Adult Attachment and the Link To Relationship Satisfaction: A Review of the Literature

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Abstract
Relationship dissatisfaction and divorce occur at alarming rates leading to many mental health consequences. This places a burden on mental health providers to understand and implement effective treatment for relationship problems. Attachment theory provides a conceptual framework for understanding relationship difficulties and intervening appropriately to treat them. This literature review describes the history and current research in the area of attachment, and its influence on relationship satisfaction. Suggestions for further application of the theory to improve current interventions and treatment for relationship problems are offered.

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ADULT ATTACHMENT
AND THE LINK TO RELATIONSHIP SATISFACTION:
A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

Relationship dissatisfaction and divorce occur at alarming rates leading to many mental health consequences. This places a burden on mental health providers to understand and implement effective treatment for relationship problems. Attachment theory provides a conceptual framework for understanding relationship difficulties and intervening appropriately to treat them. This literature review describes the history and current research in the area of attachment, and its influence on relationship satisfaction. Suggestions for further application of the theory to improve current interventions and treatment for relationship problems are offered.
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Adult Attachment and the Link to Relationship Satisfaction:
A Review of the Literature

Divorce and dissatisfaction in relationships lead to mental health consequences on an individual, familial, and societal level. It is predicted that nearly 50% of marriages will end in divorce in the U.S., (NCHS, 2002, 2005) with more than 1 million divorces granted each year (Americans for Divorce Reform, 2007). Researchers and clinicians in the field of psychology must increase their knowledge and understanding of therapeutic interventions that may lead to a decrease in marital distress and an improvement in relationship satisfaction.

Divorce often leads to mental health problems in adults and in children. Research suggests mothers who are separated or divorced evidence a greater number of depressive and anxiety symptoms (Afifi, Cox, & Enns, 2006). Studies also indicate that adolescents have significant school problems, a lowered sense of well-being, and an increase in depression and anxiety following a divorce (Storksen, Roysamb, Moun, & Tambs, 2005). Children of divorce may also exhibit higher levels of anxiety, depression and antisocial behavior than children of non-divorced parents. Research has also found that even prior to a divorce, these children often exhibit higher levels of these symptoms than children whose parents remain married (Strohschein, 2005). These findings suggest that not only does divorce lead to mental health consequences for children, but marital conflict does as well. Essex, Klein, Cho, and Kraemer (2003) found that exposure to marital conflict did indeed lead to an increase in psychological symptoms in children.
Thus marital conflict, often a consequence of dissatisfaction in the relationship, as well as divorce has negative consequences for the relationship partners and their children.

Divorce seems to disproportionately affect women economically. Women are often the primary care-taker of children following a divorce and thus their needs increase as their income often decreases, while for men it tends to be the opposite. Smock, Manning and Gupta (1999) reported a substantial drop in family income for women following a divorce. This often leads to societal costs as the family may seek government assistance.

In a recent study of the societal costs of divorce it was discovered that in 2001 the state of Utah spent over $300 million dollars in direct and indirect costs of divorce. Indirect costs of divorce include, but are not limited to, welfare, food stamps, child care, public housing, and court costs. These statistics were used to estimate the national costs of divorce. It was estimated that the United States spends nearly $33.3 billion each year on direct and indirect costs of divorce (Schramm, 2006).

This places the burden on those practicing in the mental health field to treat and/or prevent divorce and relationship dissatisfaction. Divorce rates continue to stay alarmingly high which suggests that there is room for improvement. There is a viable theory that provides an understanding of adult relationships and patterns in these relationships.

The purpose of this paper is to highlight the importance of attachment theory as a framework for improving treatment for relationship dissatisfaction. This will be accomplished by first describing the history and tenets of attachment theory and providing evidence for the utility of its application to adult relationship satisfaction. Gaps in the literature in this area will then be highlighted. Finally, suggestions will be made for
further and more widespread use of attachment theory to improve treatment for relationship problems in order to decrease dissatisfaction and divorce.

Theory of Attachment

Attachment theory has roots in Freudian psychoanalysis. According to Bowlby (1979), psychoanalysts and those influenced by psychoanalytic theory would agree that a stable and permanent relationship with a mother (or substitute) is vital throughout infancy and childhood. What is not agreed upon is what makes this relationship so important and why it can be so detrimental to the child who does not have this stable relationship.

John Bowlby, the father of attachment theory, became interested in how experiences of separation and loss affect children (Bowlby, 1979). In his early research Bowlby observed children placed in institutions and hospitals for extended stays. He explored the effects separation had on the relationship between mother and child (as the mother was considered to be the primary care giver). Bowlby found that there were similarities in the way the children coped with the separation and their reaction when reunited with their mother. Bowlby theorized that institutionalized children would search for their parent, either through physical or mental behaviors and when the parent returned the child expressed a great deal of anger. He proposed that this behavior serves to “recover the lost person and to dissuade him or her from deserting again” (Bowlby, 1979, pp. 51).

This behavior has an evolutionary basis. In the wild it was dangerous to lose contact with the family group, especially for the young. Therefore, it is in the best interest of the group for both personal safety and species reproduction for there to be strong bonds tying the family together. Bowlby stated that due to this survival instinct “every
separation, however brief, should be responded to by an immediate, automatic, and strong effort both to recover the family member... and to discourage that member from going away again" (Bowlby, 1979, pp. 52). These bonds or attachments are the central focus in attachment theory.

