Attachment: Family Ties That Bind

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Each person is inextricably interwoven within broader interactional systems, the most fundamental of which is the family. Bowlby’s [[1]](#footnote-2) attachment theory has increased awareness of the importance of early attachment experiences on interpersonal relationships throughout life. Bowen[[2]](#footnote-3) highlighted the emotional atmosphere of family of origin, including interpersonal relationships patterns. Rovers[[3]](#footnote-4) noted that family is the primary and the most powerful system to which a person belongs. This paper will examine attachment theory in general; what role attachment plays in enhancing children’s well-being; and lastly, what the research says about the role of attachment as differentiated through the many faces of family: nuclear, blended, single parent and same sex families.

Attachment Theory

Central to Attachment theory is the concept of an attachment behavioural system; “a homeostatic process that regulates infant proximity-seeking and contact-maintaining behaviors with one or a few specific individuals who provide physical or psychological safety or security” (Sperling & Berman[[4]](#footnote-5)) Attachment behaviours are goal oriented, with the purpose of promoting security (Ainsworth[[5]](#footnote-6)). This ‘secure base’, or at least ‘felt security’ (Scoufe & Waters[[6]](#footnote-7)) is the primary purpose for attachment behaviour (Bowlby[[7]](#footnote-8); Simpson & Rholes[[8]](#footnote-9)). Attachment can be seen as an emotional bond that ties us to one or more significant others. Its purpose is to comfort and to protect. Attachment will be within us all the days of our life, from cradle to grave, and it is the glue that keeps families together. When families are very disturbed or when they are not able to stay together the attachment bonds are insecure or conflicted (Parkes[[9]](#footnote-10)). People are inherently predisposed to behaviours that promote proximity to others, and in the parent - child relationship, reciprocal patterning of interaction, or internal working models are established. These internal working models of self and other (Bowlby[[10]](#footnote-11)) are established in the process of early relationship between the child and the parent. Internal working models are persistent throughout our life time but can be revisable in the appropriate supportive environment. A delicate balance is sought by all children between seeking emotional safety from the caregiver and exploration of one’s world, between connectedness and autonomy (Mikulincer & Shaver[[11]](#footnote-12)). It is the quality and consistency of the parent’s availability and responsiveness that will impact if a child develops a sense of security or of insecurity (Bowlby[[12]](#footnote-13)).

Internal working models have been categorized into secure and insecure attachment styles. (Bowlby[[13]](#footnote-14): Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall[[14]](#footnote-15): Mikulincer & Shaver[[15]](#footnote-16)). Four general styles of attachment have been described: secure, avoidant, ambivalent and disorganized. Secure infants showed the most adaptive behaviours. Secure attachment not only provides comfort and protection as the needs arises, but also enables autonomy and a more effective ability to explore the environment (Ainsworth[[16]](#footnote-17); Bowlby[[17]](#footnote-18)). Secure infants are confident of the availability of caregivers and confident of their own interactions in the world (Weinfield, Sroufe, Egeland, & Carlson[[18]](#footnote-19); Mikulincer & Shaver[[19]](#footnote-20)).

The patterns of insecure attachment might best be viewed as emotionally mediated strategies for coping with a difficult interpersonal world learned over the years from infancy to adolescence and then maintained in adulthood (Bowlby[[20]](#footnote-21)). Mikulincer and Shaver[[21]](#footnote-22) describe insecure attachment styles as secondary attachment strategies. These are adaptive strategies to consistent and predictable shortcomings of parents around which avoidant and ambivalent children tend to be able to organize themselves (Bowlby[[22]](#footnote-23); Mikulincer & Shaver[[23]](#footnote-24); Weinfield, Sroufe, Egeland, & Carlson[[24]](#footnote-25)).

Avoidant children are characterized by the belief that when one needs care one will not be responded to helpfully. They learn to emotionally deactivate their attachment needs (Mikulincer & Shaver[[25]](#footnote-26)). In the Strange Situation (Ainsworth[[26]](#footnote-27)), avoidant children showed avoidance of proximity during reunion, often turning away or ignoring the parent. These children are less likely to show affective sharing, and less likely to appear distressed. These children make little apparent effort to maintain contact with the caregiver and have learned to maintain a proximity that does not threaten the caregiver with its needs (Mikulincer & Shaver[[27]](#footnote-28); Weinfield, Sroufe, Egeland, & Carlson[[28]](#footnote-29)).

