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Bridging Attachment Theory and Attachment Parenting with Feminist Methods of Inquiry

Attachment theory has a rich theoretical and empirical history in developmental psychology. Attachment parenting, while becoming increasingly more popular, has little empirical data to support the claims that its proponents make. Although one could argue that adopting certain attachment parenting techniques could help foster the same kind of maternal sensitivity associated with secure infant attachment, no empirical data have been reported relating attachment parenting techniques to the development of attachment in infants. Furthermore, developmental outcomes of parents choosing to attachment parent have been ignored. Given the limitations of both attachment theory and attachment parenting to provide universal trajectories for optimal child and adult development, perhaps it is time to explore feminist methods of inquiry in our attempts to relate attachment parenting practices with the development of infant-caregiver attachment and its sequelae. In this paper, I review attachment theory and feminist critiques while pointing out the limitations in empirical findings supporting attachment parenting behaviors. I suggest that some of the measures used in the study of adult attachment could be considered feminist, and that perhaps feminist inquiry into what motivates individuals to engage in attachment parenting could be beneficial to our understanding of human development.

"Attachment theory" per se has a rich history in developmental psychology and refers to the body of theory and research rooted in the works of John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth. Bowlby (1969; 1988) posited that infants develop attachments to caregivers—primarily mothers—in order to ensure infant survival. Mary Ainsworth and her colleagues (Ainsworth and Wittig, 1969; Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, and Wall, 1978) provided a basis for demonstrating empirical differences in the quality of infant attachment relationships to mothers. Since the mid-1980s, attachment theory has spurred a tremendous

amount of research in developmental psychology, and its clinical (e.g., Belsky and Nezworski, 1988; Orbach, 1999) and social policy implications (Rutter and O'Conner, 1999) have been recognized. Despite critiques both from developmentalist (Kagan, 1998; Lamb, Thompson, Gardner and Charnov, 1985) and feminist (e.g., Birns, 1999; Bliwise, 1999; Contratto, 2002; Eyer, 1992; and Franzblau, 1999, 2002) circles, investigation of the development of attachment from prenatal to adult periods of development has continued to flourish (e.g., Cassidy and Shaver, 1999; Fonagy, Steele, and Steele, 1991; Kerns and Richardson, 2005; Simpson and Rholes, 1998; and West and Sheldon-Keller, 1994).

"Attachment parenting" refers to a relatively recently identified parental style which includes a cluster of parenting behaviors which are intended to emphasize and foster emotional responsivity to infants and young children. Although one could argue that adopting certain attachment parenting techniques (e.g., breastfeeding on demand, keeping an infant in close physical proximity) might be akin to fostering the same kind of maternal sensitivity that Ainsworth and her colleagues (and multiple investigators following them) documented in securely attached infant-mother dyads, no empirical data have been reported relating attachment parenting techniques to the development of attachment in infants. In fact, while the claims of attachment parenting Internet websites are grand, little empirical research focuses on the developmental outcomes of children raised in attachment parenthood households. Furthermore, developmental outcomes (e.g., indices of mental health, self-efficacy, autonomy, etc.) of parents choosing to "attachment parent" have been ignored. Given the limitations of both attachment theory and attachment parenting to outline a universal trajectory of optimal development, perhaps it is time to explore feminist methods of inquiry in attempts to relate attachment parenting practices with the development of infant-caregiver attachment and its sequelae.

Attachment theory and feminist critiques

The infant's attachment to the primary caregiver—usually the mother— is a major milestone of social and emotional development at the end of the infant's first year. John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth both referred to the secure base behavior of infants at this age. The negotiation of the toddler's exploratory needs with the need for felt security is the focus of much of the toddler's emotional energy (Bretherton, 1985, 1992). Whereas Bowlby attempted to offer a universal theory of attachment based on clinical observations, Ainsworth and her colleagues sought out to document empirical differences in the quality of attachment, or the felt security infants experience.

