

**“Best Be the Ties that Bind: Bonding and Attachment”**

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In discussions of parenting, attachment is a highly successful concept. Attachment generally refers to the existence and formation of emotional bonds between children and their caregivers. More importantly, attachment behavior is used to describe the array of behaviors and emotions expected of a parent, usually a mother, to promote the healthy attachment of infants. The concept of attachment has been very fruitful for researchers and others who participate in attachment theory. The quality of early attachment of a child has been used to explain an array of child and adult behaviors. For example, secure attachments are associated with self confidence, assertiveness, and successful friendships. Those who suffer from poor attachment are found to be more aggressive, dependent, and controlling (Carlson and Strouffe 1995). More importantly, attachment is believed to be a repeating cycle. Parents hand down the quality of their personal attachment to the next generation (Karen 1994).

Given the presumed importance of attachment for the future life of the child, attachment research has focused on the source of children's attachment, their caregivers. While contemporary attachment discourses assume that a child may attach with any primary caregiver, most attachment research focuses upon mothers. The behaviors of mothers of securely attached children were compared to the behaviors of mothers of the anxiously attached. Attentive mothers had securely attached children (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, and Wall 1978). The conclusions are obvious. Mothering is destiny, or at least, predictive. The psychological, behavioral, and even academic performance of children could be improved through proper parenting or more specifically, proper mothering. Most importantly, attachment theory implied that mothering itself was the result of successful attachment, often referred to as bonding, by mothers for children.

This paper will examine the social processes that lead to the discovery of attachment. Influenced by Foucauldian ideas, this paper takes a neutral stand on the “truth” of attachment. I am not interested in the truth of attachment but rather the social consequence of its truth. In other words, I believe attachment is a story we tell ourselves. By studying the social history of attachment, we can see that the process by which attachment became true was inextricably linked to the regulation of mothers. As attachment attained the status of objective reality, it became an important resource for a project of normalization of behavior. Not only were the reputed objects of attachment research normalized, that is, the children, but their mothers were also subjected to this project of normalization. In the end, the truth of attachment established a disciplinary regimen for mothers.

### **The Discovery of Attachment**

The truth of attachment is largely accomplished through studying the absence of attachment. Attachment has its roots in the institution. The importance of attachment was key to answering the question of why institutionalized children who received adequate care in terms of their physical needs often suffered severe developmental delays and even higher levels of mortality than non-institutionalized children. Early attachment theorists, such as John Bowlby, claimed that what the children lacked was love and affection. They argued that maternal deprivation, that is, the lack of a loving caregiver, was responsible for the difficulties of infants raised in institutions. As Diana Eyre notes in her critique, it is revealing that these infants were diagnosed as suffering from *maternal* deprivation, as opposed to any other type of deprivation (Eyre 1996). But it is also important to note that maternal deprivation is defined as the absence of a mother. At this point, the quality of parenting has not come into question, yet.

The next important step in the development of the concept of attachment was a refinement of what attachment really was. Using a psychoanalytical framework, Bowlby had argued that the initial attachment formed by a child for its caregivers was most significant for future well-being. To develop successful attachment, a child needs a present and emotionally involved caregiver. More importantly in Bowlby's point of view, the child needs to develop trust in its caregivers. Yet at this time, attachment had not yet attained a high degree of truth. Bowlby's work was persuasive to many yet largely theoretical and speculative.

To attain the status of truth, attachment required the work of Mary Ainsworth. The greatest achievement of Mary Ainsworth was the operationalization of the concept of attachment. Mary Ainsworth observed the behaviors of mothers and infants and developed her famed "Strange Situation" test. The test, which involved the temporary separation of a toddler from its mother was used to identify the degree to which a child was emotionally attached (Ainsworth and Wittig, 1969). Securely attached children allowed their mothers to comfort them, while insecurely attached children cried miserably in their mothers' arms. Children classified as avoidant ignored their mothers completely. More importantly, the degree of a child's attachment was strongly correlated with the quality of her mothering. A highly sensitive mother who was most aware and responsive of her infant's needs was most likely to have a securely attached child.

The development of the Strange Situation test was significant for several reasons. First of all, the Strange Situation test helped establish the empirical reality of attachment in children. A vague concept attained an objective reality because it could now be measured. The creation of the three attachment styles allowed children to be classified and made intervention a possibility. Researchers who followed were able to use the categories to predict many future behaviors, and

they thus contributed to the project of establishing their status as truth. More importantly, for the purposes of this conference, the Strange Situation test directly implicated mothers. By classifying infants, the quality of mothering could be measured. The work of Mary Ainsworth contributed to the expansion of the problem of maternal deprivation to include children with mothers. Amongst attachment researchers, there was a growing awareness that a child raised by its mother might still suffer developmental delays such as failure to thrive. In other words, a child with a mother could suffer from maternal deprivation. The meaning of maternal deprivation thus shifted from indicating the absence of a mother to indicating mothering inadequacy.

