

Not attached to attachment theory

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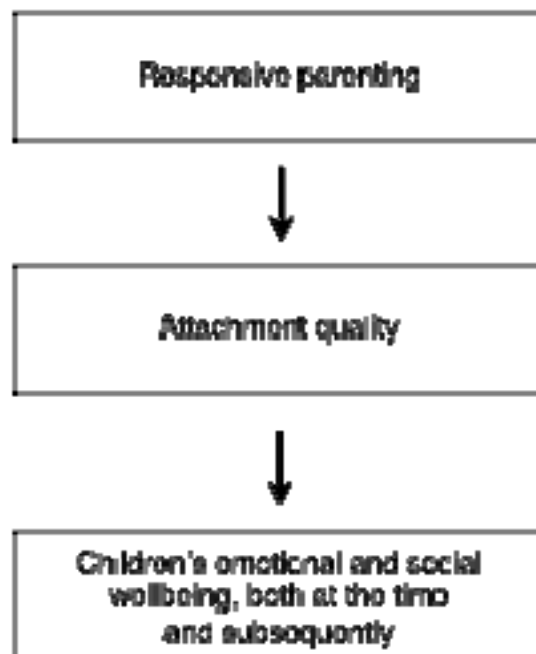
It seems that, whenever economic times are tough, we return to conservative ideologies to exclude people from competing for the few jobs available – and, in many cases, those excluded are women. It is not unrelated, then, that during economic recessions, there seems to be a new emphasis on attachment theory.

Attachment theory was first proposed by John Bowlby, who was a Freudian. (Freudians posit a sexual attraction between children and their opposite-sexed parent, and the need for children for their maternal caregiver). Bowlby studied children in orphanages in World-War-II Britain and, from this Freudian perspective, concluded that the orphans' emotional maladjustment was caused by the loss of their mother (Birns 1999; Honig 2002). He ignored the fact that they were deprived not only of their mothers, but also of the most basic needs for food and caring.

Legend has it that Bowlby's theory was embraced by the British government of the day, glad to have a rationale for removing women from the workforce so that returning soldiers could be employed. To suit its ends, the government was happy to pass off a profoundly conservative political doctrine in the guise of psychology.

ATTACHMENT THEORY

Attachment theory states that children's attachment to a primary caregiver provides a secure base from which to explore outwards. This attachment is said to determine children's social-emotional functioning both at the time and throughout life. This theorised pathway from attachment to social wellbeing, then, can be drawn:



However, in addition to basing his data on his conclusions (rather than the other way around), Bowlby made some errors of reasoning in formulating attachment theory. First, even if he were correct that children need their mothers (note that fathers don't get a mention), this does not justify his conclusion that children need

full-time maternal care. His concept that human babies need *intensive* care exclusively from a *single* caregiver is false. Unlike other species, human infants develop affection for many people: their mother, father, siblings and familiar adults and peers – even when they spend very few of their waking hours in their company (Birns 1999). In other words, children rely on and benefit from an array of relationships (Verschueren & Marcoen 1999; Waters & Cummings 2000).

