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An Overview of Attachment in Marriage

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### Abstract

This paper seeks to give an overview of the attachment processes in marriage, starting with the courting process when attachment bonds are first formed. It then explores the newlywed phase and the longer-term relationship, including negative phenomenon such as violence in marriage. Finally, dissolution is discussed.

### An Overview of Attachment in Marriage

Of the common attachment relationships that have been identified, the parent-child relationship and the spousal relationships are arguably the two most important relationships of our lifetimes. While the Parent-Child relationship is of critical importance to the well being of the individual throughout the lifetime, the marital relationship will often take up a significantly greater percentage of the individual's life.

Generally attachment relations are considered to be stable and relatively unchanging. Sperling and Berman, for example, give their working definition as "... the stable tendency of an individual to make substantial efforts to seek and maintain proximity to and contact with one or a few specific individuals who provide the subjective potential for physical and/or psychological safety and security" (1994, p. 8) and Davila, Karney, and Bradbury (1999) note that "a basic premise of attachment theory is that attachment style is stable and guides interpersonal functioning across the life span." Even so, there are obviously some exceptions to this rule. If there is an attachment relationship in marriage, then this relation must develop in some psychological fashion – while one may be born with an attachment to one's parents, one can not be born with an attachment to a spouse.

Clearly, then, we must begin any investigation into attachment in marriage during the courting phases of the relationship. Besides the genetic and hormonal factors involved in the courting process, a predominant part of the courtship rituals are behaviors that are likely to encourage attachment such as stroking, touching, and kissing (c.f. Sperling and Berman, 1994, pp. 228, 300). In fact, current research indicates that by the time the couple gets close to marriage, the attachment pattern is fairly well set. Crowell, Treboux, & Waters (2002) note "marriage, per se, was not an impetus for change" and that the attachment representations appear

to be based on early attachment experiences. While one can easily infer that typical courtship rituals have the effect of creating the attachment bond, this may not be true for all cultures and time periods. As an example, in some cultures the couple's parents arrange the marriage and the couple may not even meet until the day of the wedding. What we can conclude is that in our western culture the "typical western" courtship rituals create the attachment relationship.

There are a few additional problems with using the study by Crowell et al. On average, the couples had been courting for 51 months ( $SD = 25.66$ ), which is a very long time for attachment relationships to form in. Consequently, while one may conclude that the ceremony itself may not have had a major impact in attachment styles, we cannot say at what point the couple's attachment style had firmed with any certainty based on this study. The study covered the period of three months prior to the wedding through 18 months after the wedding, and no mention of how long the couples were engaged was made. Further, the authors note that a powerful opportunity for change was afforded by several of the couples, especially among those that still lived with their parents or had not cohabitated prior to marriage. This indicates that more specialized studies may provide different results (such as by studying those that had not cohabitated before the marriage or those who abstain from sexual activity before marriage).

It is very difficult to underestimate the importance of the courting phase. Creasey (2002) did a study to determine the relationship between attachment style and conflict resolution. In the report, Creasey notes "conflict management difficulties ... represent a future concern for young adults. Researchers have documented that married couples who engage in corrosive management behaviors tinged with negative affect ... are more likely to divorce than couples who use more positive conflict management behavior" (2002). The results of the study indicate that attachment style strongly predicts conflict management behavior. Gender-related differences were observed

as well, with secure women displaying more positive behaviors and insecure men displaying more negative behaviors.

The next phase the couple embarks on is the newlywed phase and, as noted above, there seems to be some confusion on how much impact the wedding plays in attachment processes. In current western culture cohabitation prior to marriage is relatively common, whereas in prior time periods this custom was not generally practiced. Indeed, the common law marital statutes of some states presume that the act of cohabitating creates a marital bond. One may posit that there is a significant difference in attachment adjustment between couples who cohabit before marriage and those who do not, however there is very little research on the subject.

Nevertheless, Davila et al. (1999) were able to determine that attachment processes do, in fact, change during the early years of marriage. They compared linear models to mean and standard deviation models for various components of attachment as well as marital satisfaction and determined that the linear models were a “better fit” in each case. I was disappointed to discover that they did not compare an exponential model. Mathematically speaking, exponential models are more elegant and often better matches for natural processes. However they did do a good job of determining change in attachment as well as investigating both the intra-personal forces and the inter-personal forces that moderate attachment.

While Davila et al. did confirm several intuitive hypotheses, the study also discovered several counter-intuitive findings. They address several issues in their study including contextual models of attachment change, cognitive-social models, and reciprocal associations within marriage.

Davila et al. cited several studies that indicated that marital satisfaction tends to decrease with time – that is, the couple starts in a “honeymoon phase” where they view their marriage as

ideal, and over time their perception of their marriage becomes more realistic. Their data confirms these results and also posits that attachment security increases with time. “Spouses tend to become more secure over time—specifically, more comfortable depending on others and less anxious about abandonment” (Davila et al., 1999). Unfortunately why this occurs is not clear. There are several contributing factors within the marriage, and they further note a study by Klohnen and John (1998 as cited in Davila et al., 1999) that found evidence of an increase in attachment security in a 25-year longitudinal study. Consequently, whether “the trend toward security is actually reflective of a marital process rather than a more global maturational process is not clear” (Davila et al., 1999).