Still in the Strange Situation described by Ainsworth[[29]](#footnote-30), ambivalent children sought contact but often in a resistant or angry fashion. These children have learned that their parents are inconsistent in their availability and responsiveness. They very much want contact or proximity, but do not seem to be calmed or made secure in that connection (Weinfield, Sroufe, Egeland, & Carlson[[30]](#footnote-31)). Their sense of security becomes dependant on hyperactivating their attachment needs (Mikulincer & Shaver[[31]](#footnote-32)). These children are more passive because they tend to be clingy and uncomfortable exploring the world; letting go of this strategy would mean letting go of the hyperactivation of their attachment needs and feeling unsafe.

A disorganized attachment style was recognized as a distinct category later (Main & Solomon[[32]](#footnote-33)). Disorganized children were not consistent in any attachment strategy: in fact, they tend to use both avoidant and ambivalent strategies in indiscriminate ways (Parkes[[33]](#footnote-34)). A child with a disorganized attachment is described by Main and Solomon[[34]](#footnote-35) as both needing and fearing the parent. Thus in the Strange Situation at reunion, a disorganized child can perform the reunion with the parent by moving forward towards the parent but, when it achieves a certain proximity, it turns itself around and proceeds to show its back to the parents, revealing a behaviour of fear as it gets closer (Main & Soloman[[35]](#footnote-36)).

Intergenerational Patterns of Attachment

Bowlby[[36]](#footnote-37) believed that attachment behaviour in adulthood is a “straightforward continuation” of attachment in childhood (p.208). Adult attachment “is the stable tendency of an individual to make substantial efforts to seek and maintain proximity to and contact with one or a few specific individuals who provide the subjective potential for physical and/or psychological safety and security ... this stable tendency is regulated by internal working models of attachment which are cognitive-affective-motivational schemata built from the individual’s experience of his or her interpersonal world” (Sperling & Berman[[37]](#footnote-38)). Attachment theory can therefore be considered to be intergenerational, especially in regard to assessing and predicting parental attachment patterns based upon what these parents experienced as infants. Bowlby[[38]](#footnote-39) stated that “because ... children tend unwittingly to identify with parents, and therefore adopt, when they become parents, the same patterns of behaviour that they themselves have experienced during their childhood; patterns of interaction are transmitted more or less faithfully from one generation to the next” (p.323).

Past attachment behaviours are often transferred to present relationships (Rovers[[39]](#footnote-40); Skowron[[40]](#footnote-41)). Turned around, present relationships patterns can be better understood by uncovering traces of remote events and characteristics of past attachment figures and patterns; discovering and realizing ‘unfinished business’ of childhood which still organize present processes (Mikulincer & Shaver[[41]](#footnote-42); Simpson & Rholes[[42]](#footnote-43)). In the next section, this paper reviews attachment and what role it plays in the wellbeing of children. What attachment theory teaches us is that looking after children effectively is not about a family having a stereotypical family type or structure, but rather it is about the ability of parents to provide a secure bond to the children.

At a recent workshop, Mary, a 72 year old nun shared her story about being adopted out to her aunt and uncle when she was born. She was the 4th child, but a combination of her mother’s illness after the birth and family financial circumstances meant that she was given up for adoption. As she was telling the story, Mary was pretending to cradle a little baby in her hands and softly, slowly gesturing as if to give the baby away: “I was given up” she said. She paused, and after some silence she said, “Now” she said “I think I understand why I’ve always had a hard time getting close to people.” This is attachment theory and attachment injury.

