentiation of self as mediated by triangulation in the nuclear family. This review did not directly produce a concept which accounts for variations in attachment presentation, but suggests triangulation mediated by differentiation of self as a possibility for future research.

Keywords: attachment, differentiation, triangulation, systems, paradigm.

Theoretical Context

Attachment theory relates health outcomes to the quality of the dyadic attachment bond between a child and a primary caregiver (Skowron & Dendy, 2004). Attachment styles include in order of severity, secure, anxious or avoidant, and disorganized. Secure attachment being ideal, anxious and avoidant indicating a bias toward a particular regulation strategy of closeness or distance, and disorganized being the most problematic and indicating a lack of any one preferred pattern of regulation. Modern attachment research now expands the scope to examine the implications of early attachment patterns for adult relationships. Mary Main's Adult Attachment Interview (AAI) (Main, Kaplan, Cassidy, 1985) is an exceptionally well-supported method of determining an adult's attachment style based on a qualitative analysis of the coherence in which they are able to recall past events.

It is not surprising that the combination of strong empirical support and relative self-evidence of its concepts that attachment researchers claim it as an "all-encompassing or complete organizing theory of human functioning" (Ng & Smith, 2006, pp. 438). However, it is possible that the dyadic focus of attachment theory may limit its ability to account for environmental factors beyond the dyadic context. For example, it is hard to imagine that acute anxiety in the relationship between the mother and father would not temporarily alter the attachment presentation of the mother, subsequently influencing the presentation of the child as he or she responds to stress in the family.

Method

This review utilizes a small sample of six peer-reviewed articles from the years 2002, 2004, 2006, 2009, 2016, and 2016. It also makes limited use of seminal works ranging from 1985 to 1991. Peer-reviewed studies were obtained from the PsychINFO database using the

keywords “attachment AND triangulation,” “attachment AND triad,” or “attachment AND differentiation.” A superficial review of the initial search results revealed that research on the topic was non-existent before Skowron & Dendy’s study in 2004, was then followed by Ng & Smith’s study in 2006, and eventually picked up pace to greater than ten published studies each year starting around 2011.

Review

Skowron & Dendy (2004) claim to have been the first to compare attachment theory with concepts from a systemic family theory. While their 2004 study did not specifically seek to account for variations in attachment presentations, they did study the convergence of Murray Bowen’s concept of *differentiation of self* (DoS) (Kerr & Bowen, 1988) measured using the Differentiation of Self Inventory-Revised (DSI-R) and attachment style (AS) measured by the Experiences in Close Relationships Scale (ECR), correlating with a third concept *effortful control* as defined by the *Effortful control scale* (ATQ-S-EC). They summarized effortful control as the ability to “suppress reactive tendencies, modulate emotion feeling, and engage in purposeful behavior,” a definition remarkably similar to Kerr and Bowen’s (1998) definition of DoS, which reads “Increasing one’s ability to distinguish between thinking and feeling within self and others and learning to use that ability to direct one’s life and solve problems” (pp. 98).

Testing for theoretical convergence between DoS and AS is perhaps a logical choice for a first study toward understanding the place of attachment theory in a broader social context, as DoS is an individual as well as a systemic concept. The generic scope of DoS suggests applicability beyond the child-caregiver dyad to all human relationships, and indeed beyond the domain of human functioning into other areas of life. However, for the purpose of this review

one may provisionally equate DoS to the level of security in an individual's preferred attachment style.

Skowron and Dendy (2004) found that there is considerable convergence between DoS and AS, which is in line with the expectations of this review. A significant link was found between measures of DoS and AS, with *emotional reactivity* (ER) correlating with anxious attachment, and *emotional cutoff* (EC) correlating with avoidant attachment, along with a link between DoS and effortful control. However, a link between AS and effortful control was not found, which is counter to claims that attachment security alone determines an individual's ability to regulate affect. This suggests that either there are factors in the instruments used that do not account for all dimensions of the theoretical constructs of DoS and AS, or that there may be extraneous variables outside the caregiver-child dyad which affect one's ability to auto-regulate in the midst of emotional intensity.

