Attachment & Multiculturalism: The Cultural Deficiency Model

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Abstract

The findings of attachment research are widely accepted and utilized across many disciplines. Clinicians, clinical supervisors, researchers and educators utilize attachment research findings to understand what is considered to be a fundamental feature of the human condition which is the basic need to experience closeness, warmth and validation. Attachment theory is the product of attachment research which has sculpted the landscape for understanding the importance of attunement in the parent-child relationship. Although attachment theory has helped to solidify this basic human need for attunement and warmth, attachment research has not given much attention to culture. Without attachment research being considerate of cultural influences on attachment, researchers, educators and clinicians can miss salient culturally relevant meanings of attachment that are cannot be generalized across all cultures. Furthermore, these cultural meanings can be pathologized when compared to general Eurocentric ideals and standards. This article critiques attachment theory by examining the original work of its founders John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth using the cultural deficiency model (CDM) which emphasizes monoculturalist orientation that sees the European Caucasian culture as the standard for all other cultural groups. From this perspective, without a cultural meaning of attachment, attachment theory can be insufficient if not harmful to minority populations. This study argues that a cultural meaning of attachment is a vital perspective that is lacking in the attachment literature and proposes a qualitative phenomenological approach using an African American family can be an effective approach in capturing such meaning.

Attachment

Attachment is understood as one of the most essential components of an individual's life, particularly in infancy and childhood and has significant implications for development throughout the lifespan in terms of internal working models (Bretherton, 1996; Bowldy, 1988; Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991). Internal working models significantly influence the perception of self and others and the ability to create and maintain healthy relationships. "To thrive emotionally," John Bowldy (1951) states, children need an intimate, "sensitively responsive" (Stevenson-Hinde, 2007), warm and consistent parent that is satisfying and enjoyable (Bretherton, 1996; Bretherton, 1992). This empirically tested thesis, ultimately known as attachment theory, has held up over decades providing a language and a conceptualization of the critical importance of the parent-child relationship early in life and implications thereafter. To further elucidate the importance of attachment theory, it serves as the foundation for one of the most widely used evidence based therapeutic approaches today, Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT).

Attachment theory, according to John Bowldy's early work, emphasis that the relationship between a child and their mother is essential in the development of mental health (Bretherton, 1996) and the development of functional, as opposed to dysfunctional, internal working models (Bretherton, 1996; Ainsworth and Bowldy, 1991). Internal working models are the mental and emotional representation of the self and, others and the quality of the relationship between the two (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991; Bretherton, 1992, Bretherton, 1997). Inge Bretherton (1997) states that internal working models are established in the early years of life and serve as the foundation to understanding relationships. When a parent or mother is sensitive (e.g., open, responsive and pleasant) to the needs of their child, the better developmental

outcomes are for that child such as social competency and their ability to appropriately trust

others (Bretherton, 1992). The less sensitive a mother is, the more likely there will be

maladaptive behaviors and poorer developmental outcomes for the child over the lifespan. This

is exemplified in John Bowldy study *Forty-Four Juvenile Thieves: Their Character and Home-*

Life and Mary Ainsworth's work in Uganda with mothers and their infants.

In John Bowlby's study, he identified 88 adolescent in the juvenile system, half were

identified as thieves, aquired a theft charge, and the other 44 were not. He wanted to examine

delinquency in youth due to the overwhelming statistic that about 90% of juvenile court cases at

the time were related to theft. Of the 44 participants identified as thieves, a trend emerged; these

individuals lacked a sensitive mother and experienced separation from their mother (Bowlby,

1944; Bretherton, 1992). In Mary Ainsworth's work in Uganda, which consisted of observing

Ganda women and their interactions with their infants, she identified three patterns which she

titled securely attached, insecurely attached and not yet attached infants (Bretherton, 1992;

Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991). Securely attached infants had sensitive parents while insecurely

attached infants did not. Mary Ainsworth later undertook a similar study titled The Baltimore

Project. In this project, she observed mothers before birth up until their child reached the age of

one (Bell and Ainsworth, 1972). The study found that infants who had mother's that were

sensitive to their needs, they infants appeared to develop an internal locus of control in addition

to crying less as the child aged (Bell and Ainsworth, 1972; Bretherton, 1992). This ultimately

led to the development of what attachment research is best known for which is the Strange

