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978-1-107-02774-9 - Different Faces of Attachment: Cultural Variations on a Universal Human Need

Edited by Hiltrud Otto and Heidi Keller

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Different Faces of Attachment

Cultural Variations on a Universal Human Need

Attachment between an infant and his or her parents is a major topic within developmental psychology. An increasing number of psychologists, evolutionary biologists, and anthropologists are articulating their doubts that attachment theory in its present form is applicable worldwide, without, however, denying that the development of attachment is a universal need. This book brings together leading scholars from psychology, anthropology, and related fields to reformulate attachment theory in order to fit the cultural realities of our world. Contributions are based on empirical research and observation in a variety of cultural contexts. They are complemented by careful evaluation and deconstruction of many of the underlying premises and assumptions of attachment theory and of conventional research on the role of infant–parent attachment in human development. The book creates a contextual cultural understanding of attachment that will provide the basis for a groundbreaking reconceptualization of attachment theory.

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Foreword

Attachment theory developed amidst the talented group of psychologists and clinicians who surrounded John Bowlby in London between the publication of his memorable report on maternal deprivation for the World Health Organization (*Maternal Care and Mental Health*) in 1951 (a more popular version was published by Pelican as *Child Care and the Growth of Love* in 1953) and the publication of his article on “The Nature of the Child’s Tie to His Mother” in 1958. As subsequently elaborated in the trilogy Bowlby published between 1969 and 1980, attachment theory represented a synthesis of the available clinical evidence, sensitive observations of young children experiencing stressful separations, and comparative experimental research by scientists such as Harry Harlow, a psychologist, and Robert Hinde, a behavioral biologist, all viewed in the context of the integrative control systems theory then emerging. The tremendous power of that synthesis has been demonstrated conclusively over the course of the ensuing decades as attachment theory has come to be recognized as the most coherent and predictively useful theory describing human developmental processes.

The enduring success of attachment theory is surely attributable not only to its scientific coherence but also to its timeliness and cultural resonance, although proponents of attachment theory have long preferred to claim it as a purely scientific theory with implications for policy (e.g., on early childcare) and practice (with an emphasis on maternal responsibility and responsiveness) rather than as an ideologically compatible framework for understanding early development. A traumatic half-century of war and devastation had precipitated widespread doubts and questions about the essence of human nature by the time Bowlby began creating attachment theory. Bowlby’s theory provided comforting reassurance that human babies were biologically designed to thrive when assured of the continued availability and responsiveness of their mothers, and this emphasis on maternal love and exclusive domesticity strongly complemented a widespread desire to reclaim a “traditional” way of life, with mothers focused on caring for their children and fathers focused

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on economic activity, rebuilding the shattered economies and societies around them. There is little doubt that the widespread embrace of attachment theory in Western developmental psychology was attributable, at least in part, to its resonance with cultural values then in ascendance. Less remarked upon is the extent to which the theory itself was surely created under the influence of clear cultural values and ideology as well.

The contributors to Otto and Keller's remarkable anthology have no doubt about the important role played by values and practices in shaping beliefs, practices, and early child–parent relationships. Writing in both German and English over the last 30 years, Keller (e.g., Keller, 2007; Keller, Miranda, and Gauda, 1984; Keller, Poortinga, and Schoelmerich, 2002) has argued and demonstrated that different cultural groups view infancy, parenthood, and developmental processes in distinctive ways and that these often profound differences shape infant–parent interactions and relationships significantly, thereby raising searching questions about many of the assumptions and conclusions held dear by attachment theorists and developmental scientists. Now, in this volume, Keller and her coeditor, Hiltrud Otto, are joined by a phalanx of distinguished psychologists and anthropologists who have conducted research in diverse cultures and settings designed to document the central importance of ecological variations in understanding the role, or possible roles, of infant–parent relationships in development. The case they offer is challenging and compelling, strengthened by the impressive way in which empirical research and observation in a variety of cultural contexts is complemented by careful evaluation and deconstruction of many of the underlying premises and assumptions of attachment theory and of conventional research on the role of infant–parent (though often only infant–mother) attachment in human development. Collectively, these scholars have constructed a remarkable argument for the central importance of the cultural context when striving to understand the place of attachment in human development. Their examination and critique of attachment theory is thus much more comprehensive and provocative than much earlier evaluations of the empirical foundations of attachment theory written by my colleagues and me (e.g., Lamb, Thompson, Gardner *et al.*, 1985).

Specifically, the contributors to *Different Faces of Attachment* address, in sequence, the extent to which attachment theory is as well grounded in evolutionary theory as Bowlby believed, cultural differences in the perception of close child–parent relationships, differences in the early experiences and processes of relationship formation in differently organized societies, and descriptive accounts of parent–child interaction in several quite distinctive socioecological contexts. It ends with two chapters by culturally sensitive scholars who have long pondered the role of

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culture in shaping social relationships, and a concluding chapter written by the editors.

Different Faces of Attachment is a unique collection, rich in insights and provocative ideas. It should be required reading for all developmental scientists and theorists, as well as for practitioners with responsibility for translating the fruits of research (often conducted in a rather narrow and unrepresentative cultural context) into practical guidelines to be followed in other, quite different cultural settings. At a time when there is increasing focus on the extreme fragility and vulnerability of infants and young children, there is a special need for scholars to recognize not only the remarkable resilience of young humans, but also our species' incredible adaptability to diverse sociocultural demands and contexts. *Different Faces of Attachment* offers a compelling argument for humility and for recognition of the rather unusual circumstances to which attachment theory has been responsive.

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