Subsequent studies found similar convergence with the anxiety/avoidance dimensions of attachment and dimensions of DoS using different measures of DoS (Ng & Smith, 2006; Ross, Hinshaw, Murdock, 2016). However, Ng & Smith (2006) found no link between AS and non-dyadic measures of *Personal Authority in the Family System* (PAFS), such as intergenerational intimidation (parents preventing children from psychological maturity) and intergenerational triangulation (parents conscripting children to help sort out their adult relationship problems). Based on Feeney's (2003) finding that attachment style varies according to context, Ng & Smith suggest that attachment is just one variable among many in the larger context:

“What these players bring to the relationship is not within the purview of the individual alone. ... Hence, the attachment quality of an individual is only one among many variables in the equation. This might explain why

intergenerational triangulation (i.e., triangulation involving parents) was not significantly associated with the attachment dimensions” (pp. 437).

While early studies looked at convergence of attachment and systemic constructs, work toward a useful integration of attachment and systemic concepts has not occurred until recently. Ross et al (2016) compared experiential avoidance (EA) with DoS dimensions of triangulation, claiming triangulation accounted for the relationship between AS and DoS. Interestingly, their findings suggest that DoS captures a more complete determinant of individual health outcomes. In similar fashion, Dallos, Lakus, Cahart & McKenzie (2016) take a direct look at how tension in the mother and father’s relationship impact the attachment response in the child. Dallos et al aim to fill a gap in the research of how “a mother’s ability to offer a secure attachment is influenced by the anxieties and tensions in her relationships with the child’s father” (pp. 461). In this study, children’s responses to dyadic “attachment dilemmas” were compared to triadic attachment dilemmas to see if contextual variables influenced the type and severity across responses. Their findings suggest that “a child has an attachment, not just with each parent but with the relationship between them” (pp. 461), and that triadic dilemmas “generated higher levels of attachment distress than the dyadic ones” (pp. 466). Importantly, they found that children who would normally show secure attachment responses to dyadic dilemmas may show insecure attachment responses in triadic dilemmas. This not only indicates that the familial or social context influences the attachment response, but that the familial context has a significantly larger impact on attachment responses than previously thought. Further, it was found that triadic arousal persists significantly longer than dyadic arousal, indicating that the long-term effects of tension in the family may contribute more to complex trauma.

In an effort toward integration of individual and systemic attachment concepts, Mikulincer, Florian, Cowan, and Cowan (2002) propose a couples-based attachment security model that has each member in a couple as a separate sub-system of attachment characteristics: attachment security; positive models of self and others; relationship satisfaction; interaction of goals of togetherness; and positive models of self and others (see Appendix A, Figure A). Each of these characteristics interacts within a single person as well as with all characteristics in the other person, and the process multiplies exponentially with the addition of each new family member. Mikulincer, et al. (2002) suggests that “the quality of the relationship between the parents plays a central role in the generational transmission of working models of attachment” (p. 415). This suggests that the quality of the relationship between two family members may temporarily affect the presenting attachment characteristics of their child. For example, if a mother and her sister argue, then the mother may react to the resulting anxiety by activating her attachment system with the child in order to find that old familiar but enmeshed sense of safety. In this example the presence of the sibling may take part in the construction of an avoidant attachment style in the child that matches the now anxious presentation in the mother.

Discussion

While many aspects of AS and DoS appear closely related, they were developed in parallel by different schools of psychology and as a result classical literature offers little explanation of their relationship. For example, Bowen frequently cites problems in the family stemming from an “unresolved symbiotic attachment” (Kerr & Bowen, 1988, pp. 68, 110, 201, 220) with the mother, but does not distinguish between his “attachment” and Bowlby’s “attachment.” Indeed, the question may have little relevance in a systems context which assumes the level of differentiation and integration of the parts as a complete measure of the *negentropic*

capacity of the whole. Rothbaum, Rosen, Ujie, and Uchida (2002) eloquently describe similarities between attachment theory and family systems theory such as drives for togetherness and individuality.