Situation experiment (Ainsworth & Bell, 1970). The Strange Situation is a procedure designed

to elicit a baby's attachment behaviors in relationship to their mother and consist of 8 phases. (1)

The mother, observer and infant enters the 9 x 9 square foot experimental room that is furnished

with chairs for mother and stranger to sit as well as toys for the baby to explore. The observer

leaves to observe behind a one-way mirror in the room. (2) Mother places baby at the base of

three chairs that form a triangle and sits quietly only to engage with her child if baby engages

with mother. (3) A stranger enters, sits quietly for 1 minute, talks with mother for 1 minute and

then attempts to engage with infant with toys for a minute then mother leaves the room at the end

of the third minute. (4) The stranger continues to engage with the baby particularly if the baby is

experiencing distress, otherwise the infant maybe engaged in play and this lasts for 3 minutes.

(5) The mother enters the room for an unspecified time to then leave intentionally signaling to

her child that she was leaving. (6) The baby is left alone with the stranger for 3 minutes. (7)

Stranger again attempts to engage or console child if distressed. (8) The mother returns and the

reunification was observed and coded into three categories; insecure- avoidant (Group A) is baby

under distress avoids the mother upon her return, secure (B) if the baby is consoled by their

mother upon mother return or insecure-ambivalent (C) if the baby exhibits both proximity with

mother yet avoidant behaviors and is unable to be consoled. The sample used in this experiment

were Caucasian middles class mothers with babies around one year of age.

Both John Bowlby's research with delinquent youth and Mary Ainsworth's research with

mothers and their infants in Uganda in Baltimore parish in the U.S. serves as the foundation for

attachment theory. John Bowlby work focused more on maternal separation, particularly

extended separation, as an explanation for the development maladjustment later in life. Mary

Ainsworth looked more at the interaction between mother and child up until the age of one in her

work. Their findings concluded that a parent who was present and responsive to the needs of

their child(ren) in a warm and optimistic manner resulted in better developmental outcomes for

the child(ren) (Ainsworth & Bell, 1970; Bretherton, 1992; Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991;

Stevenson-Hinde, 2007, Bowlby, 1944, Bowlby, 1951; Bell & Ainsworth, 1972).

The Cultural Deficiency Model

The cultural deficiency model was defined by Daniel Patrick Moynihan in the 1960's in

his report titled *"The Moynihan Report."* In this report, Moynihan (1965) stated "Negroes are

among the weakest" (p. 2) when it comes to assimilating to the American way of life. The report

attributes the weakness of Negroes, or the plight of the African American people, to the

deteriorating structure of the African American family; female led households, the birth of

illegitimate children, dissolution of marriages, African American male unemployed and welfare

dependency (Maynihan, 1965) which, in most cases, were greater than their Caucasian

counterparts. The report identified the problems that inundate the African American family and

perpetuates their unfortunate circumstance as a culture of poverty, also known as culture of

deprivation (Encyclopedia, 2016). According to David Farrigia and Jessica Gerrard (2016), the

cause of poverty is largely caused individual factors such as relationship problems, mental health

issues and substance abuse.

Conversley, the epidemiological approach in understanding the causes of poverty, and

more specifically homelessness, considers both individual and structural factors; unemployment,

social inequalities, and housing stock (Farrigia & Jessica, 2016). Today, "in contexts such as the

United States, individual level risk factors remain the dominant explanation for homelessness"

(p. 272). Therefore, Moynihan report prescribes to the individualistic explanation of the cause of

poverty which does not consider structural factors. Farrigia and Gerrard (2016) adds that

poverty is a common characteristic of capitalist societies.

The cultural deficiency model considers European Caucasians as the standard in comparison to all other cultural groups (Chung & Bemark, 2011, p. 10). The model is Eurocentric in nature and defines the inability of others who either cannot or do not live up to European Caucasian standards as less than, deprived or deficient (Chung & Bemark, 2011; Encyclopedia, 2016; Zinn, 1989). Maxine Baca Zinn (1989) further breaks down the cultural deficiency model into three categories: culture as villain, family as villain and welfare as villain. From a Cultural perspective Culture as a villain standpint

> "poor people have distinct values, aspirations, and psychological characteristic that inhibit their achievement and produce behavioral deficiencies that inhibit their achievement and produce behavioral deficiencies likely to keep them poor not only within generations but also across generations, through socialization of the young. In this argument, poverty is more a function of thought processes than of physical environment. As a result of this logic, current discussions of ghetto poverty, family structure, welfare, unemployment, and out-of-wedlock births connect these condition in ways similar to the 1965 Moynihan Report."

