

Looking In, Looking Out: Attachment Theory, Psychoanalytic Object Relations, and Academia

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Abstract

Ever since the pioneering works of John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth, attachment theory has been the subject of much interest among psychologists. Over the past three decades, researchers have explored and established several relationships between individuals' attachment representations and various aspects of psychosocial and cognitive functioning. Attachment theories and psychoanalytic object relations can provide insight into the processes through which attachment transactions are transformed into mental representations. The goal of this paper is to examine the similarities and differences between Fonagy's models of transgenerational consistencies of attachment and object relations theory, and discuss the influence of attachment patterns on students' academic achievement.

Key Words: Attachment, psychoanalytic object relations theory, transgenerational consistencies of attachment, academic achievement, mental representations.

Introduction

As soon as newborn infants come to this world, they are continuously being bombarded by countless sensory stimuli. William James described their world as a "booming, buzzing confusion" (Nelson, 1991). This "confusion" gradually lessens as the infant begins to interact with her caregiver and make sense of her environment. When parents or caregivers are responsive to their infants' needs, they endow them with a secure base from which they can explore their surroundings without being anxious about whether or not they are available. It is proposed that it is this very secure or safe base that helps the children develop confidence and high-self esteem (Cutrona et al., 1994). However, "in states of uncontrollable arousal, the infant will come to seek physical proximity to the caregiver in the hope of soothing and the recovery of homeostasis" (Fonagy, 1999, p.1). The maintenance of this "homeostasis" is the hallmark of attachment theory, which is concerned with the evolving needs of the child and his or her cognitive and affective states in relation to others (Hill et al., 2003).

The original work of Ainsworth and her colleagues (1978) over three decades ago led to the discovery of three distinct attachment styles characteristic of the infants who participated in the "Strange Situation" experiment: Secure infants eagerly explored their environment in the presence of their mother, were distressed by the short separation, sought reassurance and comfort upon regrouping, and were fretful around strangers. Anxious/ambivalent infants, on the other hand, could not seem to be comforted, cried more, were distressed before the separation, and tended to cling to their primary caregivers. The avoidant groups "exhibit little overt distress upon separation and do not seek contact upon reunions. Instead, they keep their attention directed towards toys or other objects, apparently to shift attention away from the wish to establish contact with their attachment figures" (Spertling & Berman, 1994, p. 35).

Main and Solomon (as cited in Fonagy, 1999) identified a fourth category of insecurely attached infants whom they referred to as disorganized/disoriented. When these infants and their caregivers were reunited after the separation, they appeared to distance themselves, almost to the point of running away.

Their behavior was undirected and contradictory; for instance, they would begin to come near their attachment figure but then freeze half way through. This attachment style tends to be related to a prior history of neglect and/or abuse (Fonagy, 1999; Sperling & Berman, 1994). How do these different attachment patterns become internalized and later shape the construction of subsequent relationships? This question will be answered through examining the similarities and differences between Fonagy's model of transgenerational consistencies of attachment and the psychoanalytic object relations theory. The second aim of this paper is to explore and discuss the impact of attachment styles on academic achievement.

Fonagy's Transgenerational

Model of Attachment and Psychoanalytic Object Relations Theory

In his theory of transgenerational consistencies of attachment, Fonagy (1999) explicated that the attachment system is an "open bio-social homeostatic regulatory system," characterized by the presence of internal working models, which are representative of the accumulation of an infant's past experiences with his or her caregiver. During mother-infant attachment transactions, the child is able to internalize attachment patterns and transform them into internal working models similar to those of the mother (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2002; Sperling & Berman, 1994). The child eventually becomes capable of representing these models of attachment through three forms: In the primitive, enactive mode, she relies on body movements and facial expressions; the imagisitic stage is marked by the use of various sensory modalities; and in the mature, lexical phase, the child is now able to express objects in her environment through words. Main et al. (1985, as cited in Sperling and Berman) found that the former representational mode was prevalent in insecurely attached children, while their secure counterparts were more successful in expressing themselves lexically.

Fonagy (1999) asserted that the control the infant develops as a result of a secure relationship with his parents allows him to "move toward the ownership of inner experience, and toward understanding self and others as intentional beings whose behavior is organized by mental states, thoughts, feelings, beliefs and desires" (p.2). It seems like the type of familial environment the child is brought up in may have a significant impact on his or her intra-and interpersonal behaviors. In fact, Fonagy (2001) believed that it is how the child mentally experiences the environment (i.e., caregiver-infant attachment transactions) that it is critical to the expression of her genetic traits, and not the environment per se or the mere exposure to it. The author explained that "the manner in which environment is experienced will act as a filter in the expression of genotype into phenotype" (p.6).

Fonagy (2001) maintained that the caregiver-infant attachment transactions give rise to a "genetically defined," interpretive capacity in the child, which it is referred to as the interpersonal interpretive mechanism. When an infant is distressed, she is, first, aware of her internal state (primary representation), then she develops a "secondary representation" of that emotional state as a result of the feedback she gets from the mother's empathic response. The latter serves to reduce the emotion to the point that the child conceives it differently from the primary experience. This maternal, "contingent response," stresses Fonagy, "is the principle means by which infants acquire understanding of their own internal states, which is an intermediate step in the acquisition of an understanding of others as psychological entities" (p.9).

