

**14th Edition of the International Conference on Sciences  
of Education. Learning for Life - ICSED 2016, 12-13  
May 2016, Suceava (Romania) & Chernivtsi (Ukraine)**

**Studies and Current Trends in Science of Education  
Editors Otilia CLIPA & Constantin-Florin DOMUNCO  
ISBN: 978-973-166-435-4; e-ISBN: 978-973-166-475-0**

---

# **Universality and Variability in Infant Attachment**

---

**Marius MARICI**

**pp.33-39**

©2016 The Authors & LUMEN Publishing House.

Selection, peer review and publishing under the responsibility of the editors.

*How to cite:* Marici, M. (2016). Universality and Variability in Infant Attachment. In O. Clipa & C. F. Domunco, (eds.), Studies and Current Trends in Science of Education (pp. 33-39). Iasi, Romania: Editura LUMEN.

# Universality and Variability in Infant Attachment

Marius MARICI<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

*The Attachment Theory is one of the most influential theories in child development psychology, at its conceptual core being the idea that early parent-child relationship has the potential of influencing and shaping the whole human experience. The purpose of the present research is to highlighten some of the universal and local features of the attachment paradigm. The theoretical inquiry indicates that the assessment of infant attachment, using the Strange Situation Protocol, is subject to cultural differences. Further scientific investigations should intensity the research on variability in the attachment assessment, as there are large policy and practical implications.*

## Keywords

*Infant attachment; cultural variations; universality; Strange Situation Protocol.*

## Attachment Overview

Humans are born with no particular affective ties. These relationships develop during the first years of life and determine the whole course of individuals. The main idea of Bowlby's attachment theory is that „the real relationships of the earliest stages of life indelibly shape our survival functions in basic ways, and that for the rest of the life span attachment processes lie at the center of the human experience.” (Schoe, & Schoe, 2008, p. 9) Originally attachment was defined as "a strong disposition to seek proximity to and contact with a specific figure and to do so in certain situations, notably when frightened, tired or ill' (Bowlby 1982, p. 371). The idea that mental health and problem behaviors has its roots in early childhood is not new. Lorenz (1935), for example, showed that imprinting in birds is innate.

The first who created a method to investigate and categorize parent-infant relationship was Mary Ainsworth (1967), who developed Strange Situation Protocol (SSP). SSP contains 8 stages lasting about 3 minutes each, and includes separations and reunions of the child with

---

<sup>1</sup> Assistant Lecturer at Stefan cel Mare University from Suceava, marius.marici@usv.ro.

caregivers or strangers. There are observers who assess infant's behavior and categorize them. The stages are: (1) Mother, infant, observer (2) mother and the infant alone (3) stranger joins the two (4) mother leaves, the infant remains with the stranger (5) mother returns, stranger leaves (6) mother leaves, infant is alone (7) stranger returns (8) mother returns, stranger leaves. The instrument was initially validated studying mothers. Ainsworth defined three attachment styles (secured, insecure avoidant, insecure resistant), and later Main and Solomon (1990) discovered the disorganized style (see characteristics in Table 1).

**Table 1:** The Main Characteristics of Attachment Types

Secured	Definition	- refers to „a secured relationship between a child and caregiver that allows a child to explore, while returning easily to be comforted if distressed.” (Connor, 2006, p. 175)
	Separation anxiety Stranger anxiety	- distressed when the caregiver leaves, - avoids strangers when alone, but engaging when mother present,
	Reunion behavior	- are less likely to be comforted by a stranger, - when the parental figure reappears the child calms down, is happy and plays again,
	Other behaviors	- children use their parental figures as a safe base to explore, - explore with great ease the surroundings but monitor their parents constantly.
Insecure avoidant	Definition	- “implies a dominance of exploration over attachment” (Connor, 2006, p. 175).
	Separation anxiety	- when the parent leaves the room the child may cry or not, - in stressful situations children remain more distant from their parents, than secured children.
	Stranger anxiety	- when the child cries a stranger or the parent comforts them the same amount,
	Reunion behavior	- the return of the caregiver makes the child avoid the adult, instead of approaching him,
	Other behaviors	- children are indifferent to their parents location, - children may feel well playing alone but when they are distressed they do not seek comfort from a caregiver.
Insecure resistant (ambivalent)	Definition	- attachment dominates over exploration (Connor, 2006, p. 175) and the child is resistant to comfort, for example, clings for