In order to understand attachment theory one must first understand the terms that are used in this area of psychology. Bowlby (1982) and a second leading figure in attachment theory, Mary Ainsworth (1970), have defined an attachment as an affectional bond that one person has with another. This bond is believed to endure over time. An attachment is often recognized by attachment behaviors. Attachment behaviors are behaviors that serve to maintain proximity or contact with a caregiver. In infants these often take the form of crying, babbling, cooing and clinging. It is believed that once an attachment has been established it remains despite changes in attachment behaviors (Ainsworth, 1970). Another commonly used term in attachment theory is mental model or working model. Both terms refer to an organized system of beliefs about oneself and beliefs about interactions with significant others (Simpson, 1990).

In summary, attachment theory originated from psychoanalytic theory, placing its emphasis on early childhood experiences. This attachment serves to keep the child safe from harm. Through the relationship with one's primary caregiver an individual learns about themselves and how others treat them.

Review of Attachment Literature

Infant Attachments

Mary Ainsworth was one of the first researchers to study the theory of attachment. In a study by Ainsworth and Bell (1970), the researchers assessed the ways in which one-
year-olds react to situations involving exploration and separation from their mothers. The sample consisted of 56 middle-class, Caucasian infants, 49-51 weeks of age. The researchers used what has been called the strange-situation procedure. The procedure consisted of eight, three minute scenarios, in which the infant’s behavior was observed. Several behaviors were observed and measured; proximity and contact-seeking, contact-maintaining, proximity- and interaction-avoiding, contact- and interaction-resisting, and search behaviors.

The results from this study indicated that when the mother was present the infant used her as a secure base from which to explore this new situation. From time to time the infant visually located his or her mother and at times returned to her before exploring once again. During the episodes in which the mother was absent the infant would spend less time exploring and more time engaged in attachment behaviors, actively seeking out the mother. When the mothers returned the infant’s proximity-seeking behaviors remained at a high level. Contact-resistant behavior was observed at the same time as contact-seeking behaviors in relation to the mother. Proximity- and interaction-avoiding behavior was also observed in some of the infants when the mother returned (Ainsworth & Bell, 1970).

Research regarding attachment theory continued as Ainsworth, Bell and Stayton (1972) conducted a study in which they assessed individual differences in attachment behaviors. The participants included 26 infant-mother pairs. The children were 16 boys and 10 girls from middle-class, Caucasian families, and were recruited through their pediatrician. The researchers visited the participants’ homes every three weeks from the
time the infant was 3 weeks to 54 weeks old, with each observation lasting approximately four hours.

The research produced several important findings. Mothers who ignored their infant's crying or were slow to respond had infants who cried more frequently and for longer periods of time. The researchers also found that mothers who held their babies for relatively long periods for non-routine reasons, (routine reasons include feeding, diapering, bedtime), tended to have babies who initiated contact with the mother and responded positively when put down. It was also found that mothers who had more frequent, brief episodes of holding their infant tended to have babies that did not respond positively to being held and yet protested to being put down. On the other hand, mothers who were abrupt and interfering when picking up their infant tended to have babies who would squirm to be put down (Ainsworth, Bell, & Stayton, 1972).

Bell and Ainsworth (1972) elaborated on the findings of the previous study with an emphasis on the attachment behavior of crying. The researchers focused on crying as it serves to bring the infant in contact with its mother and is an infant's most effective form of communication. This was reflected in their results. It was observed that after approximately three months infants changed their behavior in response to their mother. The infants whose cries were not responded to quickly or were ignored tended to cry more often and for longer than infants whose cries were responded to by the mother. The increase in crying discouraged the mothers from responding quickly and thus led to a greater increase in the infant's crying. This illustrated the way in which the attachment relationship is developed and that attachment problems may start quite early in the relationship.
In another article using the previous study, Stayton and Ainsworth (1973) elaborated on results from their research. They concluded that there is a security-insecurity dimension in the attachment of infants with their mother. The researchers proposed that the behaviors that is suggestive of an anxious or insecure attachment include frequent protests in separation situations, protest when reunited, protest when contact is ceased and prolonged, and repeated crying. Patterns of behavior that suggest a secure attachment relationship include infrequent protest at everyday separation, happy greeting upon reuniting, brief and infrequent crying, and a tendency to contentedly accept the ending of physical contact with the attachment figure. They also proposed that it is the maternal responsiveness and sensitivity to the infant’s signals that promotes the development of a secure attachment. Unresponsiveness to the infant’s signals leads to the development of an insecure or anxious attachment.

These findings eventually led Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters and Wall (1978) to propose three infant attachment styles. The first is the secure attachment that is described above. The researchers proposed two insecure attachment styles; avoidant and ambivalent attachments. The infant with an avoidant attachment style avoided contact with the mother during play and when the mother returned the infant ignored her regardless of the mother’s attempts to coax the child to come to her. These children were also observed approaching their mother and then suddenly turning away. The avoidant infants also expressed more anger than the other groups. The infants with an ambivalent attachment expressed more separation anxiety. They were more likely to be distressed in the presence of the stranger. These children were also took more time to be soothed and were observed clinging to their mothers when put down.
As demonstrated, several researchers have studied the attachment relationship and in so doing have expanded the theory. Through many studies Ainsworth and colleagues have discovered the secure/insecure dimension and have described the styles of infant-mother attachment. As research is the area continued, it began to focus on the effects of attachment in adulthood.

Attachments in Adulthood

Bowlby (1979) theorized that adults who had experienced the loss or separation from a parent during childhood would report greater symptomatology. He proposed that this was due to disruptions in the attachment relationship. He also noted that in several of his studies he found that adults with depression were more likely to report separations or loss of their primary caregiver than were non-depressed individuals. It was Bowlby's belief that attachments are important to humans from the time they are born until the time they die (1982).

