

# Real-World Applications of Attachment Theory

Mariano Rosabal-Coto, Naomi Quinn, Heidi Keller,  
Marga Vicedo, Nandita Chaudhary,  
Alma Gottlieb, Gabriel Scheidecker,  
Marjorie Murray, Akira Takada, and Gilda A. Morelli

## Abstract

Attachment theory has its roots in an ethnocentric complex of ideas, longstanding in the United States, under the rubric of “intensive mothering.” Among these various approaches and programs, attachment theory has had an inordinate influence on a wide range of professions concerned with children (family therapy, education, the legal system, and public policy, the medical profession, etc.) inside and outside the United States. This chapter looks critically at how attachment theory has been applied in a variety of contexts and discusses its influence on parenting. It examines the distortion that often results when research findings are translated into actual applications or programs, ignoring any particularities of cultural context. It describes how attachment theory has been used as the basis for child-rearing manuals and has influenced programs and policies more directly, to form legal decisions that affect families, as well as to develop public policy and programs—all without requisite evidence to support such application and, more importantly, without regard to cultural context. Because child-rearing practices vary among cultures, the value systems that motivate these different practices must be recognized and accounted for when applications are developed and implemented. It concludes with a call for researchers to become proactive in rectifying misuses of attachment theory and holds that doing so is a matter of social responsibility.

## A Critical Appraisal

Western societies, and especially their middle classes, have moved away from traditional parenting practices handed down across generations, toward validation of these practices by designated experts (Arendt 1958; Nolan 1998). Prominent among such expert theories today is attachment theory. The extreme influence that attachment theory has on contemporary parents was recently

captured by Bethany Saltman (2016) in the popular press. In this narrative, a single mother recounts her preoccupation with whether or not her daughter may be insecurely attached to her, due to her own inadequate parenting. Her anxiety leads her to undertake training in the Strange Situation Procedure and then undergo a clinically administered Adult Attachment Interview. Her anxiety and guilt are only put to rest when the interview results are interpreted by the clinician to mean that her daughter is indeed “securely attached.”

A striking feature of attachment theory and its appeal is how widely its fundamental tenets have been disseminated to a range of lay audiences, all targeting parents such as the one in the example above. Books, brochures, and videotapes proliferate, with the Internet now serving as a platform to facilitate parental information searches, counseling, and peer support in every major language (Niela-Vilén et al. 2014; Shah 2014; Montesi 2015). The Internet has thus become a supplement to the advice that might once have been sought exclusively from pediatricians or other child health-care professionals (Fischer and Landry 2007; Gottlieb and DeLoache 2017). This new technology may well account for the rapid, global spread of attachment theoretical approaches to parenting as well as a rash of other fashionable approaches. Although many of these are independent of (and may even predate) attachment theory itself, they may bear some resemblance to the latter.

In their U.S. versions, these approaches have been classed together as advocating “intensive mothering” (Hays 1996). They may be variously labeled, in both the United States and other countries, as “child-centered parenting,” “natural parenting,” or “evolutionary parenting.” These concepts project a cultural model of mothering that has been described as being “so sacred, so deeply held, and so taken for granted” in U.S. society “as to remain generally unquestioned and regularly treated as common sense” (Hays 1996:13). The U.S. cultural model holds that:

1. Child-rearing is the responsibility of individual mothers.
2. Child-rearing entails constant nurture centered on the child, nurture that is labor-intensive, emotionally absorbing, and financially expensive, “even if this means that the mother must temporarily put her own life on hold” (Hays 1996:111).
3. Children themselves are innocent and pure, and hence worthy of a mother’s love, care, and sacrifice; that is, children, and mothering them, are “sacred,” in opposition to the expectations of self-interest and personal gain in the outside world.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> While attachment theory can certainly be classified as an example of “intensive parenting,” the story that Hays tells is much broader historically. Indeed, Bowlby, the only attachment theorist to be mentioned, appears only twice in her book, quoted once for his stance on maternal deprivation (Hays 1996:47), and then again as one of three “maternal-attachment theorists” from diverse disciplines (Hays 1996:155).