Development of Attachment Styles

John Bowlby[[43]](#footnote-44) set out to understand the emotional bond between child and parent. Based on Psychoanalysis and Ethology and Evolution Theory, the attachment model explains children‘s behaviour towards their attachment figures. He hypothesized that children have an inborn predisposition to be attached to significant care givers, and that parents often serve as that secure base for the children. Bowlby explained attachment as a goal directed behavioural system that could be conceptualized somewhat like a pre-programmed thermostat. Within a certain range of parental caregiving children feel secure and progressively develop a secure internal working model of self and others (Bowlby[[44]](#footnote-45)). Depending on the caregiver’s ability to provide a certain level of comfort and security, children would organize around different strategies. Bowlby believed that early attachment behaviours have a powerful influence on the way a person experiences relationships throughout life. Attachment theory has taken its place as a cornerstone in contemporary psychology.

This struggle of growing into one’s attachment pattern is nicely illustrated by a schema Bowlby borrowed from the biologist Waddington’s theory of epigenetic developmental pathways (Bowlby[[45]](#footnote-46); Simpson & Rholes[[46]](#footnote-47); Rovers[[47]](#footnote-48)) His schema pictures a range of normal attachment patterns in the center of the pathways, and more insecure attachment patterns on both extremes. In Bowlby’s theory of development, there is no single path to secure attachment. Development is never blocked by particular experiences but rather re-routed or constrained into increasingly particular pathways over the wide range of attachment patterns (Bowlby[[48]](#footnote-49)). Even the ‘normal’ or secure range is made up of different pathways, or branches. The road to a secure attachment pattern is not a straight journey, but a process which involves life risks and choices and the legacy of experiences within our family of origin and our community (Bowlby[[49]](#footnote-50)).

Therefore, healthy childhood-to-adult development is about striving for and balancing the two crucial life forces of attachment and exploration, relatedness and autonomy (Mikulincer & Shaver[[50]](#footnote-51)). Attachment desires connectedness; that we are all born in togetherness, connected in the mother’s womb, joined at the umbilical cord; now this is love at its best. And then, from the moment of birth, and the cutting of the umbilical cord when we are born, we are set on the road to autonomy and exploration and learning. All of life is about trying to negotiate these two life forces of relatedness and autonomy in all our relationships (Lawson & Brossart[[51]](#footnote-52)). And we all do that balancing journey in one way or another. For the first six months or more, we are but babes in our parent(s) arms and we are not yet able to express too much autonomy, though occasionally we might raise our baby voices, or suffer aloneness or abandonment that can leave the feeling of “separation anxiety” within our emotional and relationship memory. Then, we begin to move away and crawl and walk, and thus, we start our road to exploration, learning and self development. When we were about two or three year old, we met our first friends; we would go over and have a play date, all the whole watching to be sure to see that mom and dad are in proximity. So, we learn to step out on our own, all the while checking back to be sure we are still safely connected. Then we go to school, and the first few weeks are terrible because school and life are big pieces of autonomy that we might not really be ready for; concrete steps in the separation process from our security blanket and our parent(s). Perhaps we might have our first sleep over; then a three night sleep over with schoolmates: all the while, learning the balance between relatedness and autonomy. It’s a tough attachment balancing act to grow up. Teenagers want to say: “Mom and dad, I’m an individual now; I don’t need anybody; I don’t need you I am shifting my attachment to my peers as they are becoming important to me (Mikulincer & Shaver[[52]](#footnote-53)); I’m not going to grandma’s house for Christmas anymore; I’m not going to church with you on Sunday; I’m working on changing how I am attached to you; I am becoming more autonomous” And, in their next breath, add: “But, can you lend me the car and 20 bucks”. Some people leave home at the age of 16 or 17, and perhaps need to become autonomous too quickly; others don’t leave home until 25 or 30, most probably because mom and dad should have stopped ‘cooking with cheese’, and they’re having a hard time leaving home and getting away. And so we have attachment through the life cycle. For each and every one of us, there’s a balancing of relatedness and autonomy. (Bowen[[53]](#footnote-54); Rovers[[54]](#footnote-55)).

The journey of life is about finding our felt security in life. As we live through the circumstances of life, especially family of origin experiences, like the attachment relationships from our parents, or our sibling position within the family; all these will determine our attachment style.