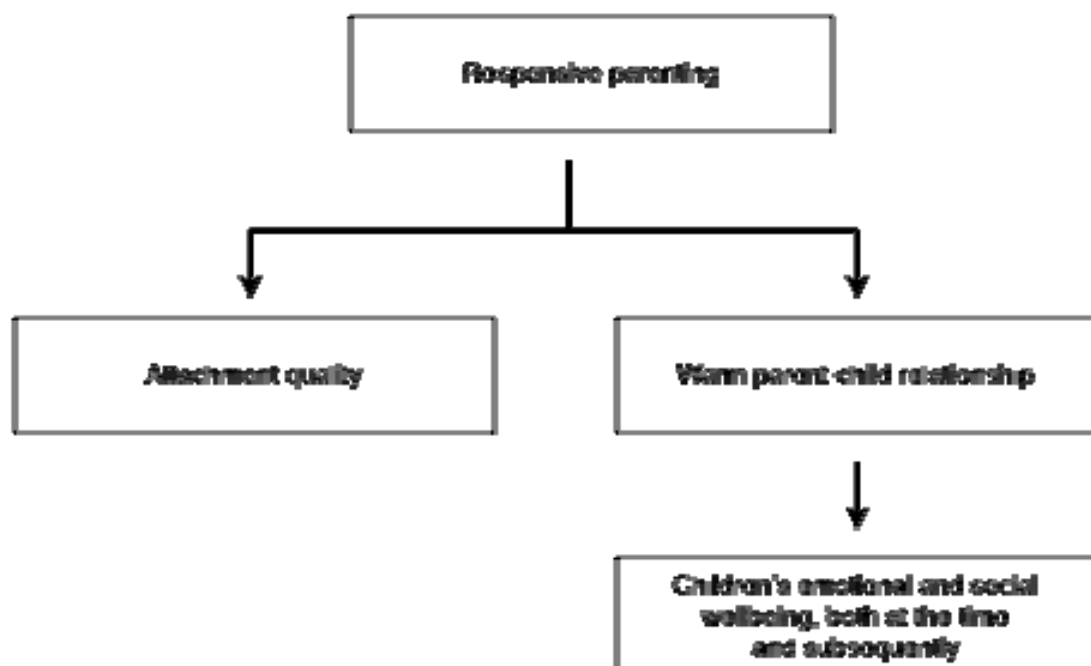
Second, and more vital for mothers' wellbeing, my concern is that attachment has been misconstrued as an all-or-nothing phenomenon, whereby babies are thought to have only six to eight months in which to become 'attached', after which it is too late for them to do so. If they have not done so by then, it is their mothers' fault and, moreover, the situation cannot be repaired.

This places a tremendous burden of guilt on those parents (particularly mothers) who could not be available to their babies in those first few months, perhaps because of postnatal depression, as a result of late adoption, or when family adversity in those early months impaired mothers' emotional availability (Bakermans-Kranenburg et al. 2004; Birns 1999; Morris 2005).

AN ALTERNATIVE FORMULA

Attachment theory is correct that children's attachment patterns are related to their development (e.g. Moss & St-Laurent 2001; Spieker et al. 2003; Stams et al. 2002) and to their social and emotional behaviour (e.g. Anan & Barnett 1999; Bohlin et al. 2000; DeMulder et al. 2000; Kerns et al. 1998; Kochanska 2001; Moss et al. 2004; NICHD & Early Child Care Research Network 2006; Pauli-Pott et al. 2007; Stams et al. 2002; Verschueren & Marcoen 1999; Warren et al. 1997). Nevertheless, these links are only modest in size. This indicates that there are numerous other environmental (not to mention genetic) influences on children's skills.

Moreover, attachment and emotional wellbeing seem related only when both are measured at the same time: attachment quality in childhood does not reliably predict adjustment in the long term, as the theory expects (Lewis et al. 2000). Indeed, children's attachment patterns in childhood do not *cause* their social and emotional wellbeing. Instead, both their attachment and their wellbeing are caused by the quality of parenting they receive at the time. This pathway can be drawn:



CONCLUSION

In other words, both children's attachment quality and their wellbeing depend on the sensitivity of their parents (e.g. Bakermans-Kranenburg et al. 2004; Diener et al. 2003; Koren-Karie et al. 2002; Posada et al. 1999; Raval et al. 2001) and other caregivers (Howes et al. 1988). This means that apparently 'poor attachment' can be repaired when parents become more responsive to their children (Hamilton 2000; Lewis et al. 2000; Moss et al. 2005; NICHD & Early Child Care Research Network 2001, 2006; Seifer et al. 2004; Waters et al. 2000a, 2000b; Weinfield et al. 2000). Early attachment status can change.

Given that attachment patterns change when the quality of children's relationships with their parents alters, I question whether we need the concept of attachment as a 'middleman': the concept does not explain or predict anything. Children's attachment status is the *result* of parenting quality, not the *cause* of their emotional wellbeing. It is parenting quality that causes children's emotional wellbeing. All that attachment theory achieves is to heap guilt on mothers.

In short, we lose nothing and gain clarity by saying simply that children are better adjusted and function better emotionally and socially when their parents are tuned into and demonstrate sensitive care towards them.

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