

Module 4: Attachment Theory

Love and Attachment Styles

Attachment Theory

John Bowlby, father of attachment theory

- How you bond with your caregivers in your early childhood affects:
 - How you behave in relationships
 - How in touch you are with your emotions
 - How much you will allow yourself to love others in a conscious level

Attachment Theory

- First six years of life: critical to bonding

Harry Harlow:

- "An emotional connection with a caregiver is necessary for the child to learn that her world is a safe place that she can explore"

Some factors that impair a secure attachment:

- Abandonment, unpredictable parent behavior, physical, verbal or emotional abuse

Secure and Insecure Attachment Styles

Secure:

- Healthy proximity to other people
- No fear of closeness and intimacy
- No pathological dependence on relationships

Insecure:

- Either you avoid closeness and intimacy, or
- You are too dependent on relationships

"The strange situation"

- Psychologist Mary Ainsworth
- **Securely attached kids:**
 - Explore when the parent is present, are upset when the parent leaves, and are happy when the parent returns
- **Insecurely attached kids:**
 - a) They cling to the parent, even before she leaves
 - b) They completely ignore the parent

Mental Models of Relationships

- Mental models are **implicit system of beliefs about human relationships** that are generated as a result of the interaction between the child and the caregiver
- These models predict how the child will interact with future caregivers and romantic partners
- **Fraley and Hazan's study of couples separating in airports:**
 - Behaviors typical to your attachment style are manifested when your relationship is threatened (e.g. abandonment, betrayal...)
 - On the other hand, these behaviors are less pronounced in long-term relationships.

The book mentions three differences between child and adult attachment.

What are these?

Insecure Attachment: Avoidant Attachment Style

- Avoidance of close or intimate relationships (romantic, or even friendly)
- Casual sex is preferred to sex on a monogamous relationship
- Difficulties in trusting others
- Lack of touch with the own emotions
- "Healthy and intimate relationships do not exist"
- No grief after ending a relationship

Personality Traits Related to Avoidant Attachment Style

- Compulsive self-reliance
- Overachievers (due to self-reliance)
 - Hypersensitivity to criticism, together with a highly critical attitude towards others
- Control-seeking
- Higher signs of anxiety when facing stressful tasks
- Inhibition of negative emotional responses

Insecure Attachment: Anxious Attachment

- Co-dependence
- Trying to make the lover fit certain anticipated goals
- Compulsive caregivers
- Emotional overinvestment, expected to be returned as praise and affection
- Idealization of people and relationships
- Uncontrollable desire for reciprocation
- Desire for extensive contact and declarations of affection
- Gain security through their relationships
- Sex is taken as evidence of their partner's commitment

Personality Traits Related to Anxious Attachment Style:

- Overachievers (in order to gain attention and affection)
- Difficulty to understand others
- Others are perceived as inscrutable and unpredictable
- Hyper-sensitivity to criticism and rejection
- Respond with fear to others' anger
- Intense experience of emotions
- Search for parental love and parental validation; "the perfect parent"
- In touch with their negative emotional responses
- More willing to seek professional help

The book discusses what is likely to happen in a relationship between an avoidant person and an anxious person. Here are some questions to further think about this issue:

- How do you think it will be in an avoidant-avoidant relationship?
 - And in an anxious-anxious relationship?
 - Could these relationships work?
 - Can an insecurely attached person have a healthy relationship with a securely attached person?
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The Search for Familiar Types of Love

- It is an observed fact that we are often drawn to certain types of people
- This is likely due to our mental representations (mostly unconscious) of what relationships are and how they function
- We seek the sort of relationships that is familiar to us
- Example: "Relationships involve seeking the approval and affection of a largely unavailable alpha-person"
- Zoe gets caught up in relationships with unavailable partners because she learned from her interactions with her mother that is what love is like

Why Do We Seek Familiar Types of Love?

- For the reptilian brain (the amygdala and the limbic system), what is **familiar is safe**
- We perceive as **"true" or "real"** only the types of love that **resemble our unconscious mental representations**
- This determines **who our heart "responds" to**: most likely, to people who resembles these implicit models
- Some people thinks of this as an "enslavement by the past"

A Classic View: Love as a Deficiency

- Plato, *The Symposium*
- Aristophanes' story
- The eternal search for our other half
- Brogaard's interpretation: This is a depiction of our search for partners with the personalities of our parents

Do we always look for partners that resemble our parents?

If so: are we then "enslaved by the past"?

Can we do something to change the past's influence on our attachment behavior?

Anxious Attachment and Jealousy

- Psychologist David M. Buss: **The evolutionary theory**
- Jealousy was evolutionarily beneficial to our ancestors

Some alleged facts:

- **Men** are jealous if their female partner is **sexually** involved with another man
- **Women** are jealous if their male partner is **emotionally** involved with another woman

- Jealousy is a mechanism that aids the **preservation of our genes**
- It functions as **warning sign**

Three Problems with the Evolutionary Theory of Jealousy

- 1) **Women that were providers** did not depend on a male partner to preserve their genes
 - Ancient Egypt, early gatherers
- 2) Jealousy **does not help ensuring the survival of our genes**: when you get jealous, it is too late
- 3) Jealousy seems to be **more related to attachment style than to gender**
 - Anxiously attached people experiences more jealousy, more intensely

Do Men and Women Really Respond Differently to Different Kinds of Cheating?

