

# The Ties That Bond

## Adult romantic and sexual styles may grow out of parent-child affiliations

By BRUCE BOWER

**M**ore than 50 years ago, as World War II's horrors and hatreds raged, British psychoanalyst John Bowlby bucked the global tide, delving into what he suspected were the roots of love. Bowlby took seriously Sigmund Freud's notion that individuals unconsciously orchestrate adult relationships on the basis of feelings and reactions originally evoked by childhood caretakers. He felt that the Viennese psychiatrist's idea had an untapped potential for exploring grown-up intimacies.

Bowlby, now deceased, first noted extensive delinquency in boys who had seen little of their mothers as infants. He also came across reports of a "failure to thrive" in youngsters reared in institutions and cared for by rotating squads of nurses.

Soon afterwards, Bowlby came to appreciate caregiver-child attachments, as he called them, in many animals whose young require extensive care. For instance, ducklings instinctively trail after any larger creature who regularly offers them aid and comfort, whether it's a mother duck or a curious scientist. On the darker side, monkeys who grow up clinging to the cold, unresponsive body of a wire-mesh substitute mother become social misfits, cowering and staring blankly out of hollow eyes.

Bowlby theorized that the human species has made a heavy evolutionary investment in mutual bonds. An innate attachment system, consisting of behaviors and physiological responses that weave pairs of individuals into interdependent units, increases both the survival of helpless infants and the reproductive success of their parents.

On the basis of childhood ties to core adult protectors, he proposed, kids develop implicit expectations about how people operate in relationships. These working models of intimacy, which are presumably open to revision as one's social world expands, provide a blueprint for adult romantic pairings.

His conception of attachment as an evolutionary product that organizes interpersonal life from cradle to grave sparked little interest among developmental researchers. Instead, they applied Bowlby's ideas solely to the study of mother-child interactions. In the last decade, however, a growing number of scientists has embraced attachment theory as a useful per-

spective from which to explore the evolution of close relationships among adults.

"There seems to be little room for doubt that the same mechanism that evolved to tie infants to their caregivers was exploited by natural selection for keeping adult partners together," write psychologists Debra Zeifman and Cindy Hazan, both of Cornell University, in a chapter of *Evolutionary Social Psychology* (1997, Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum).

The evolutionary reasons for plugging the infant-caregiver attachment system into an adults-only mating game are subject to dispute. Some researchers sus-

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pect that a lifelong capacity for social intimacy evolved as a single type of interpersonal glue, binding infants to their caregivers and tying sexual partners to one another so they can provide consistent care to offspring. Others regard caregiver-infant bonds as comprising a spectrum of arrangements that can steer a child's mating proclivities down any number of paths, from heartfelt monogamy to conniving promiscuity.

**M**uch research has documented the existence of three possible attachment orientations in children and adults: secure, ambivalent, and avoidant.

Most infants achieve secure attachment to at least one caregiver. For these youngsters, the mother or another adult consistently responds to their needs, serves as a source of comfort at times of distress, and offers a safe base from which to explore the world. Adults with a secure orientation tend to have trusting, lasting relationships in which they share intimate information and work out conflicts through compromise.

Ambivalent youngsters receive inconsistent support that sows doubts about the caregiver's availability. Desperate attempts by these kids to attract adult attention are combined with an angry

resistance to being soothed. Ambivalent adults view themselves poorly and become preoccupied with keeping their romantic partners close at hand and firmly committed to the relationship.

Avoidant infants get repeatedly rejected by their caregivers and steer clear of them when upset. Novel surroundings evoke tentative or compulsive behavior but no attempts to seek adult support. Avoidant adults either look down upon or dread any hints of emotional intimacy.

Although some people seem poorly suited to marriage, enduring relationships between pairs of adults represent "the norm for our species," according to Zeifman and Hazan. For millennia, the most successful parents have been those who stayed together and made sure that their children learned skills for survival, finding a mate, and raising offspring, the psychologists theorize.

Their argument contrasts with a prior proposal that adults are, by nature, "serial monogamists" who experience infatuations only long enough to raise a child for about 4 years (SN: 11/27/93, p. 362).

Clear majorities of both sexes report a desire for lasting sexual relationships that appears to stem from the attachment system, Zeifman and Hazan argue. In cross-cultural surveys, men and women alike report that the most crucial qualities of a potential mate are kindness, empathy, and intelligence.

Such qualities also nurture secure attachment in infants, who carefully monitor a caregiver's kindness and perceptiveness, as well as his or her familiarity.

For adults, the many divorces that occur in the first few years of marriage may reflect the failure of spouses to form a psychological attachment, Zeifman and Hazan theorize. When attachment does flower, its effects transcend each person's contribution to the relationship, and partners may get more than they bargained for—true love.

Unlike other social relationships, full-blown attachments contain four defining features, according to Zeifman and Hazan. In such duos, partners maintain close physical proximity and seek each other out at times of danger or stress. In addition, the relationship is conceived of as a secure base in the world, and separation sparks emotional distress or, in the case of one partner's death, grief.

In a survey of young and middle-aged

adults, Zeifman and Hazan found that attachments meeting all of these criteria had been formed almost exclusively with parents and sexual partners. In a comparable study of teenagers, such attachments to peers were rare overall but appeared fairly often in the minority who had ambivalent or avoidant orientations toward their parents.

