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Introduction: attachment theory in a nutshell

What is attachment on the species-specific level?

Attachment can be defined at two levels: the level of the species and the level of the dyad or individual (see Van IJzendoorn, 2021, for details of the following descriptions). On the level of the species, attachment is signifying an inborn bias to seek the protection of a conspecific in times of distress; in John Bowlby's words: 'To say of a child that he ... has an attachment to someone means that he is strongly disposed to seek proximity to and contact with a specific figure and to do so in certain situations, notably when he is frightened, tired or ill' (John Bowlby, 1969/1982, p. 371). Somewhat confusing is the term '*a specific figure*' that Bowlby used to describe a person to whom a child becomes attached. This term has been wrongly interpreted as implying that there would be only one (not *a*) caregiver who might serve as an attachment figure, and this individual would be the biological mother who is responsible for taking care of the child.

However, attachment theory and research have amply documented the ability of infants and children to become attached to more than one parent or caregiver, in a network of attachment relationships (Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2021). From an evolutionary perspective this makes a lot of sense because in early times the risk of death of a mother during and after childbirth was rather high (and in some parts of the world this risk is still high). Without alternative attachment figures the infant would have perished and the parents' 'inclusive fitness' would have suffered accordingly (Hrды, 2009). A biological tie between the attachment figure and the child is not a necessary condition for an attachment relationship. This has been documented in numerous studies on attachments in foster and adoptive families (Van IJzendoorn et al., 2020). Together with Harlow's infamous experiments on rhesus monkeys, adoption research

also showed that feeding is not necessary for an attachment relationship to develop and that 'contact comfort' or protective proximity is the indispensable fuel for the development of attachments.

What is attachment on the individual level?

The inborn bias to become attached is comparable to the inborn ability of the human species to learn a language and to communicate with conspecifics, which facilitates cooperation, cultural transmission of expertise, and survival in general. What specific language children are going to master is dependent on the environment or language community in which they happen to find themselves. 'Inborn' does not mean that the social and physical environment would not matter. On the contrary, interactions with the world are needed to bring about the latent talents and turn the potential competence into a performance such as an adequate speech act in the correct syntax and context.

The same is true for attachment relationships. Every newborn comes into the world with the competence to develop an attachment relationship. Every infant will become attached to one or more caregivers who may be able to regulate the child's (di-)stress and anxieties when these become overwhelming. Attachment figures modulate feelings of discomfort and stress going beyond the capacity of the child to self-regulate. But the quality of the attachment relationships is dependent on the social environment that might provide more or less continuous, sensitive, or stimulating interactions. Most parents and other caregivers provide 'good-enough' care (Van IJzendoorn et al., 2020) which creates a safe haven in the sense of protection against harm. However, not all of them provide a secure base to freely explore the world (Van IJzendoorn & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2021). Secure and insecure attachments might develop in such a caregiving arrangement, preparing the child for a specific future niche to which this individual child is expected to adapt.

It should be noted that the concepts of 'safe haven' and 'secure base' are often used in a somewhat confusing way. Safety is etymologically derived from the Latin word 'salvus', that is, the absence of injury, and security originates from 'se cura', that is, being without a care (Bowlby, 1969, as cited in Duschinsky, 2020; see also Chapter 7). That said, we submit that children have a species-specific innate bias to search for a safe haven but whether their individual attachments are secure or insecure at least partly depends on the quality of the care they receive.

Apart from the species-specific and individual levels of attachment, attachment at group level has been explored (e.g., attachment to school, religion, or state; see Granqvist, 2020; Marris, 1996; Ota, 2024), but currently this is very promising yet mostly preliminary work in progress that we will not discuss in this book.

Attachment networks: fathers and other caregivers

Attachment is not about the relationship between children and mothers specifically. About 3,000 years ago Homer described in the *Iliad* clear-cut attachment of Astyanax to his mother, father, and nurse. Homer narrates how Hector comes back from the battlefield with his shiny helmet and scares his son, who is on his mother's arm and huddles into her for safety (see Figure 0.1). Hector realises the cause of Astyanax's stress, pulls off his helmet, and gradually starts to interact. Astyanax soon becomes curious and initiates playful interaction with his father and nearby mother, Andromache. Not for long, however, because Hector must return to the battlefield to fight with Achilles who will defeat him and in a cruel way will drag his body around Troy in full view of his family and the other citizens (see also Chapter 6).

