Attachment Theory and the Development of Social Competence

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Early interactions between caregivers and infants are shown to affect children's social development and thus, social competence. In one study, researchers defined social competence as social skills, peer interaction quality, and social status (Groh et al., 2014). These broad dimensions include components such as one's ability to form close relationships, their efforts to initiative interaction with others, social problem-solving skills, interpersonal awareness, perspective taking abilities, and likability (Groh et al., 2014). Developing social competence has been found to have far-reaching implications. For instance, those who develop social competence are at a lower risk for behavioral and emotional issues, are more likely to excel academically, rate themselves as happier, and live longer (Junge et. al.,2020). On the other hand, poor social competence increases individuals' chances of developing a range of psychopathologies, including social anxiety, and can also lead to aggression, bullying, and peer rejection (Junge et. al.,2020).

Social competence can be seen throughout the lifespan when individuals engage in interactions with others. However, the specific skills and abilities expected for an individual to be characterized as socially competent are specific to their life stage. For instance, in infancy, interactions with caregivers that include social responses, such as smiling and gazing, and display an awareness of social stimuli would denote social competence (Junge et. al.,2020). However, when an infant enters early childhood more sophisticated behaviors, such as helping, sharing, and an increased tendency to engage in social play would signify social competence (Junge et. al.,2020).

The development of social competence can be understood through the lens of the attachment theory. The attachment theory was created by John Bowlby, who first wrote about his ideas concerning attachment in 'The Nature of a Child's Tie to His Mother' and later expanded on these ideas through his work 'Attachment and Loss' (Ainsworth et. al., 2015). Inspired by Bowlby's proposal of the attachment theory, Mary Ainsworth developed the Strange Situation which was a 20-mintue laboratory procedure designed to stimulate infants' attachment behaviors (Newman & Newman, 2023). Through her work with the Strange Situation, Ainsworth was able to contribute to the attachment theory by distinguishing four patterns of infant attachment and identifying unique caregiving behaviors that led to their emergence (Newman & Newman, 2023). According to the attachment theory, infants develop different patterns of attachment depending on the quality and responsiveness of care they receive (Newman & Newman, 2023). This leads to the formation of internal working models that guide their expectations and subsequent behaviors (Newman & Newman, 2023). The implications of one's attachment has been found to not only affect the expectations they have formed about their relationships with caregivers, but about themselves and others (Newman & Newman, 2023).

Bowlby created the attachment theory due to his belief that the recognized theories of the time failed to fully explain the behaviors he observed in young children, most notably separation anxiety and distress (Bowlby, 2008). Prior to Bowlby's attachment theory, it was held that bonds between caregivers and infants developed mainly through food and feeding rituals (Bowlby, 2008). However, Konrad Lorenz's work on imprinting in goslings and Harry Harlow's work on the behaviors of rhesus monkeys helped support the idea that other factors can lead to attachment behaviors (Bowlby, 2008). For example, Harlow's research showed that rhesus monkeys preferred the comfort of cloth surrogate 'mothers' over wired surrogate 'mothers' that provided

food (Bowlby, 2008). This inspired Bowlby to apply animal research to explain the development of human attachments. Subsequent research by Ainsworth assisted in supporting the attachment theory's merit through its identification of specific caregiving behaviors that lead to distinct patterns of infant attachment (Ainsworth, 1985).

A main concept of the attachment theory is that infants engage in signaling behaviors, including crying and visual tracking, with the goal of maintaining proximity to their caregivers for protection and comfort (Newman & Newman, 2023). Depending on the quality and responsiveness of care infants receive, they will develop one of the four attachment patterns identified by Ainsworth. The development of a secure attachment is proposed to lead to the most positive developmental outcomes and results from caregivers who are consistent in responding to their infant's distress (Ainsworth, 1985). However, insecure attachments including anxious-avoidant, anxious -resistant, and disorganized attachment, are proposed to occur from less consistent or quality responses to an infant's distress (Ainsworth, 1985). Additionally, these lead to distinct behavioral patterns across contexts. For instance, mothers of anxious resistant infants may respond to their infants' bids for attention in unpredictable ways causing their children to display caution and wariness in unfamiliar situations (Newman & Newman, 2023).

Key constructs of the attachment theory include the proposal of the attachment behavior system and internal working models. According to Bowlby, the attachment behavior system is innate in all humans and influences them to seek proximity to their caregivers for protection and comfort (Ainsworth, 1985). It is activated at different intensities depending on the situation and context. For instance, the attachment behavior system is likely to be activated in situations including when a child is separated from their caregiver, feels threatened, or is alarmed

(Ainsworth, 1985). Bowlby proposed that the attachment behavior system leads infants to form expectations about the care they will receive, which become internalized into a working model of attachment (Ainsworth, 1985). In time, infants internal working models also comprise expectations about themselves and the environment which further shape their actions (Ainsworth, 1985).