"Family as villain" describes the deconstruction is the deconstruction of the African American family: out-of-wedlock births, separation/divorce, and female led households contribute to a culture of poverty. "Welfare as villain" argues that welfare discourages motivation to work as well as allows African American men to not tend to their responsibilities in the home. Essentially, according to the CDM, poor families, specifically African American families, are the cause of their own plight according to this report.

The cultural deficiency model is harmful to minority populations for this reason and does not consider more contextual factors such as historical and societal conditions such as racism, discrimination and capitalism and their effects on the African American family. For example, according to Stevenson (2017), the lynching of African American men in the South has help to not only dismantle the African American family but more specifically has undermined and

compromised the African American male role in the home. Instead, the African American family is portrayed as deficient and defective due to its own devices. Attachment research also lacks the considerations of contextual factors, more specifically culture. Without the cultural meaning of attachment, minorities may become the sole reason for their experienced challenges and disadvantages. More specifically, as it pertains to attachment theory, minorities will be discriminately placed in an insecurely attached category and pathologized as opposed to understood.

Cultural Considerations and Attachment

Cultural implications were not much of a consideration in John Bowlby's and Mary Ainsworth's research. Culture as a factor to be considered was briefly mentioned is some of Bowlby's and Ainsworth's works but never explored or applied within his methodology. It is argued that Ainsworth work in Uganda and African shows the universality of attachment (Van IJzendoorn & Marinus, 1990) yet neither Bowlby or Ainsworth discussed culture in-depth or overtly and its implications in attachment research. Therefore, cultural implications for attachment can be seen as lacking severely in the foundational research of attachment and may not be as universal as it may be assumed to be (Sagi et al, 1990).

There have been several cross-cultural studies (Durrent et al., 1984; Grossman et al., 1981; Kermoian & Leiderman, 1986; Lamb et al., 1982; Miyaki et al., 1985; Sagi et al., 1985; Smith & Noble, 1987; Takahashi, 1986; Van IJendoorn et al., 1985) as well as a number of research projects that examine the cross-cultural implications of attachment (Grossmann & Grossmann, 1990; Hinde & Stevenson-Hinde, 1990; Main, 1990; Sagi, 1990; Van IJendoorn, 1990). Cross-cultural studies of attachment have replicated the Strange Situation within their home county (Ex: Japan, Israel and Germany). To revisit, the procedures of the Strange

Situation are an (1) infant and mother is left in a strange environment or a laboratory disguised as a play area for 3 minutes and then a (2) stranger walks in. (4) 3 minutes after the stranger walks in, (5) the mother leaves for 3 minutes. (6) The mother then returns again, stays for 3 minutes, and (7) leave once again for 3 minutes and once again (8) returns. The experiment is designed to activate a child's attachment behavior. After the second 3 minutes of the mother's absence, when the mother returns and if the infant can be consoled by their mother, the infant is labeled as securely attached (B). If the infant seems ambivalent about being consoled, showing proximity seeking behavior yet a resistance to being consoled, the infant is labeled as insecurely attached or anxiously resistant (C). If the infant does not display proximity seeking behavior and actively avoids their mother upon reunification, the infant is labeled as insecurely attached as well or anxiously avoidant (A) (Van IJendoorn & Marinus, 1990). Again, the separation of the infant and mother where reduced in some replications to due to the level of distress separation caused some infants.