This tragic episode in the Trojan War makes clear that children become attached not only to their mother but also to their father, and possibly other caregivers such as nurses or nannies. Fathers have been neglected in developmental research in general and in attachment research as well, despite seminal work by Michael Lamb (2004). Due to societal changes like greater participation of women and mothers in the labour force, fathers' active involvement in raising their children has significantly increased in the past decades in most Western, industrialised nations, with a three- to six-fold increase in childcare involvement compared to their own fathers (Bakermans-Kranenburg et al., 2019). Parenting research lags behind this societal change, but the attention to fathers as parents is on the rise. While in the 1980s and 1990s 'inclusion' of both parents in studies often meant that the mother was observed in parent-child interactions and was asked to report on fathers' income, education, absence, or other characteristics that were then used as covariates in the analysis of mother's parenting and child outcomes, in the new century fathers themselves were more often observed. It is now acknowledged that fathers contribute independently from mothers to child development (e.g., Cowan et al., 2019; Perpetuo et al., 2023).

At the same time, this raises the question of how children deal with different attachment relationships (secure with one caregiver, insecure



Figure 0.1 Sergey Postnikov (1838–1880), *Farewell of Hector and Andromache*. Oil on canvas, 1863. The story of an attachment network told by Homer some 3,000 years ago in the *Iliad*. Public domain, Wikimedia Commons, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Postnikov_ProshGektora.jpg.

with the other, see Dagan et al., 2021) and, broader, how large a network of attachment relationships can be. We have argued that the attachment network may increase in size with the child's cognitive development. For the development of an attachment relationship, the child needs to

be able to distinguish a specific caregiver from other adults and to have a mental representation of the caregiver when not present. Managing distinct cognitive models of a large number of attachment figures, with accompanying expectations about behavioural *dos* and *don'ts* in those specific relationships, requires complex cognitive processes and may thus only be feasible for somewhat older children. Having said that, not every caregiver is an attachment figure, and not every social relationship is an attachment relationship. Teachers have primarily an educational role, but in kindergarten the relationship of the child with the teacher may have attachment components. The limiting factor to the size of attachment networks may not be the number of caregivers, but the opportunities that a child has to learn contingencies in relationships that have an attachment component (Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2021).

Child maltreatment

Sometimes, however, a safe haven and secure base is not established, with detrimental consequences for the child's physical and mental health. The first condition that hampers attachment development is family violence leading to child maltreatment, and the second is structural neglect in institutional settings. From an evolutionary perspective, Bowlby argued that: 'the more the social environment in which a human child is reared deviates from the environment of evolutionary adaptedness (which is probably father, mother, and siblings in a social environment comprising grandparents and a limited number of other known families), the greater will be the risk of his developing maladaptive patterns of social behaviour' (Bowlby, 1969/1982, p. 166). During millennia of human evolution children have not evolved to endure social environments with very abusive parenting or fragmented and neglectful care by too many different (non-genetically related) caregivers. They will wither away more severely the more violent, neglecting, or discontinuous their social environment happens to be (see, e.g., Hamilton, 1964, and Trivers, 1974, for the role of parent-offspring conflict).

The detrimental effects of institutional care and child maltreatment (Chapter 5) might teach us valuable lessons about the core propositions of attachment theory. The first lesson is that children need social interactions to grow up and develop their physical, social, and cognitive competences. Sufficient food and medical care are not enough to avoid serious developmental delays. Second, continuity of care arrangements is essential as fragmented care creates atypical attachments, growing insecurity, and increasing distrust in others. Third, children and their parents or caregivers

need a small and reliable social network of individuals who offer the support they need in times of anxiety, stress, distress, or illness. Last, most children may recover from early issues with attachment (Chapter 14). A drastic change from a detrimental institutional environment to a supportive family environment leads to fast catch-up growth in most developmental domains, including attachment. According to attachment theory safe, stable and shared (Triple S) care is essential for child development.

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