

Epilogue

Thousands of articles, chapters, and books have been written on the topic of attachment. The book you just finished reading highlights some major questions that researchers, practitioners, and students of attachment have raised over the years, and summarizes the answers to those questions. Nevertheless, there are still many open questions for people to investigate. In the Epilogue we highlight some of these questions.

WHAT ARE SOME OPEN QUESTIONS IN ADULT ATTACHMENT?

Can Attachment Styles be Explained Away by Basic Personality Traits?

Some scholars have wondered how attachment styles relate to other kinds of personality constructs that are studied in social-personality psychology, such as the personality dimensions highlighted by the Big Five framework (ie, Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Neuroticism, and Openness).

There are different perspectives in personality psychology on what the Big Five dimensions represent. For some scholars, the five factor framework is a descriptive taxonomy—a means to locate a variety of individual differences constructs within a common descriptive space (eg, John, Naumann, & Soto, 2008). The Big Five framework has been extraordinarily valuable for this purpose. One of the Big Five factors, Neuroticism, tends to correlate 0.40–0.50 with attachment anxiety (Nofhle & Shaver, 2006). This suggests that attachment anxiety may be usefully construed as belonging to a family of traits that are relevant for understanding negative affective experiences. Attachment avoidance is more difficult to locate within the Big Five space, but most researchers report small to moderate negative correlations between avoidance and Conscientiousness and Extraversion (Nofhle & Shaver, 2006). In short, if modern personality taxonomies are used as maps to locate a variety of descriptors in multidimensional space, then it seems appropriate to locate attachment anxiety near Neuroticism and to conceptualize avoidance as a vector that cuts through several of the traits.

Nofhle and Shaver (2006) observed that attachment and personality dimensions tend to uniquely predict various outcomes, despite their overlap. For example, in predicting variation in relationship quality, the attachment dimensions were capable of explaining variance above and beyond that explained by the Big Five personality traits. The reverse analysis (starting with the attachment dimensions and adding the Big Five) did not improve prediction. This kind of

finding is commonly reported in the literature. Specifically, when general traits are statistically controlled, the attachment dimensions continue to predict outcomes of interest in theoretically anticipated ways (eg, Gillath, Bunge, Shaver, Wendelken, & Mikulincer, 2005).

For some scholars, the five factor framework is not merely a taxonomy. According to Costa and McCrae (2008), the five factors represent the foundational dimensions of personality in adulthood. Costa and McCrae, for example, view the five factors as basic tendencies, grounded in genetic variation between persons, which give rise to other aspects of human functioning (eg, the self-concept, attitudes). Further, Costa and McCrae argue that the five factors are not affected by external influences, such as cultural norms, life experiences, and relationship processes.

Within the Costa and McCrae (2008) framework, it would not be appropriate to view attachment styles as facets of more general traits in a descriptive taxonomy. One reason for this is that basic traits are not influenced by relational contexts. But, as we have reviewed in this book, attachment styles manifest differently across contexts (chapter: What Are the Effects of Context on Attachment?) and change in light of interpersonal experiences (chapters: How Do Individual Differences in Attachment Develop? and How Stable Are Attachment Styles in Adulthood?). Within Costa and McCrae's framework, attachment styles might best be characterized as "characteristic adaptations": characteristics of persons that are shaped to some extent by basic tendencies (eg, personality traits), dynamic processes, and interpersonal experiences.

In summary, we believe it is useful to locate the attachment dimensions—and other individual differences constructs—within a common space. Doing so makes it easier to see where the various islands exist within the sea of personality variables. But we are reluctant to suggest that the individual differences studied by attachment researchers are simply alternative labels for personality traits that are already studied by Big Five trait psychologists. Not only are the associations between them far from perfect, but what is known about attachment styles to date seems incompatible with certain ways of conceptualizing personality traits.