Ainsworth argued for an understanding of the infant's organization of attachment behaviors (e.g., cooing, smiling, crying, following, clinging) in behavioral context. Instead of focusing on discrete behaviors of mothers and their infants, such as in smiling or mutual eye contact, she sought to develop an

ecologically valid laboratory procedure that would mimic the casual comings and goings that infants and their primary caregiving mothers experienced on a daily basis. In the Strange Situation (Ainsworth and Wittig, 1969; Ainsworth *et al.*, 1978), mothers and their 12 or 18 month-old infants go through a series of brief separations and reunions over a 21-minute period of time. Infant behavior during the two reunions is recorded and coded, and infants are typically classified into one of 3 categories, although a 4th category is often now utilized (Weinfield, Sroufe, Egeland, and Carlson, 1999). Athough some researchers have developed other measures of infant attachment (e.g., Waters and Deane, 1985), the Strange Situation continues to be the standard measure of infant attachment.

The majority of infants observed in the Strange Situation are coded as securely attached. (Note that this is true even in samples from multiple cultures. See Van IJzendoorn and Sagi [1999].) These infants may or may not show distress at separation but actively greet the caregiver and show attempts to reconnect emotionally at the reunions. Infants who show little or no distress at the separations and conspicuously ignore the mother and her overtures for interaction during the reunion episodes are coded as insecure-avoidant. Infants who seem completely distressed by the separations and preoccupied with the mother's whereabouts to the extent that they cannot actively explore their environment are coded as insecure-resistant/ambivalent. Infants who do not fit the patterns described thus far, who show contradictory behaviors, such as approaching while avoiding the mother (e.g., walking toward while looking down or away) are coded as having a disorganized-disoriented attachment (Main and Solomon, 1990). This category is rare in "normative" samples, but can be high in clinical samples, as in families experiencing trauma and abuse (Spieker and Booth, 1988, Van IJzendoorn, Schuengel, and Bakermans-Kranenburg, 1999). While cultural context has been an important point of debate (Harwood, Miller, and Irizarry, 1995; Rothbaum, Weisz, Pott, Miyake, and Morelli, 2000), Marinus Van IJzendoorn and Abraham Sagi (1999) suggest that the universality of infant attachment might lie in a "...general cultural pressure toward selection of the secure attachment pattern in the majority of children, and the preference for the secure child in parents across cultures" (730). What is defined as optimal or secure may nonetheless vary culture to culture (Bliwise, 1999; Bolen, 2000; Rothbaum *et al.*, 2000).

At the time Ainsworth identified the three original patterns of attachment behaviors, she also observed and recorded maternal behavior toward infants in the home. Infants who were coded as securely attached in the Strange Situation were more likely to have mothers who typically displayed sensitive and responsive care to infant bids for interaction than infants who were coded as insecure-avoidant or insecure-resistant/ambivalent. Infants coded as insecure-avoidant often received indifferent, intrusive or rejecting care from their mothers; infants coded as insecure-resistant/ambivalent had mothers who were inconsistently sensitive to their bids for interaction. Multiple investigators

(e.g., Belsky and Isabella, 1988; see de Wolff and Van IJzendoorn, 1997) have replicated these findings and have demonstrated that sensitive caregiving—be it from a mother, father, grandmother, or daycare provider—is associated with infant attachment to that particular caregiver. Hence, infant attachment is not conceptualized as a trait or characteristic of the infant, but instead as the infant's representation of the history with a particular caregiver. Infants can and do have different Strange Situation attachment codings with multiple attachment figures (Sroufe, 1985). However, the majority of investigations documenting the construct and predictive validity of infant attachment as assessed in the Strange Situation has focused on infant-mother attachment. Clearly, this is a limitation in understanding the usefulness of attachment theory as applied to children's development, as children are greatly influenced by others in their social worlds (e.g., extended kin, fathers, siblings, peers, etc.). Investigations of the development of attachment in children and their parents must be considered in a greater family and social context (Cummings and Graham, 2002; Bliwise, 1999).