Although Bowlby proposed that adults form attachments that are similar to the parent-infant attachment this idea was not fully realized until researchers Hazan and Shaver (1987) applied attachment theory to adult romantic relationships. The authors hypothesized attachment theory may provide valuable information about adult romantic relationships. They proposed that romantic love is an attachment process that each partner experiences somewhat differently because of his or her own attachment history. In their study, the authors found that, given brief descriptions, participants could accurately classify their own attachment style. Of the participants 56% classified themselves as secure, 25% as avoidant and 19% as anxious/ambivalent. These
percentages are remarkably similar to proportions reported in infant-parent attachment literature.

The participants were also asked to describe their most important romantic relationship and to rate the relationship on several factors such as happiness, fear of closeness, sexual attraction and many others. Hazan and Shaver (1987) hypothesized that participants would answer differently based on their attachment style. Their findings supported this hypothesis. They found that participants who characterized themselves as secure described their relationships as happy, trusting and on average lasted longer than either of the insecure styles. The participants with the avoidant style described their relationships as characterized by fear of intimacy, jealousy and emotional highs and lows. Those with the anxious/ambivalent style reported love as obsessional, a desire for union, marked by emotional highs and lows, and characterized by jealousy and extreme sexual attraction (Hazan & Shaver, 1987).

Hazan and Shaver (1987) proposed when assessing participants’ attachment histories individuals would report different experiences partially due to their attachment style. They found that the best predictors of adult attachment style were the participant’s perceptions of the quality of their relationship with each parent and their parents’ relationship with each other.

In a later book chapter Shaver, Hazan and Bradshaw (1988) provided clear descriptions of the similarities between infant attachment behavior and adult attachment behavior. A few of the similarities stand out. For example, when an adult is sick or distressed the individual will seek comfort from his/her romantic partner, much like an infant will seek out his/her mother when sick or distressed. Another attachment behavior
the researchers noted is that lovers often engage in prolonged eye contact and seem fascinated with one another’s physical features such as eyes, nose, and hair. It was stated that this is much the same behavior seen in infants who will often engage in prolonged eye contact with his/her mother and seems fascinated with the mother’s physical features. The researchers stated that romantic partners also use their partner as a secure base from which to explore and noted that partners will check back in from time to time and return to their partner as noted above when in distress.

Feeney and Noller (1990) sought to replicate findings of previous researchers, as well as to add to the knowledge base of adult attachment. Research participants consisted of 374 undergraduate students, mainly recruited from a freshman psychology course. The participants ranged in age from 17 to 58, the majority of the participants were single. They were asked to answer a number of questionnaires assessing self-esteem, attachment style, attitudes about love and several similar topics. The researchers hypothesized that those individuals with a secure attachment style would rate higher on measures of self-esteem. They also hypothesized that individuals with an avoidant attachment style would score low on a measure assessing loving.

Attachment style of the participants was assessed and the researchers (Feeney & Noller, 1990) found similar rates as Hazan and Shaver (1987), 55% of participants endorsed a secure attachment, 30% described themselves as having an avoidant attachment and 15% of participants endorsed the anxious-ambivalent attachment style. The authors failed to find a significant difference in attachment styles between genders. They noted this as an interesting finding given that the descriptions of the avoidant and the anxious-ambivalent attachment styles are similar to stereotypic communication
patterns between male and female partners. Secure individuals in general reported positive family relationships and endorsed items emphasizing a trusting attitude. The anxious-ambivalent individuals expressed a lack of parental support and also expressed dependence in relationships and a desire for commitment. Individuals with an avoidant attachment style expressed mistrust and a distancing from others. They were also more likely to report a childhood separation from their mother. These findings are consistent with those of Hazan and Shaver (1987) and lend credence to the application of attachment theory to adult romantic relationships. Researchers have recently applied the theory of attachment to adult relationships. It was observed that adults report attachment characteristics similar to attachment styles of infants (Hazan & Shaver, 1987) (Feeney & Noller, 1990). These finding suggests that the infant-mother relationship may have life-long effects.

Impact of Attachment on Adult Romantic Relationships

After observing that adults attachment styles are similar to infant’s attachment, researchers sought to discover effects of attachment on adult relationships. Simpson (1990) examined the effects of attachment style on romantic relationships. One hundred and forty-four dating couples were recruited as participants. The mean length of the dating relationship was 13.5 months, with over 92% having dated at least a month. The participants were asked to fill out several self-report measures including Hazan and Shaver’s (1987) adult attachment measure. The study was conducted in two phases. Data were collected during Phase 1 and approximately 6 months later the participants were contacted and interviewed to determine whether they were still dating and if not, the
amount of emotional distress each partners experienced after the breakup (Simpson, 1990).

Simpson (1990) hypothesized that individuals with different attachment styles will have relationships that differ in the emotional tone, both the intensity of the emotion and the direction; positive or negative. The researcher also proposed that among couples who ended their relationship, those individuals with an avoidant attachment style would report less emotional distress following the breakup. The results indicated that individuals with a secure attachment style had relationships that involved interdependence, trust, commitment, and satisfaction, while those who scored high on avoidance reported less interdependence, trust, commitment and satisfaction than the other group. Individuals who scored high on anxiety reported relationships that involved less commitment, trust and satisfaction than those with a secure attachment. These findings are consistent with previous findings (Hazan & Shaver, 1987, Feeney & Noller, 1990).