Having said this, we also don't want to err on the side of emphasizing the uniqueness of attachment styles too much. Bowlby and Ainsworth viewed their efforts as an attempt to build a theory of personality development. Thus, in some respects, attachment theory can be viewed as a theory of personality, but one that emphasizes specific aspects of personality functioning rather than attempting to explain the full gamut of individual differences (see Fraley & Shaver, 2008). Given the increased interest in recent years in gene–environment transactions (eg, Briley, Harden, & Tucker-Drob, 2014) and epigenetics (Slavich & Cole, 2013), we believe that future research on personality development can be enhanced by integrating some of the themes traditionally emphasized in the personality trait tradition (eg, the heritable foundations of individual differences) with those emphasized in the study of attachment (eg, person–environment transactions, mental representation, and affective processes). In other words,

attachment theory could prove to be a valuable foundation for investigating personality dynamics and not just attachment processes themselves.

ARE ATTACHMENT STYLES REALLY JUST MATING STRATEGIES?

Some scholars have proposed that what attachment scholars call “attachment styles” are really just manifestations of long- and short-term sexual mating strategies (eg, Kirkpatrick, 1998, see chapter: *What Are the Effects of Context on Attachment?*). Long-term mating strategies reflect strategies used to obtain a long-term mate, a partner for life, and indicate investment of resources in child rearing (eg, finding one’s soulmate or other half). Short-term mating strategies, conversely, reflect strategies to obtain short-term access to a mate, and genetic variety (eg, a one night stand). Attachment security is thought to reflect long-term mating strategies; whereas attachment avoidance is thought to reflect short-term mating strategies.

Kirkpatrick made at least four points in his 1998 chapter in which he leveled a series of criticisms regarding the explanatory value of attachment in understanding romantic relationships. One is that love (or commitment) is sufficient to solve the problem of bringing mates together for the purposes of raising children. We don’t need an extra construct—the attachment behavioral system—to solve that conceptual problem. Second, the notion that the “attachment system” is what is driving the kinds of dynamics we study in romantic relationships is mistaken. Adult romantic partners do not protect one another against predators in the way that attachment figures protect their offspring. Moreover, a lot of what seems like attachment behavior can just as easily be understood as a manifestation of caregiving. Third, although individual differences exist in how people think about and behave in close relationships, those differences are reflections of short- and long-term mating strategies, not “attachment” per se. For example, preference for closeness and intimacy—that might be perceived as attachment security—can be the outcome of the endorsement of long-term mating strategies. Finally, he argues that, while attachment theorists emphasize the role of relational experiences in shaping individual differences, this argument is also put forth by life history theorists who suggest that mating strategies are conditional upon the environmental context in which individuals are raised (see chapter: *What Are the Effects of Context on Attachment?*).

Although Kirkpatrick raises some valid points, some attachment researchers (eg, Zeifman & Hazan, 2008) have argued that these ideas represent a narrow view of both the attachment bond and of attachment styles. First, Zeifman and Hazan (2008) argue that attachment helps ensure that infants receive routine adequate care (food, warmth, shelter, etc.), so whereas protection from one’s partner might be less important, staying with one’s partner to take care of offspring is still important. Replacing the concept of the “attachment system” with love (or commitment) as Kirkpatrick suggests in his first point raises other problems. For example, the concept of love is rather limited in its scope and

lacks the developmental, evolutionary, and cognitive roots attachment has. The attachment behavioral system is indeed a powerful framework for understanding interpersonal processes as we have demonstrated throughout this book. So from a practical point, studying these processes using attachment presents advantages for researchers that love does not.

Second, while adults might not need the physical protection of their attachment figures and do not turn to their attachment figures for such protection, attachment behavior in adulthood is not dissimilar from the behavior of older children and adolescents (see chapter: What Is Attachment Theory?) who have internalized mental representations of their attachment figures. However, children, adolescents, and adults all need someone to serve as their secure base and safe haven. Adults still need to be able to draw on the support of others when in need of help or in distress, and still want to share their happiness and achievements. Furthermore, the fact that a behavior is not identical at different phases of development does not mean that the behavior serves different functions or that other behavioral systems are in play. Zeifman and Hazan (2008) use feeding behavior as an example of this argument—although it changes dramatically over the course of development—the basic function of feeding remains the same.