**S**uch results contribute to evidence that adult attachment evolved to keep sexual partners together, contend Lynn C. Miller and Stephanie A. Fishkin, both psychologists at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles. In groups of Stone Age hunters and foragers, they propose, adults who melded into stable relationships and gave their children plenty of support were more likely to experience enjoyable sex and raise their youngsters to maturity.

However, the rise of city life over the past 10,000 years has introduced more people to abject poverty and shrunk the number of supportive friends and family living near one another, Miller and Fishkin argue. Such conditions often breed parents who are unable or unwilling to stay together and who are unprepared to offer sensitive care to their kids, in their view.

A child's ambivalent or avoidant responses to such parents may gear him or her toward a secondary strategy of pursuing short-term relationships instead of a long-term attachment.

Preliminary data gathered by the USC scientists support their theory that long-term relationships are the natural state. In two studies that consisted of more than 600 male and female college students, most members of both sexes said that they preferred having either one or two sexual partners over the next 30 years rather than none or more than two. There was no overall difference among students reporting different forms of attachment to their parents.

Only men who had experienced cold, distant relationships to their fathers departed sharply from this pattern, most often citing a desire for four future partners.

**R**esearchers known as evolutionary psychologists take a different approach to the study of adult attachment styles. Mating patterns arise from individual strategies to promulgate one's genes, either by producing and raising more offspring or by aiding the survival of other kin, these scientists contend. A range of sexual approaches emerges from an evolved repertoire of attachment styles, no single one of which is likely to have predominated in Stone Age life, they theorize.

For instance, David M. Buss of the University of Texas at Austin argues that differences in early childhood attachments prod individuals toward pursuing one of

a variety of sexual strategies, which may include stable relationships for securely attached folks and casual sex for those with ambivalent orientations.

This work draws heavily on a model presented in 1991 by Jay Belsky, a psychologist at Pennsylvania State University in State College, and his colleagues. They theorized that times of relative safety and abundance produce warm parental care. Secure attachments set the stage for delayed sexual maturity, mating with one or a few people, and intensive nurturing of the children's own offspring, they say.

In contrast, parental care grows chillier in times marked by scarce food and

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shaky prospects for survival. Caregivers treat infants in harsh, dismissive ways.

Under such circumstances, youngsters develop ambivalent or avoidant attachments that imbue them with a sense of fatalistic opportunism regarding close relationships. Belsky proposes that these children often begin puberty early, mate with many people, and devote limited effort to raising the resulting brood—characteristics that he considers advantageous in hard times.

Ambivalent attachment may also have evolved as a means of inducing enough helpless dependency in some children—perhaps in those with an introverted disposition—that they become adult “helpers at the nest” for parents or other kin, Belsky speculates.

“Secure and insecure [attachment] patterns evolved as responses to caregiving practices that enable individuals to successfully reproduce, or at least once did so in [certain] environments,” Belsky writes in the upcoming *Handbook of Attachment Theory and Research* (J. Cassidy and P. Shaver, eds., New York: Guilford). Stone Age ecological conditions may have promoted attachment patterns that don't appear in modern cultures, he suggests.

Full-blown attachment, with its various interactions, may in fact occur only in childhood, adds psychologist Lee A. Kirkpatrick of the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, Va. Long-term sexual relationships depend only on the ability to experience the emotion of love, Kirkpatrick contends.

**I**t will take a decade or more to evaluate fully the competing evolutionary explanations of attachment, remarks psychologist Jeffrey A. Simpson of Texas A&M University in College Station. In the meantime, he says, attachment theory looks like a promising tool for studying close adult ties in the here-and-now.

Consider an as-yet-unpublished study by Simpson of the ways in which college students with different attachment styles handle a visceral threat to a dating relationship. Each member of dating duos that had been together for an average of 16 months first completed a battery of surveys on their attitudes toward relationships and love, from which attachment scores were generated. They were then videotaped as they evaluated and discussed slides of highly attractive and moderately attractive students with their dating partner looking on. Afterwards, all the volunteers watched their videotapes and noted their thoughts and feelings at specific points.

While looking at photos of men, the secure women frequently checked to see if their partner were upset, threatened, or jealous, whereas avoidant women tended to ignore their partners. Men, regardless of attachment style, checked their partners most often during evaluations of the most attractive alternatives.

When viewing the videotapes, the secure men exhibited a greater willingness than other men to reveal their dismay as their partners rated potential dates.

When shown a videotape of their partner rating the photos, many participants—including those displaying secure attachment styles—exhibited little understanding of their partner's thoughts and feelings. Simpson attributes this tendency, first reported in a study that did not measure attachment (SN: 3/23/96, p. 190), to a need to keep knowledge about relationship-threatening thoughts at bay in order to preserve the romantic status quo.

Ambivalent women, however, showed keen empathic insight when their partners rated other women. At the same time, they felt much discomfort and insecurity about themselves and their relationships.

Constant worry about the commitment of partners may impel ambivalent women to try to monitor and control them at all times, Simpson says. That smothering strategy may backfire when the women make uncomfortable discoveries about their beaus that provoke jealousy and may derail relationships.

Four months after the study, break-ups were most likely to have occurred between pairs in which both partners have ambivalent attachment styles.

Scientists need to examine how attachment styles influence the responses of married partners to threatening situations, Simpson notes.

That's a challenge John Bowlby would have undoubtedly relished. □