

● REACTION

## **The Application of Attachment Theory to Counseling Psychology**

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We are encouraged by the attention of counseling psychologists to attachment theory and research. The literature on attachment in late adolescence and adulthood has burgeoned in recent years, and there is every sign that it will continue to accumulate rapidly. Given the likelihood of continued enthusiasm for attachment theory and research, we have chosen to highlight issues that we believe are crucial to the advancement of work on attachment in general, and to its application to counseling psychology in particular.

### **CONCEPTUAL ISSUES IN ATTACHMENT RESEARCH**

It is essential to distinguish between attachment styles, whether defined in terms of relationship schema (internal working models) or characteristic strategies for gaining security in close relationships, and the quality of specific attachment relationships. These two approaches to conceptualizing attachment in adulthood are often used interchangeably, although logically they are independent. An individual may have secure working models of attachment and an insecure primary attachment relationship, or vice versa. We were pleased to see that Blustein, Prezioso, and Schulteiss (this issue) distinguished secure relationships and the felt security provided by working models in their propositions linking attachment security and career development. They hypothesized that access to security through either source will facilitate career development. The next step is to consider how these two forms of security are conceptually related: Do they additively contribute to adjustment, do working models mediate the relationship between secure parental relationships and adjustment (or vice versa), or do the two forms of security interact in the prediction of adjustment?

A related conceptual concern is the definition of an attachment relationship. Attachment relationships are typically defined in terms of the following

components: strong and enduring emotional ties, a desire to maintain proximity with the attachment figure and anxiety when that proximity is threatened or lost, and the desire to use the attachment figure as a source of support under conditions of threat, and as a secure base from which to confidently engage in other activities (e.g., Ainsworth, 1989; Hazan & Zeifman, 1994). Hazan and Zeifman (1994) found that adult attachments are most commonly directed toward romantic partners, although parents, other family members, and close friends also serve as attachment figures, especially in the absence of a long-term sexual relationship. These researchers also reported that, on average, it took two years for romantic relationships to take on all the characteristics of an attachment relationship.

Based on these findings, we question how meaningful it is to apply an attachment framework to a whole range of relationships, including short-term therapeutic relationships, supervisory and mentoring relationships, and work relationships. We acknowledge that attachment patterns may influence behavior in a wide range of social situations (through characteristic interaction patterns, information processing biases, etc.) and that many social relationships share features with attachment relationships (such as the provision of support). But attachment is only one aspect of relational behavior and, we suspect, is only a key aspect of relational behavior in a narrow subset of relationships, notably parent-child relationships and long-term sexual relationships. We caution against the indiscriminate extension of attachment notions to social relationships that may be better understood in terms of other conceptual models. Where researchers and theorists wish to make a case for the broader applicability of attachment theory, they need to clearly indicate how attachment is related to, and in some way adds to, other relational constructs such as social support, social competencies, working alliance, and relationship satisfaction. Such conceptual clarity can then guide the selection of measures and the interpretation of findings.

At the same time, we caution against an overly narrow definition of attachment relationships. In the field of adult attachment, there has been a tendency to focus on romantic relationships (e.g., Hazan & Shaver, 1994), and in the field of adolescent attachment, there has been a tendency to focus on parent-adolescent relationships (see Kenny & Rice, this issue). The little research examining attachment hierarchies in adulthood (e.g., Hazan & Zeifman, 1994; Trinke & Bartholomew, 1995) suggests that, especially for late adolescents and young adults, both parent-child and romantic/peer relationships commonly serve attachment needs. We recommend that researchers interested in adolescent adjustment take both attachment domains into consideration (e.g., Armsden & Greenberg, 1987; Blain, Thompson, &

Whiffen, 1993), and that the possible interactions of attachment experiences in these two domains be explored.

The measurement of attachment in adolescents and adults continues to be problematic (Bartholomew, 1994; Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994; Bartholomew & Shaver, in press; see also Kenny & Rice, this issue; Lopez, this issue). Some measures focus on the quality of attachment relationships (e.g., the Parental Attachment Questionnaire [PAQ]; Kenny, 1987) and others assess attachment models or styles (e.g., the Adult Attachment Interview [AAI], Main & Goldwyn, 1985). Attachment measures differ in the content domains assessed (family, peer, or romantic relationships), the specificity with which they define attachments (from single relationships to a general model), and in the form they take (concurrent or retrospective self-reports, projective, observational, and interview measures). In addition, some measures focus on security of attachment (e.g., Kenny, 1987), some assess dimensions underlying attachment such as anxiety and avoidance (e.g., Simpson, Rholes, & Nelligan, 1992), and some assess different patterns or styles of attachment (e.g., Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Further complicating the picture, there are a number of different classification schemes in use (e.g., Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Main, Kaplan, & Cassidy, 1985; Sperling & Berman, 1991).

We want to emphasize the importance of measurement issues. There is little literature exploring how the various attachment measures relate to one another and, where comparisons have been carried out, the results are not always encouraging (e.g., Borman, & Cole, 1993). And yet, in each of the articles in this volume, studies using a variety of potentially unrelated measures are cited together, implying that the findings from the various studies converge.