Attachment and family dynamics

Let us look more closely at how an individual can become preoccupied or avoidant depending on the context of the family. The first example will discuss the preoccupied attachment. Preoccupied individuals give of themselves in order to please others. Because they have such a strong need for togetherness and for intimacy, these people would give up much of their autonomy needs to maintain connectedness. Indeed, they are afraid of autonomy and of standing on their own two feet often because these trigger fears of abandonment and insecurity. They may have grown up in life where autonomy was either damaged or scary or no one ever gave them enough encouragement to go and live life a bit on their own. And so they hold tightly onto relationships. These children would be clingy, insecure and anxious. Adults who have this preoccupied attachment style are very focussed and concerned about the relationship and what others think of them. This attachment style is like country and western music at its worst; “I need you baby and I can’t live without you”. These people are in trouble. These people have never resolved or untangled the original symbiotic or preoccupied relationship with their caregivers. Ongoing attachment preoccupies their relationships.

A 32 year old woman comes into therapy and she wants to talk about her relationship. She comes from a very strong Christian fundamental family. For the most part, she’s still living at home but she’s had four live-in partners that she’s lived in with so far. She meets them; she falls in love quickly; she lives with them almost immediately; these enmeshed relationships lasts anywhere from three months to three years and it falls apart; and she moves back home with mom again. She comes in to therapy and wants to know what’s going on here. Within her family of origin, that tree of life that she has journeyed through for 32 years, there is a strong preoccupied, enmeshed relationship with her mother to the point of obedience, and a distant, absent father. It would make some sense from an attachment theory view point that she is looking for the attachment with a male that she never got from her father. She falls in love quickly for the possibility and hope for feeling that attached security she so desperately sought from her dad. But she’s also caught up in this obedience dynamic with her mother. When she is gone from mom too long, mom gets anxious and mom pulls her back into relationship with her via the fourth commandment: “Thou shall obey your mom”. She was reminded by her therapist that obedience to parent is for children and that, for a 32 year old woman, it no longer applies. The commandment for 32 year old people is “Thou shall love and honour your parents”, but you don’t have to obey. And loving and honouring your parents is important but so is growing up to become our own person and to engage in a peer, adult to adult relationship with your parent. Gradually she was able to say: “You know what, I need to live my own life and disconnect a bit from mom. I need to find out what male relationships means in my life, and connect more with my dad, and gradually, start being able to make better choices in my relationship with others, moving from a preoccupied relationship style to being a bit more autonomous”. She is changing her attachment pattern.

On the other side of the attachment continuum is the dismissive avoidant relationship style. These people like relationships but they tend to “love ‘em and leave ‘em.” They have a very strong sense of self reliance; they have a great difficulty in intimacy, with connectedness, as this is fearful for them. The dismissive avoidant child may appear indifferent and they may well be distant from their loved ones. Their parents were not available to them and or were dismissive of their emotional needs so they learn to look after themselves; to keep space and distance from others. For the dismissive avoidant adult, they could be the emotional iceberg, and uncomfortable being too close to others. These folks are called the “The Lone Rangers of love.” From a distance they look good, but when they get close to a new partner, these new partners say: “You are my man! I am falling in love with you a little bit, and I want to talk to you about relationship and intimacy; tell me what you’re thinking, tell me what you’re feeling, tell me a bit more about yourself.” This is when the dismissive avoidant get ants in their emotional pants and they’re gone, taking distance for fear of too much closeness.