Attachment styles also corresponded with different emotional experiences in relationships. Individuals with a secure attachment reported experiencing less negative emotions and more positive feelings, while individuals with an avoidant or anxious attachment reported experiencing a greater amount and more intense negative feelings and less positive emotions in the participants' relationships. The results from Phase 2 of the study revealed that for relationships that had ended, men with an avoidant attachment style reported experiencing very little emotional distress following the breakup. One conclusion was that differences in attachment style tends to be a pattern of relating to others, in addition attachment style in a specific relationship was considered to be based
on one's own relationship history and not directly influenced by the current romantic partner (Simpson, 1990).

The above findings suggest people have a mental representation or mental model of themselves in relationships. These mental models include an expectation of how romantic partners will treat them and how the individual will behave in the relationship. Based on this theory, an individual's mental model of relationships would affect the way he/she views his/her own relationship experiences.

**Impact of Mental Models on Current Relationship Satisfaction**

In a series of three studies, researchers Collins and Read (1990) created the Adult Attachment Scale, validated the measure, and proceeded to use it in subsequent research of adult attachment. The measure was created based on Hazan and Shaver's (1987) adult attachment descriptions. The measure consists of three scales: Close; assessing an individual’s comfort with closeness, Depend; the individual’s ability to depend on others, and Anxiety; the individual’s degree of anxiety about being abandoned or unloved. Their results indicated that individuals with a secure attachment style reported they were comfortable with closeness, were able to depend on others and were not anxious about being abandoned. On the other hand, an individual with an avoidant attachment style was likely uncomfortable with closeness, did not feel he/she can depend on others and did not report much anxiety about being abandoned. Lastly, the results indicated that an individual with an anxious attachment style is comfortable with closeness, has much anxiety about being abandoned and unloved and is fairly confident depending on others (Collins & Read, 1990).
In the proceeding study Collins and Read (1990) recruited 80 female and 38 male undergraduate psychology students to participate in the study. The purpose of the study was to examine the relationship between attachment style and general mental models of oneself, others and relationships. The researchers additionally hypothesized that there would be an association between beliefs about oneself and the world and the participants' descriptions of their childhood relationships with their parents. This hypothesis was confirmed. The researchers found individuals with a secure attachment style reported a more positive view of them and of society and also described their mothers as warm and responsive. In contrast the participants with both insecure attachment styles reported more negative views about themselves and others; they also described their mothers as ambivalent or inconsistent.

Although the concept of general mental models/working models has been implicitly measured in many of the studies on attachment, researchers Kobak and Hazan (1991) wanted to explore the effects of working models in marriage. The authors described a secure working model as trusting the availability of others, viewing oneself as worthy, and believing in one's own abilities in situations that require comfort or support. In comparison, individuals with an insecure working model perceive others as rejecting or unavailable and view themselves as incapable and have low self-worth. These differences in working models often lead to differences in communication. For instance, an individual with an insecure working model may read his/her partner's behavior as rejecting and in turn act in defensive anger or withdrawal. The participant sample consisted of 40 couples, twenty-eight couples were recruited through a newspaper advertisement for a study of love relationships and 12 from a radio advertisement of
“happily married couples” (Kobak & Hazan, pp. 862). The couples were given several measures for marital adjustment and attachment style. The couples were observed during a problem-solving task and a task involving one partner confiding in the other. The results revealed a large percentage of the participants described themselves as having a secure attachment style. Approximately 80% of husbands and 72.5% of wives reported a secure attachment style, 15% of husbands and 20% of wives reported an avoidant attachment style, and 5% of husbands and 7.5% of wives reported a preoccupied attachment style. The authors (Kobak & Hazan, 1991) speculated that this finding may be due to the idea that individuals in long-term, committed relationships move towards a secure attachment.

Kobak and Hazan (1991) also found that working models had an impact on participants’ abilities to effectively communicate during the problem-solving and confiding interactions. Wives with secure working models displayed less rejection during the problem-solving task while secure husbands displayed less rejection and provided more support during the problem-solving. When wives displayed rejection and provided less support during the problem-solving task the husbands reported less secure working models and described their wives as unavailable. The researchers also discovered that when husbands effectively listened during the confiding interaction the wives reported more secure working models (Kobak & Hazan, 1991).

After a careful review of the adult attachment literature, researchers Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991) proposed four styles of attachment rather than the three that were already recognized in the literature. They proposed a model of attachment in which attachment is evaluated on two dimensions; model of self and model of others. These
were labeled dependence and avoidance. It was hypothesized individuals with a secure attachment would rate low on dependence and low on avoidance of intimacy, while individuals with a preoccupied attachment would rate high on dependence and low on avoidance of intimacy. It was additionally hypothesized individuals with a dismissing attachment would rate low on dependence and high on avoidance of intimacy, those with a fearful-avoidant attachment would rate high on dependence and high on avoidance.

Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991) recruited 40 female and 37 male college students from an introductory psychology course. The participants were invited to participate with a friend in a study about friendship. The participants were required to bring a close, same-sex friend in which they were involved in a non-romantic friendship. Participants were administered a semi-structured interview in which they were asked to describe their friendship patterns. The friends were also interviewed, and were asked about the friendship patterns of the participant. They found that the secure group was described by themselves and friends as warm, having a balance in friendships as well as a balance in their level of involvement in romantic relationships. The dismissing group was described as extremely high in self-confidence and low in emotional expressiveness, low in frequency of crying and little warmth. They were also described by themselves and others as having low self-disclosure, intimacy, level of romantic involvement, and ability to rely on others. They were also described as controlling in their friendships and romantic relationships.