This cultural model of mother-centered child-rearing has its roots in the post-World War II white, middle-class United States (Ehrenreich and English 1978). In our view, the rise of attachment theory helped validate this general approach to child-rearing, along with specific assumptions such as that children must be taken care of by their mothers. Attachment theory and other versions of intensive mothering are now widely disseminated to parents outside the United States, particularly in other Western countries, such as France, the United Kingdom, and Spain (Montesi 2015), as well as within the Westernized middle class in the Global South in countries such as Chile (Faircloth 2013; Murray 2014). In Latin America, this cultural model of mothering finds ready validation from the preexisting model of *Marianismo*, with its emphasis on the “devotional and self-sacrificial mother” (Murray 2014:5). Whatever their cultural resonance, appeals to intensive mothering are bound to pose an undue opposition between a woman’s own interests and those of her child, with an inevitable accompaniment of maternal guilt (Rippeyoung 2013). Everywhere it has penetrated, this cluster of approaches has had profound effects on views and practice of parenting, particularly of mothering.

As Hays (1996:52) recounts, the cultural model came to dominate the advice given in the best-selling child-rearing manuals, spanning decades, that middle-class U.S. mothers (among others) were (and still are) encouraged to consult. The three best sellers that Hays identified were (a) pediatrician Benjamin Spock’s *Baby and Childcare* (Spock 1968), with its multiple updated editions; (b) pediatrician T. Berry Brazelton’s *What Every Baby Knows* (Brazelton 1987) and his various other books on this topic; and (c) British social psychologist Penelope Leach’s *Your Baby and Child* (Leach 1986) and its successive editions. Notably, these authors’ approaches to parenting presage that of attachment theorists. In the words of Hays (1996:57), “[t]he mother’s day-to-day job is, above all, to respond to a child’s needs and wants.” In addition, Brazelton calls for “a sensitive parent” and argues that “[g]ood parenting follows from attention to a child’s cues and requests” (Hays 1996:57).

Ideologies that call for intensive parenting and put this burden on mothers are hardly new. Hays (1996:152–178) attributes this cultural preoccupation in the United States, where it originated, to several factors. Perhaps the most interesting of these is that motherhood is but one field in which a struggle is waged between the logic of self-interested gain (which characterizes U.S. society at large) and the oppositional pull of human social ties. The current upwelling of such views with regard to mothers, in particular, may represent a backlash against the upsurge of women, especially white, middle-class women, entering or reentering the workplace in unprecedented numbers, coupled with the ascendancy of a neoliberalism that promotes individual over governmental solutions to social problems, including those that emerge when mothers work outside the home. However, these ideas and other components of attachment theory were evident earlier from other influential sources in Western psychology. One example of this is the influential book, *Beyond the Best Interests of*

*the Child*, by Goldstein et al. (1973), which was published before attachment theory gained prominence and addressed child placement within the court system. The coauthors (a law professor, a child development researcher, and a clinician) coined the phrase “psychological parent” (Goldstein et al. 1973:17–20) and advocated that placement in child custody cases be dictated by “the need of every child for unbroken continuity of affection and stimulating relationships with an adult” (Goldstein et al. 1973:8). This early psychoanalytically grounded advice is an obvious precursor to the attachment theory notion of sensitive care described by Morelli et al. (this volume).<sup>2</sup>

Some attachment theorists reject contemporary approaches to intensive mothering that do not derive from their own theory. Main et al. (2011:438–439) discuss a number of misconceptions, unsupported by attachment theory, which these more popular approaches to parenting perpetuate, including:

- An adult needs to have been present from the infant’s birth in order for the infant to form a secure attachment to that adult.
- The window of opportunity for formation of a secure attachment endures only throughout the first three years of life.
- The amount of time spent with a child is the most important element in forming an enduring attachment relationship.

