HPS304 THE SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY OF RELATIONSHIPS

SEMESTER 2 2016

TOPICS

LEARNING MODULE 2: ATTACHMENT THEORY

Attachment theory

- Attachment theory is a theory of human bonding and provides an explanation for why people have an innate need for love, care, affection and to feel secure
- Initially used as a framework to understand the early childhood experiences with caregivers on outcomes later in life
- Developed by John Bowlby:
  - *An innate psychological system that motivates human beings of all ages to seek proximity to significant others in times of need as a means of protecting oneself from threats and alleviating distress*
  - Develop out of systematic observations of maladjusted homeless children
  - Hypothesized that extended chid-parent separation resulted in deleterious interpersonal development
  - Contrasted psychoanalytic research which suggested non-normative socio-emotional development was due to maladaptive fantasy construction
  - Disciplines included:
    - Ethology
    - Evolutionary biology
    - Cognitive psychology
  - A way of conceptualising "the ability of humans to develop strong affectional bonds to particular others"
    - Interactions with attachment figures who are available and responsive in times of need facilitate the optimal functioning of the attachment system and promote a sense of attachment security
  - Two propositions were derived about attachment:
    1. Emotional bonds between individuals serve as a survival mechanism in which care-seeking are complementary behaviours to ensure survival of one's progeny and ultimately a filial's genes
    2. Harboured within the CNS, the attachment system acts as a homeostatic mechanism governed by the motivation to feel secure during times of ill-health, anxiety or threat, and as a consequence, leads to the maintenance of proximity or ready accessibility or an attachment figure
- Hazan and Shaver (1987) defined the following attachment styles:
  - **Secure style**: Comfort with closeness and confidence in others responses
  - **Avoidant style**: Insecurity in others' intentions and preference for distance
  - **Anxious ambivalent style**: Insecurity in others' responses and a strong desire for intimacy

Defining features that constitute an attachment bond

- Three defining features:
  1. Proximity maintenance: The need to maintain close distance to the attachment figure
  2. Safe haven: The attachment figure is regarded as a sanctuary
  3. Secure base: The attachment figure may act as a secure foundation from which a child can explore his or her environment and engage in non-attachment behaviour

- Coding of infant's and parent's responses to the "Strange Situation" revealed three infant attachment styles, and three corresponding parenting styles:

Attachment style	Infants	Mothers
Secure	Seek comfort, proximity and contact followed by a comfortable return to place (approx. 50-60%)	Constantly responding to infants' signals
Anxious	Display contact seeking behaviour interspersed with angry resistance, not easily comforted during stress (approx. 20-30%)	Inconsistent and inept dealing with infants' signals
Avoidant	Actively avoid contact with caregiver when distressed (approx. 10-20%)	Exhibited cold and rejecting tendencies towards infants

Activating and deactivating the attachment system / processes that regulate it

- Attachment internal working models: Mental representations 'schemata' of the attachment relationships
  - Two broad schemas:
    1. Self: Evaluations of whether the self is worthy of receiving love, affection, care and support
    2. Other: Evaluation of whether he attachment figure is a reliable, responsive, trusting caregiver
       - People hold either positive or negative views of self and other
  - Based on early child-parent attachment interactions in fulfilling attachment functions
  - Attachment styles (*people's tendency to think, behave and feel when interacting in relationships*) are thought to represent differences in working models of the self and others
    - Bowlby considered internal working models as 'dynamic'
      - Implication is that they can change over the life span
      - Change if difficult after the early stages of lie because they become ingrained and operate unconsciously and automatically
- Collins and Read (1994) describe the semantic network hierarchy of attachment mental models:
  - Their ideas are best represented by the diagram of Overall, Fletcher & Friesen (2003), three models of attachment representations
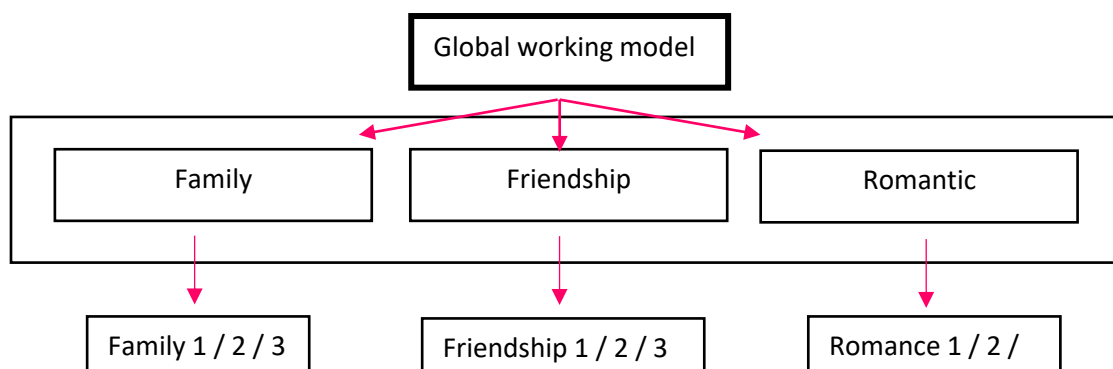
- Adult attachment amongst romantic partners:
  - Psychodynamic and social psychological research revealed analogous attachment types in adulthood to the styles identified by Ainsworth amongst infants and parents
    - These findings had important implications for the study of attachment bods later in life
    - Suggested the same features of early attachment bonds may also apply to attachment bonds in adulthood
    - This inference in turn provides a potential theoretical framework to study adult relationships
  - Hazan & Shaver (1987) applied attachment theory to the study of adult romantic relationships
    - The research followed on from the work of Weiss (1986) suggesting that chronic loneliness was due to a maladaptive or lack of attachment to a significant other
    - Supported the childhood research, with individuals falling into different attachment styles, all experiencing love differently
      - **Secure individuals**: Reported romantic love relationships as comprising trust, friendship and positive emotions
      - **Anxious individuals**: Reported feeling preoccupied with the need to merge with another person
      - **Avoidant individuals**: Reported their romantic relationship as involving a fear of closeness and a lack of trust
    - Attachment models are not necessarily static, but open to change when new experiences contradict established models