The preoccupied group was described as high in self-disclosure, emotional expressiveness, frequency of crying, caregiving and reliance on others. They also rated high on level of romantic involvement and low on balance in friendships. The fearful
group was described as low on self-disclosure, intimacy, level of romantic involvement, and reliance on others. They also rated low on self-confidence and balance of control in friendships and relationships (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991).

In a replication study (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991) recruited 33 female and 36 male students in an introductory psychology class to participate in a study about social relations. The participants were interviewed about their family relationships and their attachment to their parents; they were also interviewed about their social relationships in order to gain insight into the participants' attachments. Their results indicated that of the 69 participants 57% had a secure attachment, 18% dismissing, 10% preoccupied and 15% had a fearful attachment. The authors noted that these numbers were identical to results from their previous study. The results indicated that the preoccupied and fearful groups reported higher levels of interpersonal problems than the other two groups.

Researchers Pietromonaco and Carnelley (1994) sought to explore the interaction between gender and working models of attachment. They hypothesized that men and women who have working models that correspond to stereotyped gender roles would report lower self-esteem and more negative feelings when thinking about a romantic relationship. They also hypothesized that participants would respond more favorably to a romantic partner who expressed a complimentary attachment style to their own. The participants included 115 female and 112 male undergraduate students. The participants were asked to read and imagine one of three relationship scenarios. Each scenario involved similar events with the imagined partner having either a secure, preoccupied or avoidant attachment. Afterwards they were asked to report their emotional reactions to
the imagined relationship. Attachment style was assessed using Hazan and Shaver’s (1987) attachment measure.

The results indicated that despite the participant’s differences in attachment style, all participants who imagined the secure relationship scenario responded more positively than those who imagined the preoccupied or avoidant partner. Although all participants responded more positively to the secure partner, there were some interesting interactions between participant’s attachment style and the imagined partner’s attachment behavior. Both the avoidant and the preoccupied participants responded less favorably to the avoidant scenario, although the difference for the preoccupied participants was not significant and the secure participants responded less favorably to either insecure group. It was also found that participants with a preoccupied model of attachment reported greater anxiety in the imagined relationship and also reported more jealousy than either the secure or avoidant individuals. This difference was not found to correlate with the imagined partner’s attachment behavior. Men and women who held working models that are consistent with stereotypic gender roles reported greater negative feelings, specifically, men with an avoidant model of attachment and women with a preoccupied model of attachment reported greater feelings of depression and lower self-esteem, thus supporting the authors hypothesis (Pietromonaco & Carmelley 1994).

While attachment style describes and puts a label to person experience and behavior in relationships the mental model describes the way an individual thinks about relationships and the expectations they have about how they will be treated as well as how to treat their partner. This was observed clearly in the previous study where participants were asked to describe their reactions to an imagined relationship.
Partner Pairing and Satisfaction

Mental models affect the way a person thinks of his/herself thus attachment may also affect the partners an individual chooses to date. In a longitudinal study by Kirkpatrick and Davis (1994) the researchers sought to extend the understanding of the role attachment plays in choosing dating partners. They examined several variables: the pairing of attachment styles within couples, the role of attachment style in own and partners’ relationship satisfaction, and the extent to which attachment style serves as a predictor of relationship stability. The participants included 354 undergraduate students from a psychology of marriage course. Couples included described themselves in a steady or serious dating relationship and were assessed during the first phase of the study using the Attachment Style measure (Hazan & Shaver, 1987) and a measure for relationship and demographic information. A telephone interview was conducted approximately 7-14 months after the initial assessment to assess the stability and status of the participants’ relationships. A second telephone interview was carried out between 30-36 months after the initial evaluation (Kirkpatrick & Davis, 1994).

The results of the study revealed an interesting pattern of partner pairings. There were no couples that included either both partners with an avoidant attachment style or both partners with an anxious attachment. Avoidant individuals tended to be paired with anxious individuals and vice versa. There was also an under representation of participants with an insecure attachment with 10.2% of the participants classified as anxious and 14.4% classified as avoidant. The researchers speculated that these low numbers may be due to the selection criteria for the study; the participants must be in a steady or serious dating relationship. Men’s attachment style was found to be strongly associated to their
own relationship ratings with avoidant men reporting the greatest negative ratings and secure men the most positive. These ratings however, did not correspond with the women’s rating of the relationship. Anxious and avoidant women did not differ significantly in their relationship ratings. Men that were partnered with an anxious female partner reported less commitment, satisfaction and intimacy than those with a secure partner. At the third assessment anxiously attached women with an anxious attachment reported the greatest stability in their relationship, thus women with an anxious attachment style were less likely to break up than both secure or avoidant women. The highest breakup rates were for anxious men and avoidant women (Kirkpatrick & Davis, 1994).

Attachment plays an important role in the way individuals view themselves. These mental models create a framework for understanding experiences in life and in relationships. The expectations of their partner may lead people to choose partner based on their own attachment characteristics and in doing so may strengthen their beliefs.

Attachment in Marriage

Researchers turned their focus on attachment in marital relationships. Feeney (1994) sought to measure the extent to which attachment style effects marital satisfaction. The participants included 361 married couples recruited for three categories; those married between 1 and 10 years, those married between 11 and 20 years and individuals married for than 20 years. Attachment was measured using Feeney’s Likert scale measure (1990), which was based off of Hazan and Shaver’s forced-choice measure of attachment (1987). Marriage quality was measured using the Quality Marriage Index (QMI) (Norton,
This is a six item scale, measuring the marriage as a whole. Results indicated that couples, in which the husband expressed discomfort with closeness and wife that was high in anxiety, were more frequent in marriages of 1 to 10 years than in marriages greater than 10 years. Anxiety was found to be associated with lower levels of relationship satisfaction with the most consistent finding between wives’ anxiety and husbands’ rating of relationship satisfaction. Husbands’ level of comfort with closeness was also associated with relationship satisfaction for both husbands and wives. For husbands who reported a high level of comfort with closeness there was not a significant correlation between wives’ anxiety and relationship satisfaction for both partners. There were very few couples in which the wife reported low in comfort and the husband high in anxiety. Feeney (1994) also found that communication partially mediated the association between anxiety and satisfaction for men and was an important predictor in women’s satisfaction.