However, such disavowal does not prevent other schools of thought—such as the programs *attachment therapy* or *attachment parenting*—from sharing their name or, notably in the case of attachment parenting, from leaning on the tenets of attachment theory for scientific authority. For evidence of this, see the website of Attachment Parenting International, which (a) promotes attachment theorist Mary Ainsworth’s research and her idea of “maternal sensitivity,” (b) lists the four categories (secure, insecure-ambivalent, insecure-avoidant, and insecure-disorganized) that emerged from her research, and (c) describes the Strange Situation as the instrument used to reveal these categories. Notably, the attachment parenting literature also advocates practices such as mother-child bonding immediately at birth, continuous bodily contact with the infant (e.g., wearing the child in a sling), co-sleeping, and breastfeeding up to four years of age (Sears 2011, 2016). Adoptive parents of older children are cautioned that since these children were unable to bond with their attachment figure at birth, they may exhibit attachment disorders or insecure attachment if the parents are not trained to use the other parenting techniques that attachment parenting recommends.

The validity of such practices should be seriously questioned. The approach is introduced as an “evolutionary and natural-based” one, but this assertion relies on pseudo-ethnographic observations of child-rearing practices

<sup>2</sup> Bowlby and Ainsworth are each mentioned only once, together in a footnote (Goldstein et al. 1973:115) which cites their earliest work on maternal deprivation, along with half a dozen other citations.

in selected indigenous communities (Liedloff 1997)—practices that are then simply declared to be more “natural” (Sears 1983). Unfortunately, despite being questioned by attachment theorists and others, attachment therapy and similar movements are legitimized when acclaimed by even a few scholars (e.g., Miller and Commons 2010), thus paving the way for these movements to be adopted uncritically by practitioners.

It is not enough for attachment theorists to merely disassociate themselves from an extreme approach, such as attachment parenting, that draws on common cultural preoccupations, and promotes parental guilt in doing so, as well as pirating key components of the academic theory to make its tenets seem more scientific. Academic practitioners of attachment theory should mount a full-fledged critique of such a rival school, with its extreme, often economically unaffordable, and even nonsensical proposals for parenting. Moreover, the academic community (e.g., anthropologists, cultural and developmental psychologists, attachment scholars) has a responsibility to become directly involved with the topic of child-rearing and to make clear, in both academic and public forums, that child-rearing practices in non-Western communities are not more “natural” than others, and thus they cannot be used to legitimate the tenets of a dogmatic movement, such as attachment parenting. At the same time, investigations of child-rearing practices in these communities do provide cross-culturally diverse correctives to academic thinking that has been, up to now, strikingly ethnocentric.

Recommendations regarding breastfeeding deserve special mention. We preface this discussion with the comment that breastfeeding arrangements vary widely across groups. For example, among the Pirahã people in the Amazon, consonant with a cultural emphasis on kinship, other women related to the mother may breastfeed an infant. Depending on the food supply, the mother’s health, and other contextual circumstances, children may be nursed by a mother’s sister; Pirahã women also occasionally nurse nonhuman mammals as well (Everett 2014:176–177). This case of breastfeeding by nonmothers is not singular, as we discuss further below (see section on Public Policy). Nonetheless, attachment theorists and policy-makers alike consider biological mothers to be the only ones to breastfeed.

The American Academy of Pediatrics and the World Health Organization (WHO) both subscribe to some version of the standard advice regarding maternal breastfeeding, routinely promoting it as a best practice until the child is one or two years of age. A large impetus behind the WHO’s recommendation is so that mothers from countries in the Global South avoid feeding their infants and young children dangerous alternatives to breast milk. More ominously, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services once held a national campaign in the United States, teaching that if a mother did not breastfeed, she was putting her child’s life in danger (Rippeyoung 2013:10).