There are several mechanisms that lead to the development of attachment. Of primary importance are caregiving behaviors as they shape infants' expectations (Newman & Newman, 2023). These lead to the development of internal working models and distinct patterns of attachment. However, infants also play a role in their development of attachment by using signaling behaviors that prompt their caregiver's response (Newman & Newman, 2023). In this way, infants initiate and seek interactions that can lead to and further an attachment relationship. It is important to note that therapeutic intervention is also a mechanism of change and development as it can allow patients to explore their internal working models and reappraise them while using the therapist as a 'secure base' (Bowlby, 2008).

The attachment behavior system plays a critical role in instigating the formation of attachments as it helps infants and caregivers form a relationship through infant signaling and caregiver responses (Newman & Newman, 2023). This relationship enables caregivers to have the opportunity to influence their infant's development based on the consistency and quality of their responses to their infants' signals. Research on the attachment theory has shown that "there is today impressive and mounting evidence that the pattern of attachment an individual develops during the years of immaturity is profoundly influenced by the way his parents or other parental figures treat him" (Bowlby, 2008, p.122). Thus, development is shaped by both nature and

nurture according to the theory of attachment. From birth, infants engage in innate attachment behaviors intended to bring their caregivers near for security and protection (Newman & Newman, 2023). These attachment behaviors are the result of a natural human tendency to form attachments. However, the quality of attachment an individual forms is in large part determined by the nurturing they receive from their caregivers (Bowlby, 1969). This is not to say that infants play a passive role in their development. Rather, as Ainsworth noted from her research in Ganda, infants played an active role in the development of their attachments through their own initiative by seeking interaction with their caregivers (Bowlby, 1969). For instance, infant behaviors such as smiling, rooting, crying, cuddling, and grasping all serve to initiate caregiver responses and the subsequent formation of attachment (Newman & Newman, 2023).

According to the attachment theory, individuals are born with an internal, biological motivation to seek protection and comfort by keeping caregivers near to them (Newman & Newman, 2023). As infants continue to develop, they form internal working models which continue to influence their attachment behaviors and thus overall development (Ainsworth, 1985). Although individuals play an active role in their own development, their environment also plays a crucial role in influencing the pattern of attachment they develop. Differences in the attachment of infants exposed to similar environments can be attributed to genetic differences (Bowlby, 1969). However, as environmental variation is introduced, differences in infants' attachment patterns are likely to result. Bowlby expressed the active role the environment has on the development of attachment when he stated, "once the environment of different children is made more different, the effects on development of environment soon become evident" (Bowlby, 1969, p.296).

In his work, ‘Attachment and Loss,’ Bowlby proposed that the development of attachment occurs in four distinct phases. These phases help explain how the development of attachment unfolds over time. The first phase Bowlby named ‘Orientation and Signals with Limited Discrimination of Figure’ (Bowlby, 1969). During this phase, which typically lasts from birth to around twelve weeks, infants engage in orienting behaviors towards adults in close proximity to them, but rarely discriminate who they direct their signals to (Bowlby, 1969). Phase two, ‘Orientation and Signals Directed Towards One (or More) Discriminated Figure(s),’ lasts from around twelve weeks to six months of age (Bowlby, 1969). During this phase, infants still engage in friendly, orienting behaviors towards adults, but are more likely to direct these behaviors towards their mother (Bowlby, 1969). Phase three Bowlby named ‘Maintenance of Proximity to a Discriminated Figure by means of Locomotion as well as Signals’ (Bowlby, 1969). During this phase, infants increasingly direct their attachment behaviors towards their mothers now using their newly gained locomotor skills to follow her and use her as a secure base (Bowlby, 1969). Additionally, infants become more wary of strangers during this phase. It is also around this time that infants form their first internal working model of attachment that enables them to form expectations about how their caregiver will react to their distress (Newman & Newman, 2023). When infants are three years of age, they enter Bowlby’s fourth phase of attachment, ‘Formation of a Goal-corrected Partnership’ (Bowlby, 1969). At this point, infants’ attachment relationships become more complex as they become increasingly aware of the motives and goals of their attachment figures and how to influence them (Bowlby, 1969).

The changes that occur during the development of attachment are primarily internal and affect individuals mentally and emotionally. However, it is important to note that these mental and emotional changes also cause observable behavioral changes. For instance, children

characterized as anxious-resistant have an internal working model of their caregiver as inconsistent in responsiveness which leads them to develop greater emotional distress upon separation from their attachment figure (Ainsworth, 1985). As a result, these infants may show wariness in unfamiliar situations and exhibit less exploratory behavior (Ainsworth, 1985). Although there is somewhat of a linear path along which the development of attachment and its associated changes occur in childhood, the theory does not offer a view of development that is purely linear. For instance, infants are proposed to develop along the path set forth by Bowlby's phases of attachment. However, in later life, other factors can intervene to affect an individual's quality of attachment. For instance, therapeutic interventions and other relational experiences can assist in modifying an individual's attachment (Newman & Newman, 2023).