Authors Fuller and Fincham (1995) explored several facets of attachment style in marriage including, the individual’s attachment style and the mental model of the spouse, marital satisfaction, affect regulation, and the stability of attachment style at a two year follow-up. The participants included 53 married couples, who were married an average of 8.4 years. Attachment was measured using Hazan and Shaver’s (1987) forced-choice measure as well as an unpublished measure in which Hazan and Shaver expanded their original measure of attachment. Marital satisfaction was measured using the Martial Adjustment Test (MAT) (Locke & Williamson, 1958). The findings indicated that securely attached husbands and wives reported greater positive affect and securely attached wives reported less negative affect prior to and following a problem-solving
experience. The association between attachment style and mental model of the spouse was highly dependent on which measure of attachment was being used. The authors speculated that Bartholomew’s (1990) four category attachment measure may more accurately categorize avoidant individuals.

Fuller and Fincham (1995) also found that 22.7% of participants reported a change in their attachment style at the two-year follow-up. They hypothesized in accordance with Bowlby’s theory (1982) that this change may be due in part to a modification of the individuals’ mental model of their attachment figure as new information about the relationship is incorporated into their conceptualization of the availability of their partner (Fuller & Fincham, 1995).

According to researchers Davila, Bradbury and Fincham (1998) research has not examined the process by which attachment affects marital satisfaction. They hypothesized that the experience of greater negative affect would mediate the relationship between attachment and relationship satisfaction. Participants included 117 married couples recruited for a longitudinal study of marriage. Attachment was assessed using a series of statements from Hazan and Shaver’s (1987) descriptive paragraphs and were matched with the Adult Attachment Scale (Collins & Read, 1990). Marital satisfaction was measured using the MAT (Locke & Williamson, 1958). The couples were also asked to rate several aspects of their relationship on a Likert scale and were asked to rate the extent to which they had experienced negative affect in the past year.

Results indicated adult attachment had both a direct and indirect association, mediated through negative affectivity, with relationship satisfaction. For wives, anxiety
about abandonment was directly associated to relationship satisfaction, while comfort with closeness was mediated through negative affect. For husbands, anxiety about abandonment had both a direct and indirect association with relationship satisfaction and comfort with closeness had a marginally significant direct association with satisfaction. The authors concluded that negative affectivity and attachment style account for unique variance in marital satisfaction and this provided evidence that they are indeed distinct constructs.

The findings of these studies suggested that attachment style is associated with relationship satisfaction as well as marital satisfaction. Individuals with a secure attachment reported satisfaction with their marriage and wives anxiety about abandonment appears to be one of the strongest predictors of marital satisfaction for both husbands and wives.

Adult Secure Base Behavior

Hazan, Shaver and Bradshaw (1988) stated that in romantic relationships engage couples in attachment behaviors similar to those observed in the infant-mother relationship. The following studies attempted to observe these adult attachment behaviors in both naturalistic and laboratory settings.

In a naturalistic study by Fraley and Shaver (1998) the authors observed separating and non-separating couples at a public airport. The authors felt the best way to observe attachment behavior was to create a naturalistic study in which couples were observed in a normally occurring situation. They sought to assess attachment behavior during the separation of romantic partners. The couples were approached by a researcher
in the airport as they waited for a flight and were asked if they would be willing to fill out a few measures about the effects of travel on close relationships.

Another researcher would pretend to be waiting for a flight and would observe the couple until both partners left. The sample consisted of 109 couples, 64 were separating and 45 were flying together. Couples who were separating were much more likely to express sadness, seek contact with their partner, and maintain contact, as well as other attachment behaviors than couples who were flying together. The authors found a negative correlation between the length of the relationship and attachment behavior. The researchers speculated that over time the individuals become more certain of their partners’ availability and willingness to provide support and as such do not need outward signals. Avoidant women were less likely to seek contact and support during times of separation but this difference was not seen in couples that were flying together. No differences in behavior were found for anxious women. There was a weak negative relationship between avoidant men and contact seeking behaviors and anxious men were less likely to seek contact with their partners. In general secure individuals were less likely to report distress when separating and were also more likely to provide support and express caring for their partner whether flying together or separating. The authors (Fraley & Shaver, 1998) concluded that the airport situation did activate attachment behavior in couples who were separating and the study provided some unique insights into attachment behavior in adults.

In a more recent study Collins and Feeney (2000) sought to address several gaps in adult attachment literature. The purpose of their study was to examine the processes of support seeking and caregiving in romantic relationships. They recruited 93
undergraduate dating couples. The initial person recruited from each couple was referred to as the *support seeker* and their partner as the *caregiver*. The participants were videotaped discussing a personal concern or worry that the support seeker disclosed. The participants filled out several measures prior to, and following the interaction.

Participants’ attachment was measured using the Adult Attachment Scale (AAS) (Collins & Read, 1990).