Depending on local labor practices, maternity leave structures, transportation networks, and childcare options, breastfeeding of any length may have

negative consequences for mothers who work outside the home. The Canadian National Survey of Youth found that mothers who breastfeed for six months or longer suffer more severe and prolonged loss of earnings than do mothers who breastfeed for shorter durations or not at all (Rippeyoung and Noonan 2012). The report observes that to facilitate this practice, La Leche League, one of the largest organizations in the world to promote breastfeeding, tends to encourage mothers to work part-time rather than full-time, to this end. In addition, the attachment parenting literature recommends strongly that mothers not work outside the home, not only so that they may breastfeed but to ensure that their children receive the whole package of recommended care, of which lengthy breastfeeding is just one component (see, e.g., Sears and Sears 2001; Bialik and Gordon 2012). For impoverished mothers living in countries without extended paid maternity leave, recommendations to stay at home or to work part-time only represent an unaffordable luxury. By contrast, women living in northern European and other highly developed nations may be eligible for up to a year of paid maternity leave, thus facilitating breastfeeding and other “intensive parenting” practices (Golden 2017; Schug 2017). Yet even these more fortunate mothers in Western countries are targets of advice designed to counter the effects of their employment. In the United States, mothers who work outside the home are counseled, in the attachment parenting literature, to “wear” the child for at least four to five hours every night to compensate for their absence during the day (for critiques, see Schön and Silvén 2007; Faircloth 2013). While breastfeeding is not a prerequisite in attachment theory, it fits well with the theory’s ideas of sensitive parenting; in addition to its value as the most beneficial source of food for small children, this practice is readily responsive to children’s indications of hunger, chief among their signaled needs.

Academic reports of attachment findings are themselves likely to be replete with cautionary notes about the inconclusive or only suggestive nature of this work. For example, in the *Handbook of Attachment*, Slade (2008) describes research on the links between attachment and psychotherapy and states that “this literature raises more questions than it answers and provides few clear guidelines for practitioners.” Still, the application of attachment theory to actual parenting and the mis-education of professionals who oversee such parenting will most likely not benefit from these cautions. Practitioners often present attachment theory findings as proven scientific results. In sum, just as in the case of attachment parenting, suggestions for real-world applications that emanate from attachment theory can evolve into caricatures of the theory itself. Such oversimplified readings of research findings are certainly shaped by ethnocentric ideological and moral standards held unwittingly by those who apply them. Another driver of such distortions is funding, as Berlin et al. (2016:753) note:

In our experience, whereas university-based researchers pursue numerous and often nuanced program outcomes, community agency personnel and local funders are most interested in basic public health and child welfare indicators,

such as the rate of children in foster placements, or rates of children referred for special needs services, both of which have large financial implications for local and state governments.

When even a minority of attachment theorists advocate extreme positions regarding parenting, outliers can have an outsized influence on both audiences, given the tendency of lay practitioners to oversimplify academic views and the readiness of parents to accept any expert opinion. To offer just one example, some attachment theorists find that adopted children are less secure than nonadopted children. Using a meta-analysis of unpublished data, van IJzendoorn and Juffer (2006:1234) found that 47% of more than 400 adopted children were insecurely attached (and 53% securely attached), as measured by the Strange Situation Procedure. This rate compares, they note, with 67% in normal, nonadopted samples. While researchers, as they most often do, target later-adopted children in such studies, this subtlety may be lost in translation. Adoptive parents are especially susceptible to cautionary messages about their parenting that may originate from reports of such findings, but then get exaggerated in practitioners' retelling. And they do receive such messages: In two separate cases, one from Durham, England, and the other from Durham, North Carolina, adoptive parents reported to Quinn (pers. comm., April, 2017) that they had been told by their social workers not to expect their adopted children to "attach" to them at all. The child in the second case was only a month old at adoption.

Academic attachment theory itself has its own stringent recommendations regarding the kind of care that children need. Chief among attachment theoretic assumptions, already alluded to within the broader context of "intensive mothering," is an exclusive attention to mothers as child caregivers. When fathers get any mention, they are likely to be afterthoughts, and paid mere lip service. However, as becomes obvious in the description of the actual protocol that follows, fathers are not actually incorporated into the intervention. Even worse, they may be seen as impediments to mothering—as illustrated by the following example, drawn from the closing chapter (Video-Feedback Intervention to Promote Positive Parenting) of a book (*Promoting Positive Parenting: An Attachment-Based Intervention*) on a popular attachment theoretic approach from The Netherlands (van IJzendoorn et al. 2008). After acknowledging that fathers "do take part in rearing their children, and may benefit from interventions as much as mothers do," the authors leave the impression that the involvement of fathers is only ever secondary to that of mothers. They point out that the involvement of fathers "may motivate their partners to continue participation and to practice new behaviors at home." Thus, the "presence of the father may enhance the effectiveness of the intervention as well as the permanence of the changes in maternal behavior. It should be noted, however, that paternal involvement may be counterproductive as far as the mothers are concerned." They go on to cite two studies involving fathers in which "the effects