Bowlby's notion of the internal working model of the attachment relationship is a central tenet of attachment theory. Infant behavior in the Strange Situation is understood by attachment theorists and researchers to represent the infant's internal working model, or mental representation, of the attachment relationship with the caregiver (Bretherton, 1985). Other measures, such as the Adult Attachment Interview (George, Kaplan, and Main, 1985), the Parent Attachment Interview (Bretherton, Biringen, and Ridgeway, 1989), and the Working Model of the Child Interview (Zeanah, Benoit, and Barton, 1986) attempt to measure an adult's internal working model of attachment or "state of mind" with respect to attachment issues. These more open-ended, qualitative measures—when used in diverse samples—might provide richer and more accurate data for researchers attempting to understand parents' experience of attachment in a social context (consider Hays' 1998 critique of Bradley *et al.*, 1997).

Feminist critiques of attachment theory as a universal theory of development have focused on Bowlby's propositions and the studies of infant-mother attachment supporting them. Valid criticisms have been raised with respect to the historical and cultural context in which the theory was developed, the potential for mother-blaming, the questionable validity of attachment measures, the emphasis on early versus later life influences, and the potential problem with making ethical judgments by scrutinizing mothering.

Beverly Birns (1999), Sharon Hays (1998), Susan Franzblau (1999, 2002), and Susie Orbach (1999) all question the post World War II paternalistic practices at the time that Bowlby was developing his ideas about "maternal deprivation" and the infant's need for attachment. Orbach (1999) offers a historical perspective from the views of clinicians and remarks that although feminist clinicians noted the effects of "unattuned" mother-child relationships, astute clinicians also noted the rage and depression mothers experienced, which

may have been related to their social position. (Consider the increased rate of maternal depression among mothers of young children in recent samples as reported in Lyons-Ruth, Wolfe, Lyubchik, and Steingard, 2002.) Orbach (1999) remarks, "to talk of what children needed from mothers without understanding the social position of women was, from a feminist perspective, to miss the point" (77).

Franzblau (1999, 2002) argues that attachment theory acts as the overarching paradigm that scrutinizes women to be "good enough" mothers or pathologizes women who choose not to mother. Jordan (1997) suggests that by focusing on maternal sensitivity, developmental researchers and clinicians are failing to examine the infant-mother relationship in its relation to other relationships and social formations. She, like Hays (1998), raises concern about the lack of acknowledgement of "normal maternal ambivalence and hate" (Winnicott, 1947, as cited by Jordan, 1997) and the idealized view of motherhood that then gets promoted. The romanticizing of woman as mother (Franzblau, 1999, 2002) on the one hand, and the blaming of mother on the other, might appear problematic for attachment theory. Jordan urges us to develop a more complex theory of mothering, one that recognizes power dynamics and complicated ambivalent feelings towards infants as an alternative to romantic notions of "natural" mother-infant relationships. Yet, investigators of attachment across generations are beginning to consider and document mother-child relationships in interpersonal and social contexts. In studies utilizing qualitative measures of parental perspectives of attachment, those parents who can integrate the negative and positive aspects of parenting in a cohesive narrative are those who seem to be able to provide the sensitive care that fosters secure infant attachment (e.g., see Sokolowksi, Hans, Bernstein, and Cox, 2005 for examination of these variables in a high-risk sample). Granted, additional studies with these foci are needed in samples other than Western, Caucasian, middle-class, heterosexual samples, but a contextualizing of parenting experiences can be better documented by qualitative measures.

In regard to mother-blaming, it is important to point out that even 20 years ago, Jay Belsky (1984) and Alan Sroufe (1988) both acknowledged that the quality of care a mother can provide her infant is directly related to factors like social support, her own childhood history, preparation for motherhood, work and family factors. Hence, to blame a mother for a child's outcome would be akin to blaming her mother and her mother before her. Applying such blame would be as inappropriate as blaming a child (Sroufe, 1988). If we accept the notion of the internal working model as critical to our understanding of the intergenerational transmission of attachment patterns, then it is easier to understand that adult individuals can "work through" models of experienced insensitive caregiving so as to develop secure and autonomous "states of mind" with respect to attachment issues by considering the context in which they received such care. We can further eliminate maternal blame if we encourage social movements and interventions (e.g., health care, social services; see

Behnke and Hans, 2002; Erickson and Kurz-Reimer, 2002) that might aid in that "reworking" of mental representations of attachment relationships.