The results indicated that when support seekers rated their problems as more stressful they were more likely to seek support from their partner. They also found a direct expression of needs was associated with helpful forms of support, while an indirect expression of needs was associated with unhelpful forms of support. When support seekers perceived their partners behavior as more supportive they reported a greater improvement in mood. Caregivers who reported greater satisfaction in their relationship were found to be more responsive to their partner, provide more emotional support and less negative forms of support. Support seekers who expressed greater relationship satisfaction had partners who were better caregivers (Collins and Feeney, 2000).

Support seekers high in avoidance were more likely to use indirect strategies for obtaining support, while anxiety was not associated with support seeking behavior. Caregivers high in anxiety tended to offer high levels of support when the partner’s needs were clear and direct, but offered little support when their partner’s needs were not as clear, while avoidance was not associated with caregiving. Secure caregivers offered high levels of support regardless of the clarity of their partner’s needs or their directness of their requests (Collins and Feeney, 2000).
Researchers Crowell et al. (2002) sought to observe and measure secure base behavior in adult relationships. The study participants included 157 engaged couples that were assessed three months prior to their wedding. The couples were videotaped during a problem-solving interaction. This was chosen because the researchers felt it would be difficult enough that the participants would be likely to demonstrate secure base behavior. The Secure Base Scoring System for Adults (SBSS) was used to score the interactions. The results revealed that men and women did not differ in their secure base use, or the extent to which the participants are able to express concern, seeks support and is able to be soothed. There was also no difference between men and women on the secure base support, which includes an interest in the partner, ability to recognize distress and is responsive to their needs. Securely attached individuals were more effective in their secure base use and support than insecurely attached participants.

Results of these studies indicate that attachment behavior can be observed in adults when in stressful or separating situations such as at the airport or during a problem-solving interaction. Support seeking behavior was associated with the stressfulness of the situation, as well as attachment style. Caregiving behavior was associated with attachment style.

Mediating/Moderating Factors

Several factors may affect relationship satisfaction. Researchers have attempted to determine which factors may have a mediating or moderating effect on the relationship between attachment and relationship satisfaction.
Researchers Meyers and Landsberger (2002) sought to measure variables that may mediate or moderate the relationship between adult attachment style and relationship satisfaction, specifically to investigate how psychological distress and social support affects the relationship between attachment and marital satisfaction. The participants included 73 married women, ages 25-48. Attachment style was measured using the Adult Attachment Style Questionnaire (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Results revealed that a secure attachment was associated with satisfaction in one’s relationship, while an insecure attachment was related with more negative reports of satisfaction. A secure attachment was also related to a lower level of psychological symptoms in relation to an insecure attachment. Social support was found to have a mediating effect between an avoidant attachment style and marital satisfaction, indicating that social withdrawal that is associated with an avoidant attachment is related marital dissatisfaction. The researchers also found that psychological distress had a moderating effect on the relationship between attachment and satisfaction, thus when accounting for distress, the relationship between attachment style and marital satisfaction was reduced (Meyers and Landsberger, 2002).

In a similar study Feeney (2002) studied the associations between attachment, spouse behavior and marital satisfaction in a sample that consisted of 193 married couples. The sample was varied in terms of education, occupation, age and length of marriage. Participants were given several self-report questionnaires, as well as diary records of spouse behavior. Spousal behavior was chosen because the patterns of interactions are more accessible to interventions than are other personal factors partners bring with them. In long-term marriages one’s own comfort with closeness was associated with few reports of negative spouse behavior, while own and partner’s anxiety
was associated with more reports of negative spouse behaviors. Anxiety over relationships was associated with lower levels of marital satisfaction for both partners. Satisfaction was also related to the number of reported negative spouse behaviors. An important finding was that participants with an insecure attachment were more reactive to the recent behavior of their spouse, when controlling for frequency of both positive and negative behaviors. This finding suggests that insecure individuals attach a different meaning to the behavior than do secure individuals. Negative behaviors may confirm their expectations that relationship partners are unreliable and not trustworthy thus strengthening their existing mental models of relationships.

Authors Campbell, Simpson, Boldry, and Kashy (2005) hypothesized that individuals who have an anxious attachment would perceive greater conflict in romantic relationships on a daily basis. They also hypothesized that anxious individuals would report feeling more hurt by conflicts and weigh these conflicts more heavily when reporting their relationship satisfaction. The participants included 103 dating couples in well-established relationships. Participants were assessed using several questionnaires and were also asked to keep a diary of their relationship conflict, support and relationship quality. The authors found that anxiously attached individuals reported greater daily conflict and perceived a greater number of conflicts than their partners. Anxiously attached participants also reported a greater number of conflicts that escalated beyond the topic of conflict to other issues and described feeling more hurt by the arguments. Participants also reported that their anxiously attached partners felt more hurt from conflicts. Anxious individuals reported a greater decrease in relationship satisfaction on days with conflict that did other participants and were less optimistic about their
relationship future. Avoidant individuals reported that both giving and receiving support were less positive experiences than for other individuals.

Researchers have noted several factors that affect the relationship between attachment style and relationship satisfaction. Psychological distress and social support were found to have mediating effects on the association between attachment and relationship satisfaction.