Rothbaum, et al (2002) write, "...attachment theory is focused on dynamics involving protection, care, and felt security, whereas family systems theory is concerned with family dynamics, involving structures, roles, communication patterns, boundaries, and power relations; (b) attachment theory is focused on the dyad, with much of the action occurring within individuals (e.g., "internal working models"), whereas family systems theory is focused on the triad, with much of the action occurring within groups; (c) attachment theory is relatively more concerned with children and development, whereas family systems theory is relatively more concerned with adults and current functioning; and (d) attachment theory has historically relied primarily on empirical research with normal populations, whereas family systems theory relies primarily on case studies involving clinic populations" (pp. 329).

The later studies in this review attempt to address this discrepancy as justification for an integration of attachment and systemic concepts. Ng & Smith (2006) compare attachment and PAFS as a) having to do with connection and intimacy, versus separation while maintaining intimacy, b) "hypothesizing continuity of relationship quality across generations," c) "integrating intrapersonal and interpersonal aspects of human functioning," and d) "recognizing the central place of emotion in the family and the life and the well-being of the individual" (pp. 433). Both Ng & Smith (2006) and Ross et al (2016) take a relatively optimistic position on integrating

attachment and systemic concepts, and claim the considerable theoretical convergence found between DoS and AS as sufficient evidence to do so.

Nearly all studies reviewed here suggest that attachment theory alone may be inadequate in providing a comprehensive picture of human functioning. Ng & Smith (2006) suggest that AS may be contained within DoS as it only captures a subset of adult close relationship functioning and that a “subsystem within a larger family system may be affecting relationship functioning more than attachments” (pp. 437). This raises questions about the obsolescence of AS within a systemic context.

Ng & Smith (2006) write, “...attachment theory may not live up to researchers’ claims to be an all encompassing or complete organizing theory of human functioning. It is most significant in demonstrating relationships among spousal relationships, relationships with children, and, to a lesser degree, relationships between adults and their parents. However, where attachment theory leaves off, intergenerational family systems complements and provides a larger picture” (pp. 437).

Bowen (1988) claimed that DoS was more or less passed down through the generations, but did not give the mechanism through which this occurred. Ross et al’s findings support the idea of intergenerational transmission and offer AS and triangulation as accounting for this transmission, suggesting that “dyadic relationship patterns originate within triadic processes and eventually affect the individual’s DoS” (pp. 408).

Ross et al (2016) adds, “Although attachment theory accounts for dyadic relationships (between the primary caregiver and the child) and the

dysfunction that can result when these relationships are not secure, the theory fails to acknowledge the role of a second primary caregiver or parent, and the potentially crucial aspect of disavowed negative emotional states resulting from them being deemed inappropriate by the caregiver is often considered secondary to the dyadic interaction” (pp. 401).

According to Bowen (1998), triangulation is only the human version of a universal mechanism created in any emotional system to ensure the survival of the family or social unit. Because it operates within the context of a natural systems theory, the concept of triangulation is not restricted to specific relationships within nuclear families but points to a universal mechanism in all of life by which a group controls the behavior of a single member to ensure long-term survival of the group (Bowen, 1988). In her recent review of the “Triangle Hypothesis”, Lassiter (2007) describes the applicability of the phenomenon of triangulation not just outside the human nuclear family but across all of life, which includes its vital role in social coordination in ideal circumstances as well as its role in the unconscious emotional abuse of a single member when the group comes under increased stress. Lassiter (2008) provides an analog in the colonies of amoeba which involve the secretion of a pheromone in mating that serves to preempt an individual’s eventual self-sacrifice to provide “dead stalk” for the greater colony (pp. 69). Such a generically applicable concept may therefore contribute to a more flexible and holistic view of human functioning that involves a broader set of variables. While failing to step fully into to the broad universal context of natural systems offered by Bowen, the studies in this review succeed at demonstrating that triangulation may offer a mediating variable that connects the dyadic scope of AS with the greater systemic context (Dallos et al, 2006; Bueler & Welsh,

2009). For example, Bueler & Welsh (2009) found triangulation to be a mediating link in the pathway between emotional reactivity and internalizing problems.