According to attachment theory, the period of early childhood is most critical for the development of attachments (Bowlby, 2008). Once infants form internal working models during their first year of life, their attachment patterns are resistant to change (Ainsworth, 1985). However, attachment continues to affect development throughout the lifespan and as mentioned previously, can be modified despite the internal working models resistance (Ainsworth, 1985). For instance, in her paper 'Attachments Beyond Infancy,' Ainsworth (1989) explained that major shifts can occur in attachment prompted by the hormonal changes of puberty leading to the search for attachment relationships with the opposite sex.

Several methods have been used to determine if an individual's pattern of attachment changes or remains stable over time. Repeating Ainsworth's Strange Situation with the same infant and caregiver after a short period of time is commonly used by researchers to determine changes in an infant's attachment (Ainsworth, 1985). However, this method cannot be used to

accurately identify changes in attachment after a child reaches two years as the Stange Situation may not activate the attachment behavior system with the same intensity (Ainsworth, 1985). Thus, researchers have devised other methods to evaluate change in attachment including interviews and self-reports (Bartholomew & Moretti, 2002). These have included the Adult Attachment Interview, the History of Attachments Interview, and the Peer Attachment Interview (Bartholomew & Moretti, 2002). Depending on the method chosen, researchers can determine changes in attachment through either qualitative data gained via observations and interviews, or from quantitative data gained via self-reports. However, it appears that many researchers have preferred the qualitative measures of data collection as they provide more insight into one's experiences and attachment patterns (Bartholomew & Moretti, 2002).

Tying the attachment theory back to the topic of social competence, it is evident the implications the theory has on social development. Through the attachment relationship an infant develops with their caregivers, they begin to share joint attention, practice self-regulation, and begin early forms of social communication. It is through these interactions that infants form their internal working models which guide their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors (Groh et al., 2014). In time, children's internal working models initially formed from the relationships with their caregivers come to influence their perceptions of themselves and others as well as how they relate to peers and approach social situations (Groh et al., 2014). Thus, the internal working models that children build of their primary attachment figures in early life can influence their expectations and social behaviors across different times and contexts (Ainsworth, 1985). Empirical research has provided evidence of the importance of childhood attachment for social development and competence. For instance, a meta-analysis of over 60 studies on parent-child attachment and the development of relationships with peers found that the attachment style

children developed with their caregivers in infancy predicted the quality and amount of close peer relationships they had until adolescence (Newman & Newman, 2023). Other research has shown that preschoolers with secure attachments typically develop close peer relationships more than their insecurely attached counterparts (Newman & Newman, 2023).

However, it is important to be aware of the limitations of applying attachment theory to explain social developmental outcomes. Although research has supported the importance of early attachment for later social behaviors and outcomes, the attachment theory may fail to consider other factors that also have the ability to impact social development. For instance, while focusing only on the attachment relationship between a parent and a child, the theory seemingly ignores the cognitive capacity of individuals to develop social skills through direct teaching or modeling. Additionally, the theory provides no explanation of how an individual's desire or motivation for social interaction can lead to behaviors that promote the development of social skills in spite of their attachment pattern.

Nonetheless, attachment theory suggests that the pattern of attachment a child forms from early interactions with their caregivers deeply affects their social competence in peer groups during early childhood (Vaughn, 2014). This has led to a large amount of research concerning the implications of attachment security and insecurity on the development of social competence. Results of these studies have strengthened the attachment theory's proposition of a link between early child-caregiver attachment and social competence. For instance, a meta-analytic review conducted by Groh et al. (2014) found a significant association between attachment security and social competence with peers in early childhood. Additionally, this study showed that attachment insecurity, regardless of subtype, had negative effects on the social

competence of children aged one to six (Groh et al., 2014). Another study conducted by Vaughn (2014) provided further support for the link between attachment security and social competence in young children aged four to six. In this study, preschool children with secure attachments to their caregivers were identified as ranking higher across all measures of social competence and found to exhibit more social, emotional, and cognitive skills that aided in their acceptance by peers (Vaughn, 2014). A potential limitation of these findings is that attachment security and social competence could be merely correlated rather than having a cause-and-effect relationship. However, more research would need to be conducted to determine if some third variable influenced both an individual's attachment pattern and social competence. In the future, the attachment theory could lead to an even greater understanding of the development of social competence by inspiring research on how interventions directed at child and caregiver attachment relationships may lead to more positive social outcomes.

In conclusion, through the attachment theory, Bowlby proposed ideas about how attachments between infants and caregivers develop, as well as the potential these attachments have to affect individuals' future development (Bowlby, 1969). Ainsworth furthered Bowlby's work by identifying four distinct patterns of attachment proposed to lead to different developmental outcomes. This led researchers to explore the attachment theory's proposal of the importance of attachment for positive social development. Much of this research has provided evidence in support for the theory's proposal that secure attachment leads to the development of social competence, whereas insecure attachments lead to poorer outcomes (Groh et al., 2014; Vaugh, 2014). As the attachment theory and its implications for development are becoming more recognized, it would be helpful if researchers focused on creating evidence-based interventions

that could enhance infant and caregiver attachment relationships with the goal of improving social outcomes.

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