on paternal sensitivity were large, but similar effects on maternal sensitivity were absent” and conclude (van IJzendoorn et al. 2008:199):

Several explanations for these disappointing findings may be considered. First, if fathers are included in the intervention efforts, less attention might be paid to the mothers’ needs and abilities. Second, when fathers are also involved in the intervention, mothers may underestimate the importance of their practicing new child-rearing insights and skills.

This is one concrete example of how intervention programs can end up caricaturing the theory upon which they draw.

It is worth noting that van IJzendoorn et al. only consider siblings in reference to how sensitively they are treated by comparison to their siblings—not as potential givers of child care or attachment figures to these siblings. Grandparents are not considered at all, despite the fact that grandmothers and older siblings are key child caregivers or “allomothers” all over the world. This is but one instance of how intervention programs ignore cross-cultural variation, including ethnic variation that certainly occurs within the United States and other Western countries. It also clearly illustrates Morelli et al.’s (this volume) argument that attachment theory and research have been one-sided, overlooking what children not only receive from others but also what they provide to others—in this case to younger children.

Current attachment theory emphasizes the child’s need for sensitive mothering. Intervention programs follow Ainsworth’s original definition of sensitive mothers as those “who accurately perceived their child’s signals of distress and responded to these signals in a prompt and adequate way” (Juffer et al. 2008:3). This may be referred to as sensitive parenting, but the ease with which discussion of suggested parental interventions then turns to mothers and maternal sensitivity, the commonplace use of the feminine pronoun “her” to describe this parent, and the paucity of research to assess interventions that include fathers all betray the assumption, whether explicit or unexamined, that mother is the one who will be providing the sensitive parenting (see Morelli et al., this volume). Today, attachment theorists, unlike attachment parenting advocates, do not explicitly argue that mothers should stay at home to be able to provide appropriate care for their children.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, attachment theory does pose a tension between the kind of mother one is supposed to be and the pursuit of employment outside the home. One practical arena in which this tension plays out is that of day care, especially for infants and younger children (discussed below in the section on early education programs).

When parents themselves consult popular parenting manuals, the effects of attachment theory and related approaches are brought to bear directly on them.

<sup>3</sup> Bowlby, however, did. He called daycare centers “a dangerous waste of time and money” and argued that, other than the communists, the only ones who opposed his views were “professional women.” He continued: “They have, in fact, neglected their families. But it’s the last thing they want to admit” (quoted in Vicedo 2013:225–226).



In addition to this direct appeal to parents, attachment theory often infiltrates parenting more indirectly from four areas that will be discussed in turn:

1. in family therapy programs designed around attachment theory,
2. in early childhood education programs similarly designed,
3. in jurisprudence in connection with child custody and placement, and
4. in public policy relating to children and child development.

### Implications for Family Therapy

In the third edition of the *Handbook of Attachment* (Cassidy and Shaver 2016), Berlin et al. (2016:746) describe four intervention programs derived from attachment theory: Child-Parent Psychotherapy, Attachment and Biobehavioral Catch-up, Video-Feedback Intervention to Promote Positive Parenting, and Circle of Security. The authors note that Circle of Security is the one most directly derived from attachment theory and research, and that all four programs have a strong evidence base. In selecting these programs for the third edition, Berlin et al. dropped two programs previously included in the second edition (Berlin et al. 2008)—Skill-Based Treatment from Leiden and the UCLA Family Development Project—presumably because these had a weaker evidence base. It can be assumed that both programs are still, however, widely practiced. Presumably other family therapy intervention programs are in use as well. Berlin et al.’s treatment in the third edition is briefer and more narrowly focused than in the second edition; they build on the 2008 chapter to consider new community applications of these intervention programs and refer back to it as needed, as will we.