Internal working models

Whilst attachment bonds form when lasting relationships develop, our attachment style can influence our behaviours even at the very beginning of romantic relationships

- The attachment system is activated in the early stages of the relationship: early on in dating and in flirtatious encounters:
  - Seek proximity and closeness: A function of attraction
  - Normal stress and anxiety: A function of not sure what the future holds
- Behaviours associated with secure attachment assist in managing threat in flirtatious encounters- individuals are optimistic
  - Yields a positive tone to the encounters / savour experiences
  - Promotes further interaction
- Behaviours of anxiously attached can make early encounters tense / distressing- early break ups often occur
  - Seem needy / hungry for attention
  - Exaggerate and / or ruminate over real / imagined signs of rejection
- Behaviours of avoidantly attached can also short-circuit a relationship in early stages:
  - Emotionally detached, initially rejecting, purely sexual
  - Relationship seems shallow and lacking excitement
- Self-presentation: Tactical decision regarding how to show oneself to another
  - *Anxiously attached:* Emphasise the self as weak/helpless, needy – A means to solicit sympathy and compassion

- o *Avoidantly attached:* Present one's strengths and attempt to inflate their self-image in the eyes of a partner (even at the expense of diminishing another – To validate one's self-reliance and maintain emotional distance
  - o *Securely attached:* Show little signs of the presentation tactics used by insecurely attached individuals – Present oneself with greater authenticity
- Self-disclosure: Tell someone personal information or share feelings with another
  - o Inhibition of self-disclosure can hinder an early relationship to transition into a longer and more committed relationship
  - o Anxiously attached: High self-disclosure; disclose too early, indiscriminately, and don't draw on partner's self-disclosure in own disclosure
    - ▪ Risk seeming needy and intimacy won't be reciprocated
  - o Avoidantly attached: Low self-disclosure
    - ▪ To validate one's self-reliance and maintain emotional distance
  - o Securely attached: Responsive self-disclosure
    - ▪ Will self-disclosure in proportion to the relationship partner
- Presenting oneself in an honest and authentic way while engaging in self-disclosure that is in-step with the stage of the relationship is deemed attractive
- Not surprisingly then, it has been consistently found that regardless of a person's attachment style, people report greater emotions when imagining a relationship with a secure person
  - o People are attracted to securely attached people

Attachment and romantic relationships

- Secure individuals report greater relationship satisfaction than insecurely attached individuals which fosters positive relationship behaviours
- As relationships progress, individuals increasingly turn to relationship partners to meet their needs of comfort and support: In doing this, an attachment bond forms
- As relationships become consolidated, attachment style continues to influence various aspects of relationships, including:
    - ▪ Goals and beliefs
    - ▪ Cognitions and perceptions
    - ▪ Trust
    - ▪ Commitment
    - ▪ Support seeking
    - ▪ Support giving
- Securely attached individuals endorse goals of intimacy and closeness; maintain optimistic beliefs about relationships/partners
  - o These goals and beliefs enhance commitment towards a long-lasting relationship
- Insecurely attached individuals (anxious and avoidant): Goals emphasise emotional distance; relationship beliefs are biased, these goals and beliefs inhibit committing and constructively working towards a long term relationship

Insecure individuals compared to secure individuals hold more negative views/perceptions about romantic