For Bowlby and his followers, the question was then how to assure that the child had an involved caregiver. Bowlby felt that caring for child was difficult work and so required the development of attachment by the mother, to assure that she would do the hard work of childcare. Bowlby was not the only one to be exploring the other side of the attachment equation, the attachment of mothers to children.

### **The Discovery of Bonding**

At the same time that Mary Ainsworth was developing her Strange Situation test, another set of researchers were pondering the problem of child abuse. A group of pediatricians were noticing that abused children appeared to be more likely to be premature or to have been born by C-section (Helfer 1974). Failure to thrive was also believed to be more common among premature or hospitalized newborns (Klaus and Kennell 1976). Informed by the work of attachment theorists, this group of researchers came to the conclusion that the mistreatment of children was related to the early separation of mother and infants, necessitated by the medical

procedures that had occurred shortly after birth. In other words, the mothers had failed to develop an attachment for their children after birth.

In the classic 1976 statement, Klaus and Kennell first used the term “bonding” to refer to “the development of attachment in the opposite direction, from parent to infant. . . .(p. 1).” Parallel to attachment research on children, bonding researchers also classified the behavior of mothers, suggesting that there were bonded, or attached mothers, and unattached mothers. Initially, the reality of this form of attachment was established through research on the behaviors of animal species. Utilizing an evolutionary framework, bonding researchers argued that animals and humans have the same problem of caring for the young and this has led to the “evolution of similar patterns of maternal behavior in humans and other animals (Trause, Klaus, and Kennell 1976, p. 16)”. Evidence of attachment of animal mothers could be witnessed in their loving attention to their young. Because attachment could be witnessed in animals, attachment was conceived as an instinctual process by these early researchers. The existence of mothering instincts in animals was evidence for mothering instincts and bonding processes in humans. In other words, ethology was used to argue for the existence of maternal attachment.

However, at the same time researchers were establishing attachment as a natural process, they were keenly aware that maternal attachment could be a problematic process, with lasting consequences for children. Again, the truth of attachment was largely constructed in its absence. Much of the early research on bonding tended to focus on the absence of maternal attachment. Special importance was given to the fact that animals failed to show mothering behavior if they were separated from their young. In fact, rats and goats would reject their young if separated from them immediately after birth (Trause, Klaus, and Kennell 1976). This was attributed to the absence of a maternal bond. Researchers sought to isolate the hormones that would be

responsible for mothering behavior and the maternal bond. They found that postpartum hormones seemed to increase maternal responsiveness in an animal, in other words, her attachment to her young. If an animal was not introduced to her young during this critical period, it was believed that she was likely to reject her child or engage in troubled maternal behavior. A “critical period” for bonding in animals was posited. It was assumed that the bonding process for humans would be the same. The reality of bonding was established due to the “reality” of bonding in animals.

Further evidence for the existence of bonding was established through the scientific observation of human mothers. Behaviors such as “fondling, kissing, cuddling, and prolonged gazing” were used as indicators of attached mothers (Klaus and Kennell 1976, p. 2). But the most significant evidence for the existence of bonding was found in examples of the separation of mother and infant. For example, controlled studies were used to suggest that improved maternal behaviors could be accomplished by increasing the time a mother spent with her newborn immediately after birth.

It is important to note that the scientific accuracy of these studies was challenged. Today, few believe that there is a critical period for bonding in humans. However, the view that attachment is an objective category of human experience is thriving. Attachment theory continues to be a major field within the discipline of psychology. Numerous articles and books are published on attachment and its consequences. Attachment is also a prominent concept for understanding intimate human relationships as well as predicting children’s future behaviors. The popularity of bonding as a concept also continues to thrive. The leading parenting gurus, Dr. Spock, Dr. Sears, and Penelope Leach, all devote sections to the importance of bonding with one’s child. The American *Parents* magazine and its rival *Parenting* have published many

articles on this topic. Most significantly, many have found the truth of attachment concepts are useful for intervening in human relationships. As I have shown, discourse on attachment always implicates mothers. Now, I will consider the social consequences of the “truth” of attachment.

### **Foucault and Attachment**

According to Foucault, scientific discourses form a regime of truth that governs the normal and desirable ways to think, act, and feel (Foucault 1973). As social scientists define, classify, and organize people, they generate a set of truths about what is normal behavior and what is not. These guidelines for behavior become truths that govern and regulate us. In other words, we are changed by scientific discourses. Attachment concepts have had a great impact on our understandings of the relationships between mothers and children.

The most important conclusion of attachment research is that it is not enough for a mother to be present to prevent maternal deprivation. It is a popular finding amongst attachment researchers that a third of American middle class children suffer from insecure attachment and an even higher percentage of children in poverty suffer from insecure attachment. Attachment concepts promote a model of correct mothering. To prevent insecure attachment, mothers must be responsive and attentive to their children. Attachment discourse forms a disciplinary regime that requires that mothers and those around them monitor their behavior and emotions. The risks to children are too great to leave the mothering to the mothers.