The foundational tenet of contemporary attachment theory—the importance of attachment security for a child’s present and future well-being—is unquestioned in all of these programs. Indeed, what such security might look like is wholly unexamined in these attachment theory-based intervention programs, as is the notion of the “secure base,” which the parent is thought to provide, and the Strange Situation Procedure through which secure and insecure attachment are assessed. After all, practitioners must assume that these assessments are based on proven scientific theory, tangibly demonstrated in the experimental procedure upon which they rest. Moreover, the programs never address how attachment and these associated constructs might vary across cultural and ethnic groups, in ways that might suggest different interventions.

Another key issue, one characterizing therapy and counseling based on attachment theory, arises from the “internal working model” of parenting, a construct originally proposed by Bowlby. When a child exhibits behavioral problems or relationship conflicts with his or her parents, the chief intervention is to try to “reframe” or “restructure” the working model of the parents, the child, or both. This might involve commonsense interventions, such as

counseling parents to discontinue labeling their child as a “bad kid,” or teaching the child to be a safe haven and secure base to a younger sibling rather than engaging in competition for a parent’s affections (see Johnson 2008). However, although internal working models may be the starting point for therapy derived from attachment theory, Berlin et al. (2008:747) confess that the “mechanisms through which parents’ working models affect child-parent attachment are not well understood,” an assertion that still seems to hold true in 2016. Specifically, the applications never interrogate the working model as being the product of one among many diverse cultural or ethnic ideologies used to describe what a virtuous adult should look like and how child-rearing is set up to achieve that result, as discussed by Morelli et al. (this volume). One theory now being put forth to account for mixed findings, regarding the efficacy of interventions (called “the transmission gap”), is that some children may be inherently more susceptible to environmental conditions that lead to insecure attachment (Belsky et al. 2005). This, however, has effectively closed off consideration of other obvious explanations for mixed findings; namely, there is cultural diversity in models of child-rearing.

An illustrative anecdote was offered by anthropologist Thomas Weisner (2005:89), who remembers standing alongside a single mother watching her son through a one-way mirror as the child played with toys during a phase of the Strange Situation Procedure when she was absent. The mother comments proudly on her son’s independence. The researchers, though, clearly assuming a different working model to interpret the boy’s behavior, have classified him as “avoidant.” Followed through his adolescence, this boy exhibited none of the symptoms of insecure attachment for which attachment theorists would have predicted him to be at risk. At issue seems to be a cultural difference between the experimenters’ middle-class Western notion of what constitutes insecure attachment and the understanding of this working-class mother, who imagines a tough, resilient child, one who will grow into an adult able to make it in the world on his own. Such a cultural difference is well documented in an ethnography of child-rearing practices in three U.S. neighborhoods varied by class (Kusserow 2004). Attachment theory and the therapeutic interventions and recommendations based on it do not recognize such class-based nuances. Weisner (2005:89–90) cites systematic evidence in which mothers prefer behaviors that are coded by researchers as “insecure.”

In therapeutic programs designed to reframe the internal working models of children and parents, such as those described in the *Handbook of Attachment* (Cassidy and Shaver 2008, 2016), there are methodological problems, as revealed in this review of studies offered in support of these programs. Interventions aligned with attachment theory principles are often mixed with standard therapeutic ones (Berlin et al. 2008) and are said to be but one component of the overall program (Berlin et al. 2016). This intermingling makes it difficult to discern exactly what accounts for an improvement in a child’s behavior or a parent-child relationship. Any supportive intervention is likely

to have a positive effect. Moreover, studies of these therapeutic interventions are often performed on children at risk of various sorts (e.g., temperamentally irritable infants, maltreated children, children with depressive mothers), yet Berlin et al. (2016), just as does Bowlby, find that the mechanisms posited behind the proposed interventions apply equally to children and their families not at risk. Even so, mixed and even sometimes null results are often reported (Slade 2016:751–752). Sometimes, the mere presence of a behavior in early infancy is taken as evidence that it is related to attachment, as Slade (2008:771) candidly concludes: “The term ‘attachment’ became a code word for early experience” in psychoanalytic circles. In general, reviewers’ enthusiasm for such therapeutic interventions runs well ahead of hard evidence for the efficacy of the attachment theoretic components of these programs. Researchers in this paradigm continue to pile on citations purporting to prove that therapeutic interventions work. But work to what end? The underlying goal of achieving “secure attachment” remains unquestioned.