A 42 year old gentleman comes into therapy. He has had 4 relationships: two marriages and two other long live-in relationships. But he acknowledges that he runs when the relationship gets too close. None of them have lasted more than three years. From his family of origin story, he reveals that he’s the ninth and youngest child. He shares that he is exactly 9 months younger than his next brother. He says that his oldest sister is his special sister. He remembers that as a child, he would go into the kitchen and know that the family was talking about him. After a few sessions of therapy he goes and starts asking questions of his family of origin and he learns family secrets of his tree of life. He is, in fact, the son of his oldest sister. She was 17 when she got pregnant and not married. He was born, and in good Catholic tradition, the family put him at the end of the sibling line, where he fit just right, nine months younger to the day. And so, what he thought was his mom and dad, were really his grandmother and grandfather. But that seemed to work OK in terms of his attachment, even though there is a bit of an attachment abandonment in terms of losing his birth mother. When he was two years old, his real mother (whom he thought was his sister) decided to leave home and take him with her to try and start her own life with her son. This was another abandonment by those he thought were his real parent. His mother’s attempt at autonomy didn’t work, and in six months, they were home again and he was put back at the end of the sibling line. This was his third abandonment from the woman called his special sister, and by the time this man was six years old, he didn’t trust the world. And so he developed a very dismissive avoidant relationship style. And he just carried that attachment style through to his adult relationships, every one of them.

Attachment style has mostly to do with our relationship within our family of origin. Parents and sibling position are the luck of the draw of life. We didn’t choose our parents, and they didn’t choose us; we get parents by the luck of life. If life gave us two good functional, loving, secure, comforting parents, and a safe and stable community that enabled us to develop a pretty good attachment style, we are lucky. If life gave us insecure parents, and or a very difficult community context leading us to an insecure attachment style; sorry to hear that. Or if we get a sibling position in which we are reactive to siblings before or after us, this too forms our attachment style. But it’s not our fault. Our attachment style, be it secure or insecure, have to do with the environment that we are born into and the way we adapted within that family environment. It was not our fault, nor our choice: However, now, as adults, our attachment style is our responsibility.

Parents are the primary caregivers of children. The power of parents in children’s development is enormous; in all sincerity, when it comes to attachment style, parents are more powerful than God himself. Studies of children and attachment in the past 40 or 50 years have clearly demonstrated that it is the security of the relations bond between child and parent that impacts a child’s sense of security and self esteem (Mikulincer & Shaver[[55]](#footnote-56)). Attachment is all about protecting and comforting ourselves and our loved ones. Attachment is about developing wellbeing. Nothing is more important than receiving this protection and comfort in the early years of our life. If all children could get good parenting, secure care giving, and warm comfort in the childhood years, perhaps our prisons might be empty in 20 years time. That’s how important childhood attachment development is. Security in infancy is predictive of secure attachment in childhood and in adult relationships. Studies reveal that the more secure a child is in infancy, the more secure they are as a child, and the more loving they will be as an adult (Cassidy[[56]](#footnote-57); Mikulincer & Shaver[[57]](#footnote-58)). Attachment styles in childhood more or less carry through in adulthood (Bowlby[[58]](#footnote-59); Mikulincer & Shaver[[59]](#footnote-60)). Attachment styles by age six are carried into adulthood unless one has had the opportunity of corrective experiences in life, or therapy, or, perhaps a miracle from God (Bowen[[60]](#footnote-61): Bowlby[[61]](#footnote-62)).

Equally, there is evidence that insecure attachment and trauma are also transmitted over the generations (Doucet & Rovers[[62]](#footnote-63); Mikulincer & Shaver[[63]](#footnote-64)). Research is indicating how great the influence of parents are in their present relationship functioning. It is always amazing how the holocaust comes into the therapy room generations later; the trauma thereof is told in family stories, and stories then come down to the present generation (Doucet & Rovers[[64]](#footnote-65)). Attachment is a most enduring characteristic. Attachment styles, learned early in life, endure across our lifespan and across the generations.

Families’ Many Faces and Attachment

One of the most important insights that attachment provides is that for children’s emotional wellbeing it is not so much dependent upon the structure or the composition of a family, but upon what happens within family attachment dynamics over the generations. In essence, Bowlby[[65]](#footnote-66) explained that what children need are stronger wiser parent(s) who show interest in the child’s well being and relations security. A predictably, available and responsive parent(s) helps a child feel emotionally strong and secure in attachment.