A string of articles where published in 1990 about the cross-cultural implications of attachment and if the Strange Situation was an appropriate and/or culturally sensitive method for understanding attachment within cultures outside of the U.S. (Van IJzendoorn & Marinus, 1990). Van IJzendoorn and Marinus (1990) state that the procedure assumes that stress is experienced the same across cultures and Sagi (1990) states that it is biased toward the United States perception of attachment and that extensive observations in-home and in other context are needed. This argument against the Strange Situation are largely due to the findings in the disproportionate amount of insecurely attached infants in none US populations (Main, 1990; Sagi et al., 1985; Van IJzendoorn & Marinus, 1990) which questions the appropriateness of the Strange Situation when applied to other cultures. Bretherton (1992) states that "avoidant

classifications were overrepresented in Germany (Main, 1990) while…ambivalent attachment

was more frequent in Israeli kibbutzim and in Japan" (p. 30). These interpretations may not be

considerate of the cultural norms in Germany and Japan and may inadvertently pathologize

parenting practices in these countries similarly to how the cultural deficiency model pathologize

poor African Americans. Grossmann et al. (1985) argues similar points. Bretherton (1992)

states "attachment behavior is heavily overlain with cultural perspective" (p. 30).

  Of the 5 cross-cultural articles that were examined for this paper, 1 article (Sagi, 1990)

directly supported that the Strange Situation as a valid and appropriate measure across cultures

while the other 4 raised more philosophical and critical ideas around the topic. Sagi (1990)

stated that the overrepresentation of Group A and C in other countries maybe reflective of less

responsive parenting styles in these countries and that personal unease within individuals about

this fact maybe more of the issue. He continued by adding that insecure attachment behaviors

are adaptive but are not as adaptive as secure attachment behaviors. Main (1990) also showed

significant support for the Strange Situation by discussing outcomes from the 3 cross-cultural

studies (Grossmann, 1988; Takahashi, 1986; Van Ijzendoorn & Kroonenherg, 1988) which found

infants as toddlers, who participated in the study at about 11 or 12 months, who were securely

attachment demonstrated social competence; "planful, organized, more relaxed and less

conflictual" (Main, 1990, p. 51). Main (1990) discussed attachment in terms of primary

(proximity seeking) and secondary (avoidant behavioral) strategies. It is discussed how primary

strategies may not necessarily be better than secondary strategies particularly in instances where

infant and parental interest conflicts or when the parent is not emotionally responsive.

Furthermore, parental strategies such as responsiveness or lack or responsiveness can be a

method of encouraging independence (Group A) or dependence (Group C) which given the

cultural contexts may make since. For example, in the African American culture, decreased emotional responsiveness maybe a parental strategy to strengthen secondary strategies (avoidance) which can be a life saver against systemic racism and oppression later in life. Main (1990) states "A and C infants are presumed to exhibit secondary strategies in the face of still-present assessments of the environment" (p. 57). Main (1990) makes it clear that these adaptations are associated with maladaptive and psychological problems that can develop as a consequence of repressing primary strategies but weaves the necessity, importance and vital function of secondary strategies into her article.

Hinde and Stevenson-Hinde (1990) raised a number of importance points and questions with the most prominent one being that it is impossible to conceptualize a species without considering its context, more specifically its culture and biology and what is considered adaptive and maladaptive within these contexts. Questions about natural selection favoring a single adaptation (secure attachment behavior) versus multiple ones is raised as well as what might be considered a positive adaptation in one culture may not be considered positive in another. Therefore, attachment may not be so universal as it seems. Hinde and Stevenson-Hinde focuses primarily on the interrelatedness of biological, individual and cultural desiderata which expands the view of attachment. *Biological desiderata* are to maximize and individual's inclusive fitness, *cultural desiderata* are to strive after norms and values of society and *individual desiderata* are to achieve psychological well-being (Hinde & Stevenson-Hinde, 1990). In considering these desiderata, attachment may not seem as confined to the parent-child interaction as attachment research has proposed.

Grossmann and Grossmann (1990) discusses the necessity for both a narrow view of attachment as well as the wider view of attachment. The narrow view of attachment offered by

John Bowlby is child-centered meaning that attention is given primarily to the needs of the child; mother/primary caregiver becomes responsible for knowing and responding appropriately to the needs or cues of their child.   The wider view of attachment looks at interactional patters between primary caregiver and child that ultimately create a kind of relationship. Mary Ainsworth work contributed greatly to this wider understanding of attachment which created the insecure and secure classifications. Grossmann and Grossmann proposes that the narrow view of attachment speaks the universality of attachment and the wider view of attachment is key in understanding more cultural specific factors of attachment. They use the synactive approach to highlight the underlining importance of behavioral organization and adaptations due to parent-child interaction and places less emphases on the categorization of these interactions to better understand cultural influences and implications. Research methods of early attachment research are also brought into question as to whether they are appropriate methods to utilize across cultures.   In the Japanese culture, there is a high presence of insecure-ambivalent attachment but when the setting was familiar, the were less classifications of insecure-ambivalent attachment which Is a shift from individual factors to contextual factors. Grossman and Grossman argues that attachment theory is incomplete in assessing long-term outcomes to support its implications for internal working model

