

Support and dysfunctional attachment patterns
Tony White

Research on attachment highlights the centrality of the support seeking and support giving transactions in the formation of a secure attachment. In child development it is considered very important for parents to actively encourage children to master the support seeking transaction and for the support givers around them to respond with the correct Nurturing Parent transaction.

It is also most important to continue to offer the support transaction to the teenager even if they are rejecting and scornful of it. Parents need to make sure they do not start to feel rejected by the teenager and stop offering it.

Among those with attachment problems the social support seeking transaction has failed to develop or has developed in a dysfunctional way.

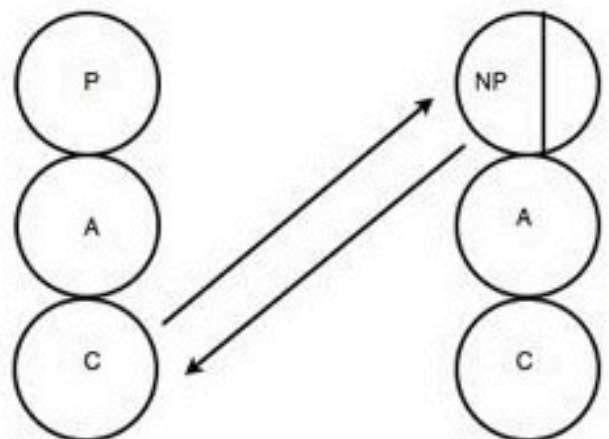
Anxious attachment - the individual does not seek support due to fears of rejection or abandonment.

Avoidant attachment - the individual does not seek support because of the belief they would not benefit from it.

Ambivalent attachment - the individual may be a chronic seeker of support but they derive little satisfaction from the support.

Continually denying ones need for support, failing to seek support or never feeling as though one has received enough support sets up a relationship pattern that strengthens the dysfunctional attachment. Not seeking support or not letting others know how they can be supportive never allows the individual to reap the benefits of the comfort. It does not allow them to see others as being supportive or feeling like they deserve such support. Being overly demanding of others for support leads to them feeling 'burned out' and ultimately rejecting the person as too overwhelming.

In these situations the individual has ultimately created the very outcome that confirms and reinforces the relational patterns that confirm their dysfunctional attachment styles.



The support transaction

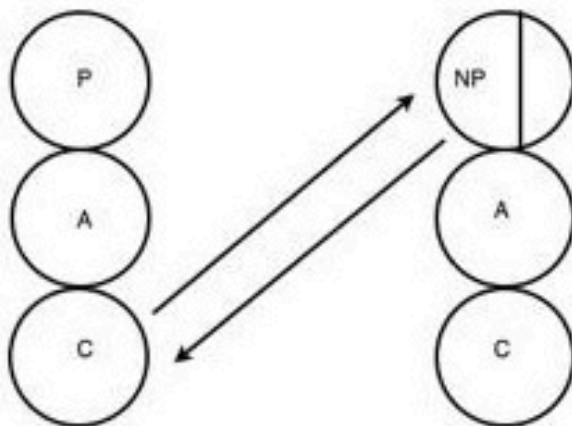


Attachment - support giving and support receiving
Tony White

Getting married is a transitional time for people and as a result could be seen to be a time when attachment styles in couples are open to change. Most importantly intervening such that the security of attachments can be altered during this transitional period. The available evidence does suggest that couples who separate can be distinguished on the basis of attachment style from those who remain married and satisfied at least early in the marriage. Pasch and Bradbury (1998) were able to distinguish between couples who remained satisfied from those who were either unhappy or divorced over 4 years based on social support behaviour in the first 6 months of marriage.



This could mean that spouses who respond negatively to their partner's expressed attachment needs, or who lack competence in expressing their own needs will be at higher risks of negative outcomes. The available research demonstrates that the inability to seek or offer support when feeling anxious results in insecure attachment. Thus support seeking and support giving behaviors are critical in developing an effective attachment style in marital couples.



In transactional analysis terms it is these transactions that are seen to be of considerable importance in the development of a healthy attachment style in marital couples and therefore should be a high priority in any therapeutic intervention. Do both spouses realize when they are distressed? Do they know how to ask for help and are they capable of giving help to their marital partner?

