

Attachment. A pancultural need but a cultural construct

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Attachment theory can be considered as the most important theory for children's socioemotional development during the first years of life with substantial implications also for the application in clinical and educational fields. Attachment theory has been developed out of the prevailing Euro-American childcare philosophy and based on a selective review of knowledge available from different disciplines, including evolutionary theory, ethology, and systems theory. What is left out is systematic evidence for relationship formation beyond the exclusive dyadic Western mother-child format. Recent evidence published by cultural anthropologists, psychologists, and evolutionary theorists is discussed in this paper especially with respect to caregiving arrangements with multiple caregivers. It is concluded that there is not one model of relationship formation that is adaptive for all of the world's population.

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Introduction

Attachment theory has become the dominant theory of children's socioemotional development since its formulation during the 1960s. The English psychiatrist John Bowlby synthesized a large body of knowledge from ethology, evolutionary thinking, systems theory, and psychoanalysis to a developmental account that describes children's development of close relationships as the foundation of socioemotional development [1]. Bowlby later teamed with the Canadian psychologist Mary Ainsworth, who developed together with her collaborators a laboratory based procedure to differentiate different attachment qualities when children are one year of age [2]. Bowlby as well as Ainsworth referred to the family in their early writings as the basis for children's relational networks; however, attachment theory became increasingly monotropic, that is to say, it assumes that the child forms

one primary relationship, mainly with the mother, to which (few) other possible relationships may be subordinated. In this conceptualization, the primary attachment relationship is considered to be the basis of all future relationships.

In the following paragraphs, the conception of relationship in attachment theory will be reviewed first. Thereafter, conceptions of relationships will be presented as documented by cultural psychologists and anthropologists as prevalent in non-Western hunter and gatherer or farming communities. These two subsistence modes are especially important for the understanding of the development of relational networks. Hunter-gatherer groups were considered as the environment to which human ancestors adapted, and in which Bowlby had located the evolutionary origins of attachment formation. Farming societies can be regarded as the precursors to urban living in industrialized and post-industrialized societies [3]. The contrast between the two suggests that the mode of subsistence and the respective lifestyle are fundamental for the development of structure and mode of relationships.

The conception of relationship in attachment theory

Attachment is conceived of as an emotional bond that emerges during the first year of life on the basis of the prevalent experiences of a child with the primary caregiver(s). Children experience mainly two distinct modes of being: exclusive and intensive dyadic interactional exchange and being alone and spending time with one-self. Interactional exchanges are organized mainly in the distal mode, that is face-to-face exchange with facial mirroring and vocal/verbal (quasi dialogic) conversations. Being on their own is facilitated through an abundance of toys and objects. Both behavioral modes convey the information that the infant is an independent and separate agent. The communication is child centered in that the caregiver is reacting to infants' (explicit) signals which are verbally explored through an ongoing stream of questions (Figure 1).

Verbal conversations center around the inner world of intentions, wishes, feelings, thoughts, and preferences of the child. The 'mind-minded' format [4] describes and interprets the child's mental world of states, emotions, and cognitions which is recently considered to be even more important than the prompt, adequate, and consistent behavioral sensitivity to the infant signals [2,5^{••}]. Overall the interactions are affectionate and affectively engaging [6^{••}]. The open expression of emotions is

Figure 1



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German middle class mother interacting with her three months old daughter in the distal mode with abundant face-to-face conversation and object stimulation.

considered as necessary for health and well-being. The child-centered responsiveness is assumed to be constitutive of the development of trust in the significant caregiving person(s), which allows the child to explore the world and learn about its properties and functions. Thus, social relationships are mediated through extensive and primary self-perception. This caregiving model is adaptive only in particular socioecological conditions. Unrestricted time and unconditional attention to a baby must be based on appropriate economic underpinnings (and/or state support) and responsibility for only few children. The mind-minded caregiving mode needs verbal elaborativeness based on high formal education.

However, this life style is grossly unrepresentative for the world's population [7,8], so that the adaptiveness of attachment theory's conception of relationship for the majority of this globe's inhabitants, which is implied by attachment theory's claim of its evolutionary basis, must be seriously questioned. Although basic questions of the representativeness of attachment theory have already been raised 1984 by Michael Lamb and colleagues [9], attachment theory has been surprisingly resistant to cultural corrections [10,11^{**}]. However, during the last couple of years three books [12^{**},13^{**},14^{**}] have appeared that accumulate evidence from diverse cultural groups about alternative conceptions of attachment that redirect the attention to the ecocultural foundation of the human psychology. The next section summarizes the insights drawn from these collections of work.

Attachment relationships reconsidered

Even before attachment theory was formulated with its universalistic claim, cultural anthropologists and

psychologists had presented evidence about the different realities in which children grow and strive, focusing on the dependency of subsistence patterns and child rearing strategies [15,16]. Especially subsistence patterns with the distribution of workload and settlement structure are associated with household structure and composition which in turn leads to different caregiving patterns and practices [5^{**},17,18^{**}]. One obvious difference is the distribution of care and caretaking responsibilities. Attachment theory presupposes that the mother has the primary/exclusive caretaking role and responsibility; however, this is representative only for 3% of 150 small scale societies that Weisner and Gallimore [19] assessed with holocultural ratings. The majority of children living on this planet is taken care of by multiple caretakers, mainly siblings and other related older children and adolescents [6^{**},20^{**}], so that multiple caretaking arrangements and alloparenting are widespread cross-culturally.

However, multiple caregiving can consist of a multiplicity of arrangements of caretakers and responsibilities. The mother may play a special role among other caregivers, be equal to others, or may not be a special caretaker at all. Moreover these arrangements may vary over time. For example, an Aka foraging mother plays an important role during the infant's first year of life, but reduces the amount of time and the frequency of contact thereafter substantially. Overall Aka children show attachment behaviors to about 6 people out of 20 with whom they are in daily contact [21]. The caregiving environment may change abruptly as described by Cora DuBois [22]. In the Alorese community, the nurturing relationship during the first year of life suddenly declines to complete inattention by the mother and even to the point of potential food deprivation. The primary attachment figure may not be the biological mother at all like in the Nigerian Hausa [23]. Or as in the Efe, multiple attachment relationships may be developed simultaneously that are similar in importance and significance [6^{**}].

However, it is not only the number of reliable caretakers and the hierarchy/or equality/functionality between these caretakers, it is especially the difference in psychological message about the definition and function of attachment relationships which needs reconsideration. Multiple attachment relationships must differ in form, function, and dynamics from monotropic one-to-one arrangements.

If we take the development of security and trust as the essence of forming attachment relationships, it certainly makes a difference whether these developmental processes are constructed in an exclusive dyadic relationship or embodied in a relational network. The development of trust within a social network rather than with a single caretaker extends the range of trusting relationships and thus promotes security as a contextual/environmental dimension, rather than a personality characteristic or an

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