> How should it be assessed (per cultural context); in what situations and life circumstances it may become relevant, and for whom; how much it matters for the individual adaptations to critical situations and relevant others; and whether poor attachment experiences can be compensated for by advantages on other domains, such as physiological conditions, health, cultural traditions, intellectual competency, and so on" (P. 38).

Culturally specific life challenges should be researched and considered more and perhaps vital adaptations versus problematic functioning should be elucidated more. Furthermore, gathering a better understanding of trends and patterns within a culture on how attachment is defined can be very fruitful particularly using a phenomenological approach. Obtaining cultural meaning of attachment would expand the narrow view of attachment as well as the general body of literature on attachment. Van IJzendoorn (1990) expounded upon this idea by stating "cross-cultural research on attachment should focus on cultural differences instead of uniformities in order to gain insight into the universality and the culture-specific aspects of attachment" (p. 1990).

Using a Phenomenological Approach

Of the cross-cultural studies that have been conducted, they all used the same methodology which was the recreation of Strange Situation. It may be advantageous to take a more pure phenomenological approach that seeks to not classify attachment behaviors but understand the cultural meaning of attachment and the parenting practices relevant to culture. A phenomenological approach can help to capture the meaning behind parenting practice trends within a culture as well as the historical context in which developed certain parenting practices. For example, in the low socioeconomic African American community, corporal punishment (also known as whooping's) is a widely acceptable parenting practice which goes against research that demonstrates the ineffectiveness of such parenting practices. African American parenting practices may seek to instill high levels of caution and awareness in navigating the implicit bias that exist in America which has become more apparent in recent news (Hezakya Newz & Music, 2016). This is not to say that corporal punishment is justified but understanding such practices in its historical and cultural context provides a much different perspective. It is

these insights and understandings that are lacking in attachment research that helps to oppress and marginalize groups that do not fit neatly into the dominant culture narratives, or on this case the preferred secure attachment style.

Attachment research has used observations as the primary method for gathering data which is a feature of phenomenological research. The Strange Situation appears to have the philosophical belief of modernism or early quantitative research which is the belief in one reality. A postmodern quantitative phenomenological approach that can elucidate the cultural reality/meaning of attachment can add to the current attachment literature. Current cross-cultural attachment research does not address why there is an overrepresentation of insecure attachment styles in other cultures. A postmodern phenomenology can. More specifically, using a triangulation method that compare and contrast observations, artifacts and interviews can prove to be very effective in capturing a cultural meaning of attachment. Unlike traditional attachment research, the interview will ask attachment related questions that will elicit cultural meanings of attachment: "what does attachment mean to you," "what does secure attachment mean to you," "would you use the word attachment or secure" and "what is important about attachment/the parent-child relationship in your culture."

Attachment research operates in a narrow view of attachment which may simply imply that parenting practices in other cultures, who have an overrepresentation of insecure attachment, is defective or insufficient in some way. The CDM helps to highlight this covert assumption which can act as an oppressive force on these groups. A phenomenological approach to attachment can be used to understand the cultural meaning of attachment. Mary Ainsworth use of the Strange Situation may have failed in simply understanding the cultural implications of attachment which has left a significant gap in the attachment literature.

Conclusion

The purpose of this article was to examine provide an overview of the foundational

research that defines much of how attachment is understood today. Although attachment

research has been significant in understanding outcomes for children, it lacks the inclusion of

culture which helps attachment theory in becoming not only narrow minded but even oppressive

similarly to the Moynihan Report and CDM.   Cross-cultural studies fail to find novice ways that

defines cultural meanings of attachment which may help to explain predominant insecure

attachment styles in samples such as Germany and Israel. To gather these cultural meanings of

attachment, a new methodology is necessary. More specifically, postmodern phenomenological

approach may help to capture the cultural meaning of attachment and such a perspective can

enhance how attachment is understood today.

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