Third, while Life History Theory suggests that similar mechanisms shape sexual strategies and attachment style, it does not suggest that attachment style and sex strategies are the same modules. Rather some are directly related to sex and reproduction, whereas others are more about feelings of closeness, security, dependence, and trust. Based on these points, and research on the unique and interactive effects of the attachment and the sex systems, we tend to agree with Zeifman and Hazan (2008). A final point to consider is that the fact that adults are attached to god, pets, places, and alike suggests that there is more to attachment than sex.

SHOULD ATTACHMENT THEORY BE CONSIDERED A THEORY OF CLOSE RELATIONSHIPS?

One of the criticisms leveled against attachment theory is that the theory offers an inadequate account of relational processes. For instance, critics such as John Holmes (Holmes & Cameron, 2005) suggest that attachment theory places too much emphasis on the individual and not enough on relational phenomena at the level of the couple. He also notes that attachment theory does not provide an adequate account of the interdependent nature of relationships.

We agree with Holmes and colleagues that attachment theory is a theory of the individual. It has its origins in psychoanalytic theory, which was largely concerned with inner life, a theme that is reflected in our modern emphasis on internal working models and mental representation. It isn't a relational theory in the way that interdependence theory is. Nonetheless, it *is* a theory about how relationships shape our lives. So, it has the potential to be a useful framework for understanding close relationships.

Importantly, however, the theory is not limited to the study of individuals. In fact, hundreds of studies have investigated attachment processes at the dyadic level, thereby modelling the relative contribution of relationship partners' attachment styles to various dyadic processes, such as the seeking and provision of support and the use of conflict patterns in dealing with relationship issues (eg, Simpson, Rholes, & Phillips, 1996; Feeney, Noller, & Hanrahan, 1994). These dyadic studies of adult attachment have provided another layer of understanding regarding relationship processes and outcomes on top of the knowledge already garnered from studies that focus on the individual.

Attachment theory also provides a highly integrative and comprehensive account of relationship dynamics across all stages of romantic relationships (initiation, maintenance, and dissolution) and across the cognitive, affective, and behavioral domains of interpersonal processes. Furthermore, attachment theory provides a historical account for how individual differences in relationship functioning are rooted in past relationship experiences and guide interactions in both the present and future. Whereas other theories may provide quite comprehensive accounts of relationship processes, they tend to focus on the origins of these processes in one's current relationship. Such theories say little about how experiences pertaining to previous significant close relationships may carry over into current relationships, or how relationship dynamics are rooted in the interplay between evolved behavioral systems. Furthermore, theories such as interdependence theory say little about people's reactions to the dissolution of a romantic relationship. Attachment theory has the potential to address many, if not all, of these issues.

IS ATTACHMENT INSECURITY FUNCTIONAL?

Research demonstrates that attachment security is associated with mental-health-related outcomes such as buffering the effects of psychopathology; whereas attachment insecurity is associated with a wide array of negative outcomes including mental health problems. As a result of these findings, many people come to label attachment security as "good," "adaptive," or "beneficial." In contrast, attachment insecurity is often considered "bad," "maladaptive," or "problematic." However, by drawing on life history theory, scholars such as Belsky (1999), and more recently Del Giudice (2009a) and Ein-Dor, Mikulincer, Doron, and Shaver (2010) have suggested that insecurity can be seen as an adaptive strategy that yields benefits and positive outcomes in contexts that reflect harsh, unsafe, or unpredictable environments (eg, living in a dangerous inner-city neighborhood characterized by high crime, see chapter: What Is the Attachment Behavioral System? And, How Is It Linked to Other Behavioral Systems?). In fact, research using a life history framework provides evidence to support claims of the adaptive advantage of attachment insecurity (eg, Del Giudice, 2011). For example, Ein-Dor et al. (2010) suggests that under conditions of serious danger, anxious individuals' hypervigilance to threat may offer an adaptive advantage by alerting people to

serious imminent hazards. In terms of attachment avoidance, the premium placed on self-reliance and self-preservation by avoidant individuals may assist in the detection of escape paths that they and others can use to avoid danger. Part of Ein-Dor's argument is that, although these insecure strategies may seem maladaptive at the individual level, in group and social contexts—contexts in which most people reside—they can be advantageous.