Unfortunately, none of the studies in this review address the problem of incompatibility between the scientific paradigms in which each theory is rooted, which suggest that the authors may not possess sufficient knowledge of the theoretical origins, and so also the *a priori* assumptions, of system theory in general. Attachment theory, object relations, and similar individual theories rely on *a priori* assumptions contained within a linear-causal paradigm that is compatible with traditional random control trials (Puhakka, 2015). Bowen (1988) considered these “individual theories” (pp. ix) because they were rooted in the psychology of the individual and the paradigmatic assumptions contained therein (Kerr, 1981). Systemic frameworks such as Bowen’s theory of natural systems relies on *a priori* assumptions contained within a mutual-causal paradigm which is inherently incompatible with the random control trial model (Macy, 1991). These theories were indeed specifically created to overcome the limitations of the linear-causal paradigm (Kerr, 1981). This *paradigm problem* may in part explain why attachment theory enjoys extensive empirical research while systemic theories primarily rely on clinical case studies (Rothbaum, et al, 2002; Dallos, et al, 2016), but it also points to a potential limitation in the foundation of attachment theory altogether. It is possible that the paradigm problem does not inhibit the type of theoretical convergence suggested by the studies reviewed here, but it is important to note the possibility of latent issues as attempts to integrate two concepts from different paradigms progress.

Limitations

This review included a small sample of studies across many years to provide an overview of the timeline of peer-reviewed research which critique the capacity of attachment theory to

account for a complete view of human functioning. Because the sample of literature is quite small, this review cannot provide a complete picture of the status of this domain of research. However, this chronological overview of the topic may be helpful in for organizing a more comprehensive review in the future.

As this review pokes at the idea of systemic theories providing a more complete view of human functioning, it is required that the scope of such research align with a sufficiently broad context. The studies reviewed here limit their scope either to theoretical convergence of DoS and AT, or to qualitative observation of the mother-father-child triad, and so can only account for functioning within an idealized three-member nuclear family. In contrast, the development of triangulation as a concept of natural systems suggests that triangulation in the holon of the nuclear family has an analog in the holon of the extended family, as well as in other higher and lower-ordered holonic taxa (Bowen, 1988). While these studies do not address the larger systemic scope, future research could observe the effect of triangulation on attachment presentations among siblings within the same nuclear family, aunts, uncles, and cousins of the children and/or parents, etc.

However, the complexity of such an expanded scope raises issues which speak to the most important problem in comparing attachment and systemic theories related to their respective scientific paradigms. It is possible that performing direct comparisons between concepts “rooted in the individual” such as attachment style, and concepts from systems theory may be inherently problematic. There is no doubt from these and many other studies that DoS and AS attempt to solve similar problems and show some level of theoretical convergence. This does not mean, however, that overlapping dimensions of the constructs are synonymous, a conclusion supported by the evidence that AS may be contained within DoS and does not

account for all outcomes such as effortful control, experiential avoidance, internalizing problems, and intergenerational dimensions of PAFS. This conclusion questions the perceived flexibility of attachment theory, and possibly the linear-causal paradigm in which it resides.