This is especially relevant for those entering into the transitional phase of getting married.

Attachment change over time Tony White

Longitudinal studies assessing the stability of attachment in both childhood and adulthood indicate there is substantial continuity in attachment across time when there is continuity in the environment. However there are a significant number of individuals who are seen to have changes in attachment style over time. In longitudinal studies of change in adult attachment approximately 30% report change.

In longitudinal studies examining change from childhood to adulthood, reports of change range from 23% to 50%. However, changes in attachment over time were consistently related to changes in the family environment, such as maternal depression and parental divorce or other things that would be expected to impact on attachment security.

Such studies support Bowlby's premise that attachment patterns can change over time. One theory is that attachment change may occur in the context of changing life circumstances (being in a supportive relationship, going through a life transition or entering therapy). This is known as the contextual model.

In this model changing the quality of the attachment caregiver bond allows the individual to alter beliefs about himself and others. In therapy one would therefore seek to alter attachment relevant behaviors within the transference relationship rather than focussing on changing beliefs and cognitions directly.

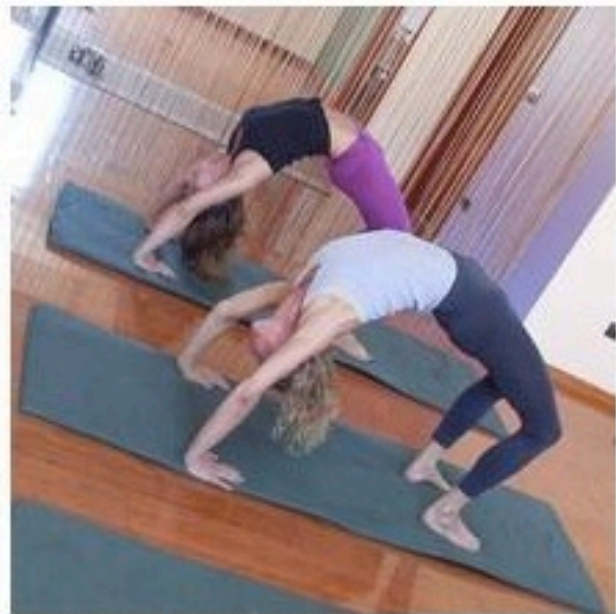


Having such a large body of research supporting the contextual model is very good news for clients (and therapists). It also highlights the importance of working with clients on changing the practicalities of their family and intimate relationships. Behaviors which break symbioses or assist one to move onto the next stage of psychological development such as with children and teenagers. And not getting completely focussed on intrapsychic processes like injunctions and drivers.

Matricide and attachment Tony White

Matricide is such an anathema of human nature. For an offspring to kill mother is so antithetical to the laws of evolution. It is programmed into our very cells that mother should stay alive as she is the core of our physical and psychological survival. Indeed we all come from the very inside of the physical body of mother.

John Bowlby proposes an explanation for matricide and indeed seeks to explain violent and aggressive youth in general. He states, "the most violently angry and dysfunctional responses of all, it seems probable, are elicited in children and adolescents who not only experience repeated separations but are constantly subjected to the threat of being abandoned."



Some things just are not natural for humans to do

Furthermore he noted the importance of threats to attachment as a determinant of aggression and violence in adolescence, by citing instances of matricide. One adolescent who murdered his mother stated, "I couldn't stand to have her leave me." Another youth who placed a bomb in his mother's luggage as she boarded a plane explained, "I decided that she would never leave me again."

As a psychological force human attachment should never be underestimated, and it often is. A newborn child has virtually no survival skills at all. It cannot move by itself, feed itself, ward off predators, keep itself warm like so many other new born animals can. Its only survival skill is to look cute. To seduce mother into loving it and much more importantly forming an attachment to it so she stays around. As I said before at the core of any persons survival is an attachment to mother.



This has direct implications for psychotherapy. If a client develops a strong transference (attachment) to the therapist then the same powerful psychological forces come into play. They of course need to be understood for what they are.