Davila et al. also studied why attachment representations changed over time, investigating contextual, social-cognitive, and individual difference models and the concept of “stable vulnerabilities” – emotionally significant life events that tend to make one vulnerable to attachment change. What they found gave support to all three models, supporting not one model but rather some complex combination of all three models. For instance, they found that despite an average trend toward security in the early years of marriage, “significant individual fluctuations occurred over time” (Davila et al., 1999). This was true for both husbands and wives, and, consistent with what the cognitive-social model predicted, was strongly related to marital satisfaction. Continuing the analysis, they further note that “wives' attachment fluctuations were also directly affected by their levels of stable vulnerabilities: Higher levels of vulnerabilities were associated with greater fluctuations” (Davila et al., 1999) consistent with the individual differences model.

Davila et al. also created a composite model, which they called the diathesis-stress model, which was based on both the individual differences model and the cognitive-social model. The

data indicated that vulnerability “moderated the number of [reciprocal] associations” (Davila et al., 1999), which in turn lent credence to the composite model. Davila et al. (1999) continue the support for a more complex, composite based model by stating that:

The clearest example was that as vulnerable husbands became less maritally satisfied, they also became less comfortable depending on others. This association was weaker for less vulnerable husbands. Hence, vulnerability creates a strong link between marital satisfaction and attachment security for husbands. This suggests that vulnerable husbands may be very reactive to even minor indicators of marital distress, or they may even overinterpret benign situations as evidence of their partners' unavailability.

It makes sense for the attachment relation to require a complex set of variables when evaluating change in attachment, for if attachment is to be relatively stable then it must be resistant to change and it is often more difficult to induce change in a complex processes than a simple processes. Even so, the degree of complexity may often be underestimated. Davila et al. also investigated reciprocal associations – that is, what effect does the attachment style, or one of the components of attachment, have on the spouse and what are the repercussions of that effect on the spouse effect on the originator of the effect. In other words, what cycles are involved in the attachment relationship?

Davila et al. (1999) found “numerous reciprocal processes”, both inter-spouse and intra-spouse, including ample evidence for a marital satisfaction / attachment security loop. “In both cases [husband and wife], satisfaction bred security, and security bred satisfaction” (Davila et al., 1999). As noted above, they discovered that stable vulnerability moderated the number of

associations, adding in an individual-difference factor to the equation. In the conclusion of their paper, Davila et al. (1999) note:

The results also highlight a process that informs understanding of the course of marriage for vulnerable spouses in particular. The results from the reciprocal analyses suggest that vulnerable people may be more likely to change their feelings about their marriage in response to changes in their levels of attachment security. ... This has important implications for understanding the course of marriage, particularly for understanding who will be at high risk for ongoing marital dissatisfaction and possibly dissolution.

Gender-based differences were discovered in the study. “In associations involving changes in husbands' marital satisfaction, it was always the case that higher levels of security of either spouse were associated with higher levels of husbands' marital satisfaction” (Davila et al., 1999) whereas “wives' patterns appeared to be different” (Davila et al.). In particular, vulnerable wives tended to be *less* secure and satisfied when the husband was secure and satisfied. This counter-intuitive result was the cause for much speculation, and for further information the interested reader is directed to the study.

Kobak and Hazan (1991) did a study that attempted to relate the accuracy of internal working models (IWM's) to attachment security, treating the IWM as an independent variable. As was expected, they discovered that spouses with a secure IWM (that is, they were comfortable relying on their spouse and perceived the spouse as being available) were better adjusted – they “showed more constructive modulation of emotion and reported better marital adjustment” (Kobak & Hazan, 1991).

Similar to Davila et al., they propose a reciprocal process between the relationship and the IWM, and thus attachment security. They created an “agreement index” that measured the “extent to which [internal working] models were accommodated in the marital relationship” (Kobak & Hazan, 1991) which accounted for a significant portion of the variance in marital adjustment. They also found a reciprocal relationship between marital relations and communications. When the wife was less secure in her IWM, the husband displayed lower listening behavior. When the husband was less secure in his IWM the wife was less helpful in problem solving and displayed more negative affect (such as anger or belligerence).

It is not surprising, then, that attachment styles play a key role in the negative aspects of marriage (such as violence and dissolution) as well. Davila and Bradbury (2001) investigated a number of couples in unhappy marriages that did not divorce. Davila and Bradbury note that a number of scholars have posited a connection between attachment insecurity and unhappy marriages. They further theorize that those who stayed together but were unhappy would display attachment insecurity (and note that other researchers have created this link in dating couples). “In particular, concerns about abandonment and love worthiness (what adult attachment researchers refer to as anxiety about abandonment) may do so. Such concerns are at the core of a broader interpersonal style consistent with a preoccupied (or ambivalent) attachment pattern” (Davila & Bradbury, 2001).