Psychoanalytic object-relations theorists view cognitive-affective representations of self and others as essential psychological structures in personality development and organization (Blatt, Auerbach, & Levy, 1997), which is similar to the importance of the internal working models in Fonagy's transgenerational attachment paradigm. These self and object representations are a product of the interactive regulation between child and mother (or caregiver), which involves both gratifying experiences as well as disturbances resulting from separation (Blatt, Auerbach, & Levy, 1997). Diamond and Blatt (as cited in Sperling & Berman, 1994) explicated that the process of internalization develops through a "hierarchical spiral" in which experiences of gratification are distorted by incongruence between primary objects and self.

This mismatch serves as a catalyst for internalizing the different relationship characteristics, which, in turn, functions as the building block for more advanced transactions in the child's environment. The external world, according to the object-relations tradition, plays an essential role in the formation of children's object relationships and their internal objects; the internal world serves as a reflection of parents and other primary caregivers. Guntrip (1971) maintained that "the entire process of growth, disturbance, and restoration of wholeness depends upon the ego's relations with objects, primarily infancy, and thereafter in the unconscious...interacting with object-relations in real life" (p. 95).

Another similarity between the psychoanalytic object relations theory and Fonagy's transgenerational consistencies model of attachment has to do with the notion of evocative object constancy and its role in the development of mental representations. Diamond and Blatt (as cited in Sperling & Berman, 1994) defined evocative object constancy as the capability to establish and maintain a representation of the mother or caregiver, independent of her physical presence. This concept that develops within an attachment relationship is congruent with the object permanence aspect of Piaget's first stage of cognitive development, which refers to children's child's ability to understand that objects still exist after they are no longer in immediate sight (Gleason, 1993). As alluded to above, both the self and object representations as well as the internal working models are comprised of mental representations of interactions between self and others including the accessibility and constancy of key attachment figures and the value of the self as capable and worthy of obtaining security and comfort (Bowlby, 1969). Therefore, evocative object constancy seems to be an integral point during which children start developing an enduring concept of the object and a stable sense of self (Diamond and Blatt, as cited in Sperling & Berman, 1994).

Even though Fonagy's transgenerational attachment paradigm and the object relations theory parallel each other, they do have certain differences. In Fonagy's model (and in attachment theory in general), the source of the child's mental representations is clearly and consistently linked to his or her past experiences with the mother or primary caregiver. However, this has always been debatable within the psychoanalytic object relations tradition. Early psychoanalysts, for instance, maintained that it is the instinctual drives that exclusively give rise to a child's mental representations; internal objects are viewed as direct expressions of instinctual drives, which are then projected so that the outside world is experienced as having the characteristics of those drives (Hinshelwood, 1989). Others, on the other hand, have completely refuted the notion that instinctual drives contribute to the development of internal objects, and argue that these latter do not derive from any innate processes, but that they are a product of children's introjections of the experiences of real people and events in their external environment (Guntrip, 1971).

Whereas the former group of psychoanalysts may be "guilty" of "drive reductionism," the latter, who back up the relational motive, may be guilty of what Eagle (1995) referred to as "relational reductionism." This has probably led to the rise of contemporary object relations theorists who fall somewhere in the middle and stress the need to find a way to conceptualize the interaction between the outside world and the instinctual drives (Sandier, 1983). Perlow (1995) explained that "the concept of representation came to be used to bridge that gap, implying a reality-oriented image of the object, while leaving room for the possibility of the influence of the drives on the 'shape' (or content) of the representation" (p. 127). The other difference between the psychoanalytic object relations theory and Fonagy's model of attachment is that the examination of internal working models in attachment theory has been largely based on non-clinical samples of adults and children; in contrast, the investigation of mental representations in object relations theory has derived mainly from the study of clinical samples of adults (Blatt, Auerbach, & Levy, 1997).

Influence of Attachment Patterns on Students' Academic Achievement

The development of secure and insecure attachment styles and their impact on individuals' psychosocial and cognitive functioning have largely been examined from clinical and counseling perspectives within classic attachment theory as well as the object relations school. However, during this past decade, researchers have begun to explore the influence of these patterns in educational settings. For example, Rice and Mirzadeh (2000) were interested in examining the relationship between attachment, perfectionism, academic integrity, and depression. First, the authors distinguish between two types of perfectionism: Adaptive and maladaptive whose descriptions respectively correspond to secure and insecure attachment patterns.

Adaptive perfectionists have parents who encourage and support them; they seem comfortable accepting their strengths and weaknesses and are realistic with themselves; they also have high confidence and self-esteem and are likely to trust others. In contrast, maladaptive perfectionists seem to hold negative views of themselves and others; they believe they are worthless and at times, they strive hard to gain (and maintain) their parents' approval and love at the expense of repressing negative emotions (Rice & Mirzadeh, 2000). Participants in this study were assessed on four dimensions: Perfectionism, attachment, academic integration, and depression. The first measure was assessed with the Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale that serves to identify adaptive and maladaptive types.

The Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment was used to assess attachment. Academic integration was evaluated by having subjects respond to the following three, Likert-type items: "I have performed academically as well as I anticipated I would at [name of institution]," "I am satisfied with my course curriculum at [institution]," and "I am satisfied with my academic experience" (Rice & Mirzadeh, 2000, p.10). The 20-item, Center for Epidemiological Studies—Depression Scale served to tap depression in the undergraduate college sample. Compared to the adaptive perfectionists, maladaptive subjects testified that their parents were very critical and expected a lot out of them; they reported a serious lack of self-confidence and were constantly worried about making mistakes. The authors suggested that the link between insecure attachment and maladjustment in this cluster might be partly due to their maladaptive perfectionism. In other words, "problematic attachment to parents may set the stage for internalizing harsh, self-defeating expectations of self and others that place the child at risk for developing later emotional as well as academic difficulties" (p.15). One of the most alerting findings was that maladaptive perfectionists' depression scores had ostensibly placed them in the clinically depressed category. It appears that this group of students had the poorest academic integration and emotional adjustment regardless of their high-personal standards. Rice and Mirzadeh posit that secure attachment augments the probability of a adopting an adaptive perfectionist style. Subjects exhibiting adaptive perfectionism claimed to be satisfied with their academic experience, were confident in their academic pursuits, and attained normal-range depression scores. Thus, the securely attached, adaptive perfectionists seem to be at an advantage in terms of academic adjustment and performance and psychological well-being.

In another study, Souce and Larose (2000) investigated whether or not adolescents' perceptions of attachment security, behavioral control, and psychological control (of parents and mentors) predicted college adjustment. Behavioral control refers to the parents' involvement and interest in their children's tasks and the types of peers they are acquainted with; these parents direct and monitor their children's behavior and seem to positively shape their social competence. On the other hand, parents who adhere to psychological control impede their children's psychological development through use of guilt and emotional manipulation in order to control behavior (Souce & Larose, 2000). Results showed that secure attachment to a mentor predicted college adjustment far and above parental attachment and control. Nonetheless, when it came to institutional attachment and academic adjustment, "secure attachment to the mentor was predictive of college adjustment only among adolescents who perceived high or moderate levels of security in their relationships with their mother" (p.11). Moreover, psychological control was found to have detrimental effects on students' academic success and adjustment to college.

Clark and Ladd (2000) observed that securely-attached children seemed to have positive prosocial orientations, more mutual and pleasant friendships, and advanced levels of peer acceptance in kindergarten. Similarly, Howes (2000) demonstrated that preschool children who were close to their teachers were observed to be socially competent and easily adjusted to school five years later. On the other hand, those preschoolers who had less secure relationships with their teachers experienced "more adjustment problems in elementary school, had higher rates of peer aggression, and were more disruptive in second grade" (pp.12-13). Howes also proposed that teacher-child transactions might have a greater influence on peer interactions than parent-child relationships. It seems like social competence plays an intermediary role between individuals' secure attachment pattern and their academic adjustment and competence. In their investigation of the relationship between attachment styles, social skills, and psychosocial adjustment in college students, DiTommaso et al. (2003) demonstrated that participants with secure attachment styles were more socially skilled than their insecurely-attached counterparts. In the same vein, Welsh et al. (2001) revealed that high social competencies were directly linked to academic proficiency in a cohort of school-age children.

Positive teacher-child relationships can have particular implications for at risk students who might have negative internal working models or representations of self-parent transactions. These students may still find that their teachers appreciate them for a some particular ability or personality attribute, and this may allow an internal working model to develop of themselves as valued and respected, which may, in turn, play a pivotal role in maintaining a degree of psychological stability and health during their academic journey. Kennedy and Kennedy (2004) argued that both secure and insecure teachers can benefit from gaining a working familiarity with their own mental representations of student-teacher transactions, and that knowledge of the dynamics underlying the attachment system allows them to embrace a more comprehensive outlook on how an individual functions within different contexts. In a longitudinal study that examined teacher and student characteristics during teacher-child interactions, Kesner (2000) reported that the attachment history of pre-service teachers was a major predictor of the quality of teacher-student relationships.

Conclusion

Both Fonagy's transgenerational consistencies theory of attachment and the psychoanalytic object relations theory shed light onto the mechanisms through which attachment transactions are transformed into mental representations. Although, they have certain differences, an integration of the two theories might serve to delineate the intricate relationships among cognitive, affective, and interpersonal dimensions in psychological development (Blatt, Auerbach, & Levy, 1997). Moreover, educating teachers about the various attachment patterns and their potential influence on academic success may not only serve as a pretext for discovering their own attachment styles and how that might facilitate or impede their everyday transactions with their students, but it will also encourage them to be more aware of their students' attachment patterns and strive to foster an empathetic and warm classroom environments during which learning from a secure base can take place.

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