Because all women are presumed to be at risk of becoming an unattached mother, the opportunities for regulation of their behavior are multifold. Because bonding was a process that was viewed as a “dangerous opportunity (Klaus, et.al 1995)”, it is suggested that new mothers be monitored for evidence of attachment problems. For example, during pregnancy, practitioners were instructed to watch for behaviors that would suggest a rejection of the pregnancy such as “a

preoccupation with physical appearance or a negative self-perception, excessive emotional withdrawal or mood swings, unusual anxiety or feelings of depression, excessive physical complaints, absence of any response to quickening, or the lack of any preparatory behavior during the last trimester. (Klaus et. al 1995 pp. 8-9).”

Attachment discourse also sought to regulate the practices of birth. The behaviors of animals immediately after birth as well as the cultural practices of less developed societies were used as models for the guidelines for behavior towards labor and birth. Women were advised to seek emotional support in labor and to avoid the use of unnecessary pain medication in labor. Instructions for new mothers meant that they must look into the eyes of their infant, hold their child, preferably with skin-to-skin contact, and breastfeed the child so that “bonding hormones” would be released. After birth, it was important that the mother be protected so she could devote herself almost completely to becoming acquainted with her new baby (Klaus, et. al 1995). A mother needed to be sheltered for “at least three or four weeks (Klaus, et al 1995, p. 124)”.

Regulating thoughts was another important area of discipline. To facilitate attachment of the child, a new mother must be able to put herself in the place of her infant so that she may sense its needs. This requires that she has no unresolved issues related to her own parenting or her child. Consequently, she must be willing to discuss her feelings so that the issues do not interfere with bonding. Ideally, she must plan to remain home with her child so that the bond is not jeopardized. If she must work, it is suggested that she is careful to think of her child throughout the day so that the bond is maintained. In the end, the new mother, in the words of Foucault, “assumes responsibility for the constraints of power (Foucault, 1977, p. 203).”

## **Discussion**

For this project, I found the insights of Michel Foucault particularly useful. It is clear that a “regime of truth (Foucault 1980)” about attachment has been established by doctors, psychologists and the popular press. By utilizing animal studies, clinical observations of new mothers, and psychological studies of children, researchers were able to discover the norms of mothering behavior. This knowledge brought two new categories of person into being: the attached mother and the unattached mother. While the attached mother represented the happy natural state of affairs, as witnessed by her presence in past and primitive societies, the unattached mother was responsible for many of the ills of modern society such as child abuse and juvenile delinquency. Since any mother could become an unattached mother, vigilance was required of everyone, regardless of her class or education.

The story of family life told by attachment discourse must also be highlighted. It is obvious that attachment presumes a traditional family with traditional gender roles. Assigning childcare to women comes to appear natural within attachment discourse. While attachment concepts are gender neutral for the most part, bonding has tended to focus on women, probably because of its reliance on biological explanations. In addition, the total absorption and breastfeeding of a newborn child attachment discourse requires, can often best be accomplished through the financial support of a breadwinning husband. Although to be fair, many of the advocates of bonding discourse do argue for greater parental leave and state support of families.

I find that the greatest irony of attachment discourse is the way the discourse ultimately destroys what it seeks to defend. Attachment between a mother and child is one of the greatest intimacies. By applying scientific scrutiny to the relationship between a mother and her child, intimate relationships are rationalized. Mothers are judged and judge themselves. Attachment cannot be natural but is instead governed by the directives of science.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, you may be wondering if I believe there a truth to attachment? There probably is but we must remember that our access to the truth is always mediated by the social methods that we use to arrive at the truth. And I believe that we must be aware of the social consequences of the truth. Attachment has attained the status of truth with serious implications for contemporary interpretations of motherhood.

My choice of theoretical perspective for this project is not an accident. By using a post-structuralist approach to studying attachment, I hope that exposing the social history of attachment will reveal the contingency of even well established scientific concepts. More importantly, by considering the social consequences of the concepts we use, it is my hope that in addition to considering the empirical veracity of a concept, we will also consider the social implications of the concepts we use. It is important that we recognize that scientific research not only studies behavior but creates behavior as well.

Observers have noted that there has been an intensification of the demands of parenting. Sharon Hays coined the term intensive mothering ideology to refer to a widespread belief that mothering must be in her words “child-centered, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labor intensive, financially expensive ideology in which mothers are primarily responsible for the nurture and development of the sacred child and in which children's needs take precedence over the individual needs of their mothers.” (p. 46). Other research has found that American mothers spend more time with their children today than 30 years ago (Bianchi). While there are many factors that may have contributed to this change in definition of mothering, I believe that we must also consider the impact of “truthful” scientific discourses such as that of attachment. Attachment concepts explicitly endorse the sensitive, responsive motherhood that is consistent

with the ideology that Sharon Hays reports. But it is important to remember there is no patriarchal conspiracy behind attachment research. Attachment concepts have often been allies of feminist arguments for greater maternity leave, more public support of breast feeding, and reform of birth practices. Instead, it is the truth of attachment that undergirds contemporary understandings of motherhood. To challenge the ideology of intensive motherhood will require that we also address objective scientific discourse.