Synthesis and Future Directions

*Application of Attachment Theory*

Divorce and dissatisfaction in relationships is associated with elevated symptoms of depression and anxiety in adults (Afifi, Cox, & Enns, 2006) and children (Storksen, Roysamb, Moun, & Tambs, 2005). Attachment theory was originally created to explain children's attachment to their primary caregiver and later explained how these attachments extend into adulthood (Bowlby, 1978, 1979, & 1989). Ainsworth and colleagues expanded the theory by identifying three attachment styles in children: the secure attachment, the insecure-avoidant and the insecure-ambivalent (Ainsworth, Bell, & Stayton, 1972), (Ainsworth & Marvin, 1995). Hazan and Shaver (1987) proposed that attachment theory could be used to explain adult relationships. Researchers discovered that attachment style is linked with relationship satisfaction. More specifically, an insecure attachment is associated with a lower rating of satisfaction in adult relationships. This paper provided the first review of attachment literature as it pertains to adult romantic relationships and now provides a summary of how this research could be used to inform therapy.
Hazan and Shaver (1987) found the best predictor of an individual’s attachment style was their perception of the childhood relationship with their parents. Feeney and Noller’s (1990) found that participants reported differing childhood histories based on their attachment style. These findings suggested an important component of therapy may be to process these early relationships.

Simpson (1990) found relationship satisfaction was not necessarily connected with current relationship events and concluded that individuals have a mental model of their relationships, including the ways they expect to be treated and how they feel in their relationships. Simpson theorized these mental models lead individuals to view their relationship based on these mental models rather than their actual events in their current relationship. This leads to a few hypotheses for the application to therapy. If people often base their relationship satisfaction on their own mental model of relationships, individual therapy may be an appropriate form of therapy for relationship problems. Another hypothesis is that an important focus of couples’ therapy for attachment issues may be to improve the couple’s communication skills as well as to raise awareness about the role their personal histories play in how they view the relationship. In raising their awareness the couple would gain a better understanding about why they react to their partner’s behavior and communication skills would provide an avenue for the couple to solve their problems together.

Bowlby (1978) outlined four tasks in therapy when utilizing attachment theory in individual therapy. The first task is to provide the client with a secure base from which to explore. The second task Bowlby outlined is to encourage the client to explore the situations with significant others; to explore how he/she contributes to the situations and
how he responds to them. The third task is to highlight the clients patterns of how he/she views others behavior towards the client and point out new ways of viewing these events. The final task in attachment therapy is to draw attention to the similarities between how acts and reacts in relationships with significant others and how he/she was treated as a child.

Currently, two forms of couples' therapy utilize the attachment theory. Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT), while not originally based on attachment theory, incorporates the theory as a basis for understanding couples relationships and directs the therapist's attention toward the couples' attachment fears, needs, desires, as well as the experiences that may have led to a loss of trust or connection between the couple (Johnson, Hunsley, Greenburg, & Schindler, 1999).

EFT incorporates attachment theory, and a systems approach to interactional patterns in marriage. Authors Johnson et. al. (1999) reported that EFT results in significant improvements in the marital adjustment compared to wait-list control groups and to the couples' level of distress pre-treatment. They also reported that in the studies using EFT over half of the couples no longer met criteria for marital distress following treatment and there were few reports of participant's relationships deteriorating during the course of treatment. They also found that improvements in the participants relationships increased after treatment ended.

In a recent study, Makinen and Johnson (2006) utilized emotionally focused therapy with 24 couples reporting distress from an attachment injury (ex: infidelity, flirtation, internet relationship etc.). The couples were assessed pre- and post-treatment
for level of distress. At post-treatment 15 couples were described as having resolved their attachment injury and 9 were unresolved. The resolved couples were observed to use more disclosure of their needs and to express their emotions. They also used more positive responses to their partner than unresolved couples. Unresolved couples were more likely to belittle, be defensive, blame and withdraw in reaction to their partner. Thus the couples who worked through their difficulties were more likely to respond positively towards their partner at the end of therapy.

Imago Relationship Therapy (IRT) is another couples’ therapy that incorporates attachment theory into its conceptual formulation. IRT teaches couples understanding for their family of origin issues and promotes building an awareness of their early emotional experiences and development (Plumlee, 2001). IRT workshops teach couples the theory as well as communication skills aimed at improving marital satisfaction (Weigle, 2006).

Taken together, the above research suggests individual therapy may be an appropriate means for processing early childhood attachments. It may also be appropriate for people with relationship difficulties. Raising couples awareness of attachment issues and improving communication skills may help couples to understand the role early childhood relationships have on their current relationship and improve the couple’s ability to solve their problems through communication.

*Future Directions*

In the above section the current usage of attachment theory in therapy has been outlined. While there are two forms of couples therapy that incorporate aspects of the
theory into practice, more widespread application of attachment theory in individual and couples’ therapy is still needed.

Although a great deal of research has been conducted in the area of adult attachment, continued research is needed. One limitation in the majority of the studies is the exclusion of sexual minority participants in either obvious or subtle ways. Studies often describe the participants as the male partner and the female partner, thus excluding same-sex couples. Separate studies have looked at attachment specifically with sexual minorities, but the exclusion from studies not specifically targeting that population furthers the erroneous notion that their relationships are too different to be included in basic attachment research. An area for future research would be including sexual minorities in studies of attachment in romantic relationships.

Many of the studies that applied the theory of attachment in therapy utilized married couples as participants. While this is an important population in terms of research to focus on those that could benefit from attachment theory, long-term dating couples or cohabitating couples have been overlooked in much of the research. The number of couples choosing to cohabitate is steadily growing. This group could present important information in terms of attachment and could also benefit from further research.

Another area for future research is the process of change when resolving attachment injuries whether from childhood or in an adult relationship. While research for EFT has shown that there is indeed a change it is still unknown what client or therapist variables lead to positive change.
As explained throughout this review researchers have found that there is indeed an association between adult attachment and relationship satisfaction. Given the high rate of divorce and relationship dissatisfaction in the U.S., therapists are encouraged to use attachment theory as framework for intervening with distressed couples. Further research is needed to not only further the knowledge about attachment but to also improve therapeutic interventions.
References