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Appendix A

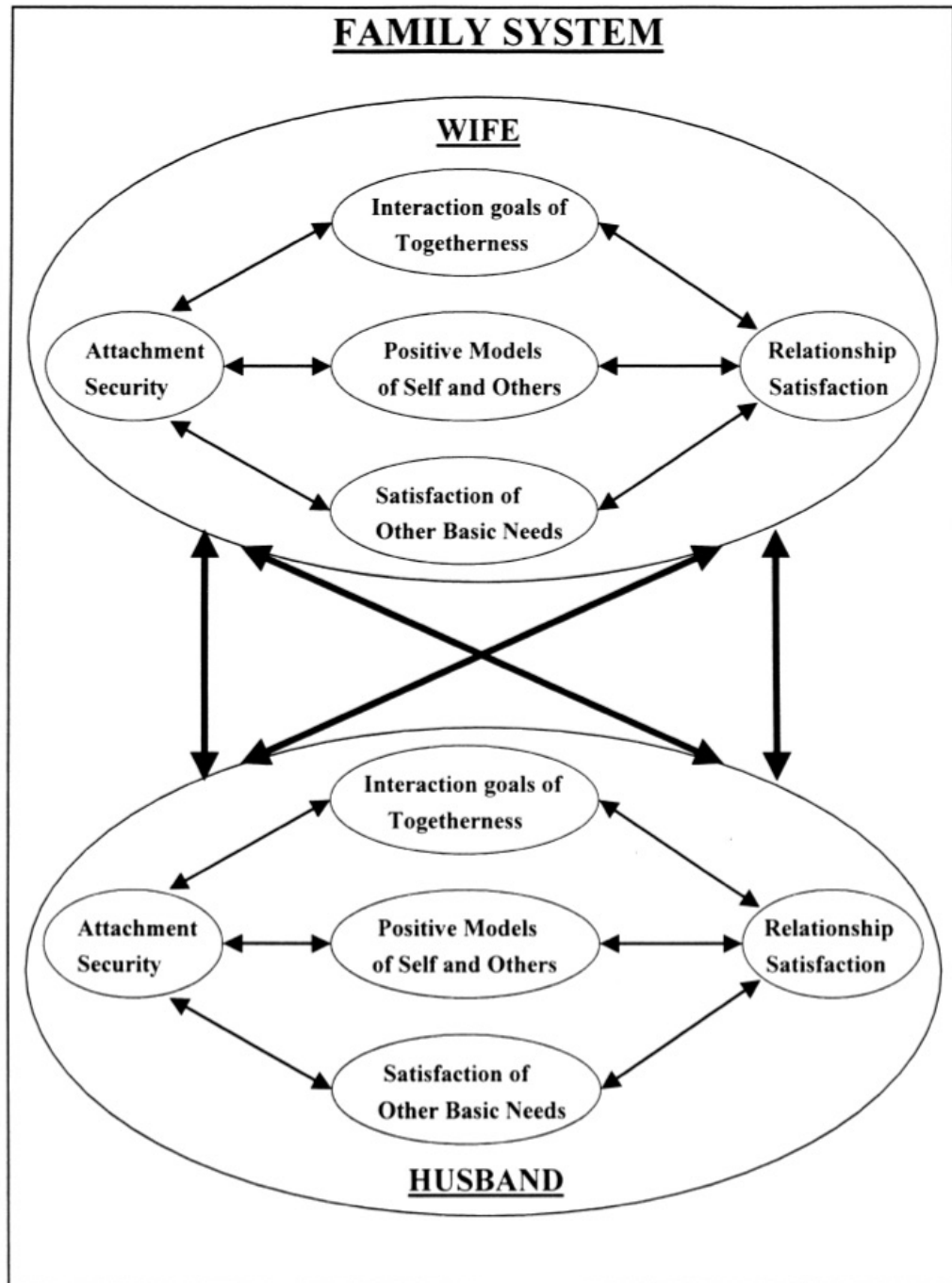


Figure A: Mikulincer’s systemic attachment security model for couples. Adapted from “Attachment Security in Couple Relationships” by Mikulincer, et al., Family Process, Vol. 41,

No. 3, 2002, p. 416, © FPI, Inc. Adapted without permission.