Attachment parenting effects: Fact or fiction?

The term "attachment parenting" is credited to William and Martha Sears who coined it in the late 1980s (Bobel, 2002). However, their current website (http://www.askdrsears.com/html/10/T130400.asp) suggests that attachment parenting is nothing new, as it is rooted in what comes "naturally" to a parent when we parent without books from "childcare advisors." Both Chris Bobel (2002) and Petra Buskens (2004) challenge what's considered "natural" by examining the social structures in which mothering takes place. Sears and Sears (2003) refer to Ainsworth's work on maternal sensitivity and infant attachment, but how that gets translated to prescriptions for baby-wearing is unclear. On the Sears' website mothers are warned to "put balance in one's parenting" so as not to neglect oneself or marriage (*sic*), yet researchers have not examined the range of attachment parenting techniques that have implications for child and adult development.

Although some students of developmental psychology are being asked to critique claims made by advocates of attachment parenting (e.g., see Sy, Brown, Amsterlaw and Myers, 2005), readers of the mainstream and alternative parenting press may not be thinking so critically. Indeed, attachment parenting has not been critiqued from a scientific point of view that would examine longitudinally the claims made by proponents on effects on children's (and parents') development. At first glance at its representation in what is now the mainstream literature, attachment parenting might be reminiscent of male authority prescription to mothers of what is in the best interest of babies. Websites on the Internet cite what is referred to as "evidence" of the efficacy of attachment parenting, but even this information is taken out of context. For example, multiple studies have been replicated that report on parental behavior (e.g., maternal sensitivity to infant cues) and its effect on the development of infant attachment quality, but no researchers to date have reported on sensitivity that might or might not be related to the range of parenting behaviors identified as attachment parenting. In William Sears and Martha Sears' (2003), *The Baby Book*, Ainsworth's attachment studies are referred to as a justification of why a mother might want to bedshare, use a soft baby carrier, and breastfeed, but the fact that Ainsworth did not include such variables in her study is not mentioned. It is entirely feasible that a mother who does not sleep with her infant, hold her infant in a sling, or breastfeed can nonetheless provide that same infant sensitive care that can foster secure attachment and emotional connection. Some of the practices associated with attachment parenting could nonetheless help teach mothers-—as well as other caregivers—to tune into the infant's emotional cues. But to ignore the vast range of parenting behaviors whereby sensitive caregiving can get expressed by prescribing attachment parenting is reductionistic.

When we consider the writings of those who have attempted to put parenting practices into a biopsychosocial and cultural context (e.g., de Marneffe, 2004; Hrdy, 1999; Liedloff, 1985; McKenna, 2000; Scheper-Hughes, 1992; Small, 1998), some of the practices of what constitutes attachment parenting don't seem so outlandish. For example, McKenna's findings on mother-infant synchronicity in sleep cycles in bed-sharing mother-infant dyads and their implication for reduced sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS) has renewed interest given the recent American Academy of Pediatrics recommendation against co-sleeping (see AAP, 2005; Sears, 2005; McKenna and McDade, 2005). To embrace and promote all attachment parenting techniques as a general rule of thumb is nonetheless limiting. What is necessary is a social transformation so as to encourage parents to find the way to self-efficacy and confidence in their own parenting. Parents will choose to parent in ways that they deem are valued by their culture. But supporting their choices and efforts can have lasting effects. Meredith Small's (1998) enthusiasm for ethnopediatrics needs to be complemented by a renewed focus on parental mental health—and maternal mental health in particular. Such support can facilitate the emotional growth of infants and their parents alike.

A call for feminist methods of inquiry

One avenue for feminist, qualitative exploration of attachment parenting attitudes and behaviors might lie in the methods of investigating attachment in adults (for general discussions of feminist methods in social science research, see Margrit Eichler [1988] and Shulamit Reinharz [1992]). While the historical roots of attachment theory and their implications for social prescriptions for women need to be kept in mind, Bowlby's notion of the "internal working model" can nonetheless prove useful in attempts to understand how meaningful attachment relationships can get reproduced across one's life-span and across generations. Feminist theory can help guide the questions and can shed light on the interpretation of findings in investigations of parent-child relationships. Exploratory qualitative interviews with ethnically diverse parents who choose to attachment parent will help us to shape the kinds of research questions, interventions, and social change that can help foster optimal child and adult development.