There are many different faces to families within our culture: nuclear family, single parent family, adopting family, same sex family, etc. Indeed, when it comes to doing research on families in Canada, the difficulties are multiplied due to the many faces that family presents. The nuclear family system is the most common face of families in Canada, but when cultural and ethnicity is added, the faces of the nuclear family can also change. With Canadian first nations, the extended family system is vital, with grandmothers and grandfathers often the primary caregivers of the children, even with both parents present within the household. The single parent family system has many possible expressions as well, such as a single mother or single father, or a single heterosexual or lesbian parent. In a same sex family, one needs to wonder it is a male or female sex parent(s), with or without biological parents or step-parents. In the blended family system, the family constellation is more than just mom and dad splitting-up, as children can live with mom and her new partner one week, and with dad and his new partner another week. These many faces of families make research more difficult.

More than two decades of research has failed to reveal important differences in the adjustment or development of children or adolescents reared by same-sex couples compared to those reared by two-sex couples (Brewaeys[[66]](#footnote-67): Brewaeys et al,[[67]](#footnote-68): Flaks et al,[[68]](#footnote-69): Golombok et al,[[69]](#footnote-70): Green, et al,[[70]](#footnote-71): Patterson & Hastings[[71]](#footnote-72): Petterson et al[[72]](#footnote-73)). Results of this vast research suggest that the quality of family relationships, especially attachment processes, is more tightly linked with child outcomes than is parental sexual orientation. In other words, the ability of parents to create secure attachments is the key to healthy childhood development. The research is saying that, in short, the development, adjustment, and wellbeing of children with lesbian and gay parents do not differ markedly from the children of heterosexual parents (Wainright et al[[73]](#footnote-74): Stevenson & Black[[74]](#footnote-75); Paterson[[75]](#footnote-76)). Lesbian mothers and gay fathers are much like other parents. Children of lesbian and gay parents are no more confused about gender identity – a question we often have (Stacey & Biblarz[[76]](#footnote-77)). There are no statically significant differences in cognitive, behavioural, or emotional development (Wainright & Patterson[[77]](#footnote-78): Petterson et al[[78]](#footnote-79)). The same results have been found for adopting or fostered families (Chamberlain[[79]](#footnote-80)). Chamberlain found that feeling a safe attachment with adopting or fostering parents is the best indicator for health developing children in these families. In other words, it is not the different face of the family, nor the sex of the parent, but the quality of parenting, care giving, and the ability to create a secure attachment place for children, that creates secure attachment styles and brings about the balance between togetherness and autonomy, and the development of wellbeing. Two parents, be they the same or opposite sex, are better than one parent, in terms of a stable attachment bond with children (Fulcher et al[[80]](#footnote-81): Gartrell et al[[81]](#footnote-82)). Perhaps the reasons for this are more sociological; sociology tells us that single parents tend to be more poor, tend to be more young, tend to be more isolated, and tend to be more busy, and, as a result, single parents do not have as much time to be available and responsive enough to foster secure attachment styles in their children. They don’t have that time or the resources to create security and comfort within the family.

Same-sex marriages are increasing and the attachment styles of the children tend to be as healthy as others family formats (APA[[82]](#footnote-83): Stacey & Biblarz[[83]](#footnote-84): Patterson[[84]](#footnote-85)). Reasons for this can include: a) the marriage of two people increases family income; b) when same sex partners are married, they have more shared benefits; c) same-sex parents commit themselves to each other in a public union which can create stability and durability that helps the attachment process in and with the children; and d) the children can go to school and say “Yes, my parents are married too.” Children today are more often heard saying: “Ah yeah, one of my friend’s mom and dad are separated, and another friend has a mom and then she’s got another mom.” There does not seem to be a problem in this child’s eyes, because the children are feeling a secure base and good attachment style growing in them.

Conclusion

The evidence we have from these studies strongly suggest that children raised within the many faces of family structures are as likely to develop strong well-being as any other child and that they are no different from their counterparts raised by two-parent heterosexual family. The literature indicates that the psychological development and sexual identity formation of children is really dependent upon the secure attachment milieu within the family structure, and not upon the make-up of the family structure. Growing up in a secure manner seems to be based mostly upon a parent’s capacity to be secure in his/herself, being respectful and supportive of children’s autonomy, all the while maintaining healthy intimate attachments. Good parents produce good children, no matter the face of the family one comes from.

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