Some evidence shows that **this is not the case.**

- 1) Studies are often realized among **college students**
 - This is not a generalizable sample

- 2) Match.com 2011 survey (by anthropologist Helen Fisher)
 - **Stereotypical gender roles seem to be reverted:**
 - Men are sappier than women
 - Men fall in love more quickly than women
 - Women need more distance and alone time than men

A Different Explanation of Jealousy: The "Ownership" Theory

- We have a tendency to **value more a thing when we own it**, or when we **believe that we ought to own it**, than when we think that we do not have any right to it.
- In economics this tendency is called the "**endowment effect**" (Richard Thaler)

Two relevant studies:

1) John Hershey's studies on **loss aversion**

- It is worse to lose a right we already had, than striving to obtain one we didn't

2) Daniel Kahneman study with mugs

- Ownership of an item makes us value it twice as much

The Ownership Theory and the Evolutionary Theory, Contrasted

- They both rely on our instinctive interest in keeping what we have.
- When items needed for survival are scarce, **loses are more harmful, than gains are beneficial.**
 - A gain = 1 pleasure unit
 - A loss = 2 discomfort units
- But jealousy is **not a warning sign**, as in the evolutionary theory.
- Jealousy is an **anticipation of discomfort and distress**, or the discomfort and distress caused by the thought of **losing what we rightly possess.**

The Ownership Theory and Anxious Attachment Style

- Disproportionate jealousy of people with anxious attachment style comes from the **feeling of "owning" their partners**
- (due to the close connection they feel to them)

Philosopher Jean Paul Sartre:

- The desire to own a person is doomed to fail
- Hence, if love is the desire to own a person, love is doomed to fail

Avoidant Attachment and the Inability to Love

Brogaard: Individuals with an extreme avoidant attachment style are incapable of loving

- Recall Kolodny's History View: It is a relationship, what renders love appropriate
- If this is true, then extremely avoidant people cannot believe that love is ever appropriate, since they avoid relationships
- Extremely avoidant people believe that **relationships are inherently bad**

Are Avoidant Individuals Truly Unable to Love?

- Perhaps they are able to, but they are not aware that they are.
- They are **not aware of their emotions.**
- The attachment system is constituted by **unconscious information**
- People is often not aware of how their attachment system works

Changing Your Attachment Style

- Around 30% of people changes their attachment style over time
- Kirkpatrick and Hazan, 1994
- **Primary factor of change: Relationships**
- In adult life, romantic partners take over the role of primary attachment figure.
 - Bullying, cruel partners or traumatic breakups can turn a secure attachment style into an insecure one.
 - Loyal friendships and healthy relationships can turn an insecure attachment into a secure one.

Some Other Factors that Influence Attachment Styles

- Susceptibility to change
 - Stability of the inner relationship model
- Personality disorders
- Major life-altering events
 - Transitions that mirror conditions in which a parent abandons a child

Attachment Love

- Harlow and Brogaard hold the view that attachment is a species of **compassionate love**

Attachment love is thus **contrasted with romantic love:**

- Warm and safe, rather than thrilling
- Long lasting and constant
- Not passionate
- Feelings of security, connectedness and protection

Attachment Versus (Romantic) Love

Robert Weiss:

- Attachment remains even after love has faded away

Levine and Heller:

- Attachment love is what keeps long-term couples together
- For the unconscious brain, attachment/staying together is perceived as something valuable.
- Evolutionarily, it was beneficial to stay together with a partner.
- Feelings of stability are crucial for raising children

Brogaard points out that it is extremely difficult for attachment love and romantic love to co-exist.

For one thing, they are realized in different areas of the brain (recall the slides on Module 1, on the neuroscience of love).

She points out that often in our relationships we want something that cannot be, namely, the co-existence of both types of love.

Do you agree with these thoughts?

If not, how could we explain the coexistence of both types of love?

Can Animals Love?

- Some empirical evidence suggests that non-human animals have the same range of emotions than human beings.
- Is romantic love one of them?

Cat brains:

- Relatively small in size
 - 1% of their body mass (human brain is 2%)
- Complex **surface folding and brain structure**
 - 90% similar to ours
- Based on this similarity, can cats experience romantic love?

Animals and Love Attachment

- Greyfriars Bobby, a famous case that shows animal attachment

Daniel Mills tested the strange situation paradigm for dogs and cats, with the following results:

- Dogs behave more like securely attached kids
- Cats have avoidant behavior
- A counterexample:
 - Brit Brogaard's cats, Roderick Chisholm and Bertrand Russell



Some Further Facts About Animal Attachment

- Dogs can take the role of **caregivers**
- They are more likely to approach someone that is crying than someone that is humming, and display submissive behavior.
- Gregory Berns, fMRI scanning on dog brains
- Dogs might have attachment, empathy, and a theory of mind
- A **theory of mind** is a belief system about what others think and want

Other interesting cases of animal attachment/love:

- Tika and Kobuk
- Anthony and Riley