	Separation anxiety	a long time and does not feel confident to explore.
	Stranger anxiety	- children become intensely distressed when parents leave,
	Reunion behavior	- children avoid or shows fear of strangers - children hang on their parents and are not comforted when the parents are near, - children exhibit both rejection and seek of the parent who tries to comfort them, - children cry to be hold in arms, but soon after they want to be released,
	Other behaviors	- they do not go back to play after the adults return, - they monitor their parents much more than secured children and are less involved in exploration and play.
Disorganized disoriented	Definition	- use a range of maladaptive strategies to obtain comfort from their parental figures,
	Separation/Stranger anxiety	- their exhibit confusion, seem interrupted or show lack of direction in behaviors,
	Reunion behavior	- on reunion the child may show disoriented or disorganized behaviors, freeze, or cling to the parents' arm or neck while leaning away. They don't know to attach.
	Other behaviors	- no coherent coping strategy. The infant may rock forth and back, look dazed when is held in arms or may seem very depressed. - children do not use their caregivers as a secure base, and may express fear. - disorganized children may easily fit in the other attachment categories. - maltreated, abused or neglected children, living in extreme poverty or alcoholic parents.

---

Bowlby stated that the attachment behavior is dependent on the exploratory behavior. Initially, Bowlby presented the theory from the point of view of behaviorism. If the child is secure, owing to the presence of the attachment figures, the child will explore the environment much more.

Research shows that aberrant environmental conditions (deficient parenting) affect negatively, much more profoundly child attachment development than physical or neurological child conditions, although the later has a negative effect too. For example, children raised in institutions seem to have rather an incomplete or absent attachment (Dobrova-Krol et al., in press; Zeanah et al., 2005). Criticizing Bowlby for not making the

difference between privation and deprivation, Rutter states that when a child fails to develop an emotional bond this is privation, and when the secured attachment is not developed this is called deprivation.

### **Attachment Theory and Cultural Variability**

Attachment theory evolved to a major personality model and research diversified in several directions such as: early child experiences and parental practices, mental representations about the self or the others, or the association with the psychiatric disorders (Fairchild, 2009).

Studies showed that attachment theory has some universal features such as: the relationship between caregivers and children, the types of attachment or the contextual development of attachment security (Ainsworth, 1967).

Starting with the 2000 when Rothbaum et. al. (2000) published their research in the *American Psychologist* journal, and put under question the universality of the attachment theory, there is an ongoing scientific debate regarding the present topic. Rothbaum et. al. (2000), referred to the sensitivity hypothesis, the secure base hypothesis, and the competence hypothesis. The authors conclude that they „have called into question the universality of attachment theory ... by providing evidence that core hypotheses of the theory do not apply in all cultures” (p. 1102) What is more, attachment variability seems to be even more important as there is an increasing number of families that migrate to different countries, and as multiculturalism becomes more and more prominent.

Sensitivity refers to the caregiver’s ability to provide protection and comfort when needed and it is a two-component process which includes: deciding when comfort and protection are necessary, and how to respond to children. In addition, the definition of competence reflects the values of society and it is considered to be a consequence of the successful child attachment to caregivers. In the process of establishing the dominant attachment style, the practitioners should consider to understand the cultural context in which the affective bonds developed, as the cultural variables may influence attachment outcomes. Immigrant families living in another cultural context often report to face difficulties in adaptation to the new dominant types of family interactions (Baptiste, 2005).

Variability in the attachment theory is given by the different caregiver cultural perceptions regarding children’s signals and caregivers’ responses, which both provide psychological security. In their meta-analysis, including 32 studies, using SSP, Ijzendoorn and Kroonenberg

(1988) concluded that there are significant variations of insecure attachment in different countries, which indicates that the universality hypothesis is limited and parental rearing practices or other factors (environmental or personality) matter. Individualistic versus collectivist characteristics seem to matter in assessing attachment characteristics. Another study by Takahashi (1990) investigated one year old Japanese infants who were observed in the SSP. The results indicated that 68% were labeled as securely attached infants, 32% as resistant-insecure and no avoidant-insecure. What was more conclusive was that in at least 90% of cases the infants were removed from the infant-alone stage because the situation was considered to be too stressful for them. This happened because Japanese parents use child rearing practices which almost never leave children alone: infants generally sleep with their caregivers, bathe with parents or are carried by their mother on their backs. That means that, during SSP, infants were put in a very uncommon situation which led to high levels of stress. What is more, the lack of avoidant-insecure records can be explained by the cultural belief that avoidance is impolite and is often discouraged by caregivers. The research underlines that there are obvious cross-cultural variations in the way infant children respond to SSP.