Holtzworth-Munroe, Stuart, and Hutchinson (1997) investigated patterns of violent husbands (as compared to nonviolent husbands) and discovered that they were more disorganized, preoccupied, and insecure in attachment. More specifically, they reported having a need for closeness with and dependence on their wives, but were also uncomfortable with depending on their wives and with closeness. This stood in contrast to distressed (e.g.

disorganized, preoccupied, or insecure) but nonviolent men who reported having less of a need for closeness with and dependency on their wives. There are, unfortunately, several limitations to this study that they also note, including both generalizability and circumstance. A violent man in treatment or who's wife recently asked for a separation would naturally experience ambivalence, which circumstance may invalidate the notion of studying the attachment construct. Furthermore they note that the nature of the study precludes making any conclusions as to whether the attachment pattern preceded the trouble, or if the trouble preceded the violence.

There is one key difference between these two papers – the specific purpose of Davila and Bradbury (2001) was to discover a method whereby an otherwise unhappy marriage could be transformed into a happy marriage, whereas Holtzworth-Munroe et al. investigated violent men (and only violent *men*, not violent *women*) in a general sense.

At this point, we have discovered several major things about attachment in marriage: 1) the courting rituals are of critical importance to the future marriage, 2) the attachment styles of the couple is a key predictor for the conflict resolution and communication of the marriage, and 3) the marriage can be a powerful agent for change, but change does not necessarily occur solely because of the marriage. The next step is to investigate the dissolution of the marriage.

Dissolution is a step that occurs in every marriage, whether it is through divorce or through the death of one of the partners. Dissolution of an attachment bond is generally quite traumatic (c.f. Sperling and Berman, 1994) especially if the dissolution was not anticipated. The mourning process of a departed spouse is well known and will not be covered here.

Divorce often creates negative affect, especially if there are children involved, and continued attachment to the former spouse has been shown to cause marital difficulties (Buunk & Mutsaers, 1999). The nature of the difficulties seems to be gender specific as well. The ability

of women to engage in a friendship with their former spouse without affecting the marriage was dependent on their spouse's attitude toward such relationships, whereas the wives did not seem to tolerate the continued attachment of their husband to his ex-wife at all. In fact, Buunk and Mutsaers go so far as to suggest that clinicians and therapists be extremely cautious when considering a suggestion to the divorced couple that they create a friendship. In most cases, the feelings of hostility will go away of their own accord, and in any new marital relations the couple – and in the case of the man, his new wife as well – will suffer in most cases.

Sperling and Berman (1994) also cover the attachment relationship in marriage in some depth (Chapter 8, for example, is entirely devoted to attachment in marriage), and they make several important points. Attachment for a child is based on seeking care giving, but an adult relationship needs to be based both on care giving and care providing behaviors (p. 213), so a happy marriage must involve a reciprocal relationship. Further, it is “unlikely that attachment regulates all affect, or even all negative affect, any more than attachment accounts for all behavior in the parent-child dyad. There are many [internal working models] and behavioral systems, all of which may regulate some emotions to greater or lesser degrees” (p. 214).

Sperling and Berman posit that “the activation of attachment in marriage occurs in a two-stage process involving both the behavior of the attachment figure and the self's IWM of attachment” (1994, p. 220). If the behavior activates one spouse's attachment system, that spouse will produce a behavior that may activate the other spouse's behavior system. This creates a cycle that continues until one partner's attachment system is not activated.

One thing that appears to be lacking in the research is a comprehensive examination of attachment style from the beginning of the courtship phase through the dissolution phase. This kind of study would be very difficult to do (at the least), potentially requiring several decades of

research to complete. Many studies do not take into account cause and effect relationships, nor is the nature of the pre-marital relationship taken into consideration. One would expect a couple that cohabitated prior to the actual ceremony to be in a different phase of the relationship than one that did not as they would have (presumably) interacted in most of the same ways a traditional married couple interacts (i.e. joint checking accounts, purchasing a house or car together) and have already experienced the need to create a different form of relationship. Once one adds in these additional factors, there is clearly a need for further research.

What we can say with some certainty, however, is that attachment is a very important and complex part of the marital bond. The attachment is formed during the courtship phase and is likely to have been relatively set by the time of the actual wedding, the attachment style predicts with some accuracy the happiness of the marriage, and attachment increases in security throughout the couple's lifetime.

For more information about adult attachment in general, internal working models, and a more complete (if somewhat dated) theory of marital attachment, the reader is directed to Sperling and Berman (below). If the reader wishes to offer constructive criticism or exchange further information, the author can be reached at [kengifirbrom@yahoo.com](mailto:kengifirbrom@yahoo.com).

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