The flip-side to the question “Is attachment insecurity functional?” can be framed in terms of “Is attachment security dysfunctional?” In an attempt to answer this question, Gillath, Gregersen, Canterberry, and Schmitt (2014) recently studied whether too much attachment security might be maladaptive or result in negative outcomes (such as lower life satisfaction, lower success, and lower SES). Gillath et al. found no evidence to support this suggestion. On the one hand, the findings by Gillath and coworkers may suggest that even high levels of attachment security reflect an adaptive advantage for individuals. On the other hand, this study does not provide unequivocal evidence regarding the adaptiveness of security.

WHAT MIGHT UNDERLIE OR EXPLAIN ATTACHMENT SECURITY?

Although we have already provided some answers in the book to this question, one answer we didn't directly provide (partially because we do not have a unified opinion about its validity) is the possibility that two systems, rather than one behavioral system, govern attachment behavior. One system may govern attachment insecurity and a separate behavioral system may govern security. From this perspective, attachment insecurity might reflect an evolved behavioral system with hard-wired brain circuitry to manage potential threats (Tooby & Cosmides, 1990, 2006; Trower et al., 1990; Pinker, 1997). This circuitry or system has already been proposed and is referred to in the literature by various names including the defense system (Trower et al., 1990), the hazard-precaution system (Boyer & Lienard, 2006), and (interestingly enough) the security motivation system (Woody & Szechtman, 2011, 2013). This system, as described by Woody and Szechtman, is designed for dealing with environmental dangers and threats and involves three features. The first feature relates to the ability for the system to detect and process threat. The second feature relates to a motivational system designed to promote specific behaviors to achieve a set-goal. The third feature reflects the termination of behaviors once the set-goal is restored. The description of this defense system shares much in common with the way Bowlby describes the attachment behavioral system.

Conversely, attachment security may reflect a different behavioral system with hard-wired brain circuitry designed to handle needs related to personal growth and well-being (Reeve, 2015). This behavioral system would be attuned to the detection of stimuli reflecting positive rewards and opportunities for personal development. This type of a behavioral system shares parallels with

behavioral models and concepts outlined in various realms of positive psychology such as Fredrickson's (2001) "broaden and build" model of positive emotions. In her model, Fredrickson suggests that being open to and experiencing positive emotions and rewards act as a foundation that helps broaden and enhance a person's physical, intellectual, and psychological capacities (for a related perspective, readers are referred to Csikszentmihalyi, 2014 on flow-state).

Framing attachment dynamics from a dual-systems perspective in which one system is sensitized towards threat stimuli (attachment insecurity) and another system is calibrated towards reward stimuli (attachment security) shares much in common with broad systems of approach and avoidance motivation (eg, McNaughton & Gray, 2000; Gable, 2006). From this standpoint, attachment insecurity may be considered a system of avoidance motivation and attachment security a system of approach motivation. Our discussion of dual systems within the context of attachment is one of speculation. It does however raise the possibility that the relationship between security and insecurity is more complex than we think and may merit future investigation.

FINAL WORDS

The questions we address in this Epilogue remain very much open, even if we tried to provide some answers (that we did not all agree on). But we would like to remind readers that the questions outlined in this Epilogue are just *examples* of *open* questions. This means that there are potentially many other open questions about attachment theory. Our goal in this book has been to provide readers with an overview of attachment theory and research. In doing so, we have addressed many of the most common and fundamental questions we get asked when teaching classes and giving talks on the topic of attachment theory. We hope that this book has left readers with a fervent desire to learn more about attachment and to pursue such open questions in their future research or clinical practice. To close our Epilogue, and for that matter this book, we draw on yet another quote from Johnny Cash. A quote about his primary attachment figure, his wife June Carter:

There's unconditional love there. You hear that phrase a lot but it's real with me and her. She loves me in spite of everything, in spite of myself. She has saved my life more than once. She's always been there with her love, and it has certainly made me forget the pain for a long time, many times. When it gets dark and everybody's gone home and the lights are turned off, it's just me and her.