Another explanation for the variations in child attachment characteristics refers to the temperament hypothesis which states that temperament decides the formation of attachment. One study by Durkin (1995) failed to find any significant associations between temperament and child attachment. The most likely explanation is that caregiver's sensitivity (which is culturally influenced) interacts with child's temperament and the combined effect influences child attachment formation.

### **Conclusions**

All in all, the quality of parent-infant relationship, on which the attachment formation is based, is a complex process which implies the concurrence of parental factors (parental health, abilities...), characteristics of the child (temperament and personality) and context variables (culture). The SSP is not meaningful in all cultures, as it was initially validated on middle class American families, in infant-mother interaction and not infant-father, which constitutes another issue to be discussed. It is a fact today that most parenting issues, such as practices, parental styles or even infant attachment process are influenced by cultural factors what shape these realities in particular ways. This observation demands more scientific effort to understand how infant attachment can be assessed and developed.

## Bibliography

- Ainsworth, M. (1967). *Infancy in Uganda: Infant care and the growth of love*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Baptiste, D. A. (2005). Family therapy with East Indian immigrant parents rearing children in the United States: Parental concerns, therapeutic issues, and recommendations. *Contemporary Family Therapy*, 27(3), 345–366. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s10591-005-6214-9>.
- Bowlby, J. (1982). *Attachment (2nd edn)*. New York: Basic Books.
- Connor, S. (2006). Grandparents Raising Grandchildren: Formation, Disruption and Intergenerational Transmission of Attachment, *Australian Social Work*, 59(2), 172-184. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03124070600651887>
- Dobrova-Krol, N.A., Bakermans-Kranenburg, M.J., Van IJzendoorn, M.H., & Juffer, F. (in press). Effects of perinatal HIVinfection and early institutional rearing on preschoolers' attachment and indiscriminate friendliness. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-7610.2010.02243.x>
- Durkin, K. (1995). *Developmental social psychology: From infancy to old age*. Blackwell Publishing.
- Fairchild, S.R. (2009). Introduction to a Special Edition: Attachment Theory and its Application to Practice. *Child Adolesc Soc Work J.*, 26, 287-289. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s10560-009-0178-9>
- Lorenz, K. (1935). Der Kumpan in der Umwelt des Vogels. Der Artgenosse als auslösendes Moment sozialer Verhaltensweisen. *Journal für Ornithologie*, 83, 137–215.
- Lorenz, K. (1935). Der Kumpan in der Umwelt des Vogels. Der Artgenosse als auslösendes Moment sozialer Verhaltensweisen. *Journal für Ornithologie*, 83, 137–215, 289–413.
- Main, M., & Solomon, J. (1990). Procedures for identifying infants as disorganized/disoriented during the Ainsworth Strange Situation. In M.T. Greenberg, D. Cicchetti & E.M. Cummings (Eds.), *Attachment in the Preschool Years* (pp. 121–160). Chicago, University of Chicago Press.
- Rothbaum, F., Weisz, J., Pott, M., Miyake, K., Morelli, G. (2000) Attachment and culture: Security in the United States and Japan. *American Psychologist*, 55(10), 1093-1104. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.55.10.1093>

- Schore, J. R., & Schore, A. N. (2008). Modern attachment theory: The central role of affect regulation in development and treatment. *Clinical Social Work Journal*, 36(1), 9-20.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s10615-007-0111-7>
- Van Ijzendoorn, M. H., & Kroonenberg, P. M. (1988). Cross-cultural patterns of attachment: A meta-analysis of the strange situation. *Child Development*, 147-156. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/1130396>
- Zeanah, C.H., Smyke, A.T., Koga, S., Carlson, E., & the BEIP Core Group. (2005). Attachment in institutionalized and community children in Romania. *Child Development*, 76, 1015–1028.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8624.2005.00894.x>
- Takahashi, K. (1990). Are the key assumptions of the 'strange situation' procedure universal? A view from Japanese research. *Human Development*, 33, 23-30. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1159/000276500>