Some of the articles also differ in the bodies of literature cited. Lopez's overview of contemporary attachment theory reviews literature in the research traditions of Hazan and Shaver (1987) and Main et al. (1985). These two traditions are largely independent and differ in a number of systematic ways (Bartholomew & Shaver, in press), but both are extensions of the childhood attachment literature exploring distinct patterns of attachment. In contrast, the literature cited in Kenny and Rice's article on adjustment in late adolescence comes, for the most part, from a third tradition of attachment research that has tended to rely on self-reports of the quality of attachment to parents and to focus on populations of adolescents and young adults.

It could be argued that similar findings with different measures should give us confidence in the usefulness of attachment theory in the various domains reviewed. But, where there is little or no evidence of overlap among the attachment measures used in different studies, the individual studies fail

to form a coherent body of research that could justify being used to guide counseling practice.

Attachment research has focused almost exclusively on identifying correlates of attachment. Specifying and testing conceptual models of how attachment is connected to these correlates has only recently begun. For example, Carnelley, Pietromonaco, and Jaffe (1994) tested a model of how adult attachment and depression mediate the associations between childhood experiences with parents and relationship functioning. Similarly, Collins and Read (1994) proposed a model in which activated working models influence cognitive and emotional responses which, in turn, interact to predict behavioral responses. In each of the domains discussed in this issue, it will be important to test competing models that specify how attachment influences variables of interest. For example, do adults who are insecurely attached to their romantic partners experience relationship distress that leads to work adjustment problems? Do these adults filter interpersonal information at work through negative working models, then behave in accordance with such models and thus develop work adjustment problems independent of relationship distress outside the work place? In addition, as Kenny and Rice (this issue) suggest, the development and testing of such conceptual models will allow researchers to assess the utility of attachment variables in combination with other more established variables. We expect that in many domains multivariate models that include attachment variables together with other theoretically meaningful variables will prove most informative.

### **APPLYING ATTACHMENT THEORY TO COUNSELING PSYCHOLOGY**

All of the authors advocate at least some application of attachment theory and research to counseling practice. Counseling psychologists interested in applying attachment theory to practice should be aware that a) the majority of extant research is basic rather than applied, b) the research is compromised by the conceptual and measurement problems described above, c) few studies prospectively predict outcomes, and d) the observed associations tend to be moderate at best, with few researchers calculating effect sizes. More research, especially applied research, is necessary before firm recommendations for practice are appropriate.

As we read the articles, we thought of a number of questions for applied research. To what extent do counseling sessions focus on attachment themes and how is this focus related to client change, working alliance, and client satisfaction? What counseling approaches are most appropriate for various

attachment problems? What is the value of discussing childhood attachment relationships in counseling? Is it more useful to help clients to earn security through revising working models? To provide a secure base from which they can explore new ways of interacting or to teach clients skills for establishing secure attachment relationships outside of the therapeutic relationship?

Although the breadth of the applicability of attachment theory is an empirical question, we agree with Pistole and Watkins (this issue) that attachment is most clearly applicable to struggles with emotionally important relationships, homesickness, and other active attachment behavior. We would elaborate on this list to include couples counseling, family counseling, abusive adult relationships, parenting, grief counseling, loss in general, and child abuse. In some of these areas, work is already in progress. For example, Johnson and Greenberg have used attachment theory to inform an emotionally focused model of couples therapy (Johnson, 1986; Johnson & Greenberg, 1992), Alexander (1992, 1993) has applied attachment theory to understanding the long-term effects of child sexual abuse, Dutton and his colleagues have applied the theory to the study of abusive marital relationships (e.g., Dutton, Saunders, Starzomski, & Bartholomew, 1994), and Lieberman and colleagues have designed an intervention for anxiously attached parent-child dyads (Lieberman, 1992; Lieberman, Weston, & Pawl, 1991).

All of the authors acknowledge the potential importance of sex and cultural differences. The fact that we know relatively little about how such differences may impact on adolescent and adult attachment is another reason to be cautious about applying attachment theory to practice. The research base in attachment is also largely limited to samples of college students and, to a lesser extent, parent-child dyads and romantic partners. We encourage counseling psychologists to conduct research on a broader range of samples, including younger adolescents, nonstudent adolescents and young adults, the middle-aged, and the elderly. We also agree with Blustein et al. (this issue) that qualitative research could advance our understanding of role of attachment in counseling psychology.

In conclusion, we are not convinced that attachment theory has the potential to provide an *organizing framework* or *metaperspective* for counseling theory and practice. In a 1994 *Psychological Inquiry* article, Hazan and Shaver presented the case that attachment theory could offer an integrative framework for the study of adult close relationships (largely romantic relationships). Duck (1994) and other commentators argued that attachment theory may not be adequate to address the many levels of analysis necessary to fully understand close relationships. The proposition that attachment theory could one day provide an integrative framework for the entire field of counseling psychology is even less tenable.

We do believe, however, that attachment theory shows promise for informing some aspects of counseling psychology. Years of programmatic basic and applied research are needed before we will know the full range of its applicability. In the meantime, we hope that counseling psychologists will pursue this exciting field of research, but will restrain themselves from prematurely applying attachment theory to their counseling practice.

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