As noted above, methods used to study attachment in adults—both from the filial and parental perspective—have included more qualitative, semi-structured interviews (Bretherton *et al.*, 1989; George *et al.*, 1996; Zeanah *et al.*, 1986). These interviews are designed to access and assess one's internal working model of attachment relationships. The interviews provide respondents the opportunity to report on one's history or current experience of attachment relationships within the context of one's life. In the Working Model of the Child Interview (Zeanah *et al.*, 1986) or the Parent Attachment Interview (Bretherton *et al.*, 1989), parents are questioned about how specific emotions are expressed and exchanged between a parent and a toddler on a daily basis. In

such an interview, a mother can express and elaborate on her feelings of ambivalence toward her child and/or motherhood. Yet, those same feelings of ambivalence (which are often rooted in the emotional frustrations of living with and caring for a an emotionally and physically demanding toddler) can be described in a coherent narrative that expresses a valuing of relationships and emotional connection. That same ambivalence—when contextualized in a rich narrative of a dynamic and ever-changing mother-child relationship—can nonetheless be related to responsivity to children's cues and secure infant attachment. The single mother living in an impoverished urban environment who expresses maternal ambivalence, yet fosters secure attachment in her infant, and who can tell her story in an interview to a feminist researcher, has much to offer those interested in the development of attachment.

At the other extreme of maternal ambivalence lies maternal desire. Daphne de Marneffe (2004) calls for consideration of mutual mother-child relationships in our understanding of the motivation that leads mothers to desire to care for their children. Citing cases from her own clinical practice, as well as findings from studies on infant-mother attachment (in addition to reflections on her own experiences of mothering), de Marneffe argues that "...feminist writing has cast a skeptical eye on the meaning to mothers themselves of taking care of children" (2004: 316). Proponents of attachment parenting often assume that mothers do indeed want to take care of their children—at all costs. Examining qualitative differences in attachment parenting choices and patterns of attachment behaviors can elucidate the ways in which attachment is experienced and reproduced. Our inquiry must indeed include mothers with conscious desires to care for their children. But a comprehensive inquiry into parenting choices and behavior—and their influences on the development of attachment experienced by children and parents—needs to extend beyond maternal desire. It must also include the desire of co-parents in egalitarian households or extended kinship of single parents who share a desire to care for children, for examples. Considering attachment from both the child's and parent's perspective can assist our understanding of the factors that enhance and limit the choices one makes in parenting. Utilizing qualitative interviews that include appropriate probes and follow-up questions encourage a respondent to explain how such factors influence her/his particular choices.

A multitude of questions can arise from exploratory methods of inquiry into attachment parenting and the development of infant-parent relationships. For example, we might ask how does one's views of one's own attachment history influence one's decision to attachment parent? Would parents with secure and autonomous outlooks with respect to attachment relationships be more or less likely to engage in attachment parenting? Do socioeconomic and/ or cultural differences yield selection of some but not other attachment parenting behaviors, such as in extended breastfeeding or bed-sharing? Do factors such as age, locus of control, sexual orientation, commitment to egalitarian co-parenting, social support, employment, or self-esteem influence

parents' decisions to engage in attachment parenting? Do such factors as social support and social class override attachment history in empowering parents to make alternative choices in parenting? Is it more difficult to go against mainstream parenting advice without a secure attachment history or social support? (Clearly, La Leche League is one social support mechanism in place that helps facilitate extended breastfeeding in a North American society that does not promote this practice.) How can flex-time and family leave work policies shape one's commitment to engage in attachment parenting?

When considering and examining attachment theory as a possible avenue for documenting attachment parenting behaviors, it is important that we don't throw that proverbial baby out with the bathwater. Attachment theory has a place in feminist developmental psychology. Feminist methods that allow us to examine mutual attachment relationships in a social context can elucidate our understanding of the contributions of attachment theory and attachment parenting to human development across the life-span.

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