Beyond these therapeutic intervention programs, attachment theory has also seeped into standard psychotherapy. Slade, the author who wrote in the second edition of the *Handbook of Attachment*, that among therapists “attachment” had become a code word for any early experience, is even more outspoken in the 2016 edition. There she asserts that “many tests of attachment theory’s use in psychotherapeutic research and practice over the last 25 years have been limited in significant ways” (Slade 2016:759–760). Her critique of research bearing on psychotherapy has to do with the lack of “measures sensitive to the dynamically meaningful and theoretically predictable differences” among categories of secure and insecure attachment. As to clinical practice, she observes that there is “a surprising lack of depth in the way attachment constructs are applied to the clinical enterprise” (Slade 2016:260). This observation led Slade (2016:760; italics in the original) to iterate her caution from the second edition, concluding that “the assumption that *attachment* is shorthand for *relationship* is both incorrect and incomplete.”

### Implications for Early Education

Attachment therapy programs in the United States may contain early education components. Although they are not designed for schools, these components can be considered “educational” in a loose sense because they train parents at home in parenting skills. All of these programs adhere to attachment theory principles: they are designed to train caregivers in improved parenting skills according to these principles, with the objective of either enhancing the security of attachment or preventing risk factors that might lead to insecure attachment. Training typically involves home visits and is augmented in one program, called STEEP (Steps Toward Enjoyable Effective Parenting), by group sessions for parents (Erickson and Egeland 2004).

Sometimes the parenting skills are taught through parent-child play (e.g., in a program called Time Together) and sometimes through direct training, which may be supplemented with modeling (as in STEEP). While STEEP recruits parents during pregnancy, other programs are more likely to be directed to (a) categories of children considered to be at high risk, (b) those identified by means of the Strange Situation Procedure as having insecure or disorganized attachment (Circle of Security; Marvin et al. 2002), or (c) those who appear to be socially isolated or having relationship difficulties (Time Together; Butcher and Gersch 2014). Such attachment theory-based programs have become so popular that as individualized versions suitable for different countries are developed, they have been translated into nine languages. By 2015 more than 6,000 providers have been reportedly trained in these programs (Berlin et al. 2016:751).

Other early education programs are focused on teaching children directly. Some research considers whether educators (early school, nursery school, kindergarten teachers) can potentially serve as attachment figures for the children in their institutions (Riley 2013). In daycare centers and other early-learning settings in Germany, for example, teachers may be taught to incorporate basic tenets of attachment theory into their behavior toward the children by (a) addressing the individual child, thus laying the groundwork for an autonomous self; (b) following the children's initiatives as sensitivity requires; and (c) operating as a secure base for the child. This adult becomes the relational and educational partner for the child. It is thought that the interests of this individual child should take precedence over those of the group (e.g., Infants Program; Laewen et al. 2006). Some German programs target adults other than teachers (e.g., doctors, medical students, social workers), but these instances are scattered. Thus, the United States is not the only country to have embraced early education programs that are extensions of attachment theory-based therapy programs. In German-speaking countries, in particular, a widespread assumption is that children cannot properly learn and be educated when they are insecurely attached. The slogans "*keine Bildung ohne Bindung*" (no education without attachment) and *Bildung geschieht durch Bindung* (education happens through attachment), used in German daycare centers to promote early education programs, show the extent to which attachment theory has influenced the daycare curricula (Julius 2009; Haderthauer and Zehetmair 2013).

A program widely used in Germany is the *Berliner Modell zum Übergang in die Kita* (often referred to simply as the *Berliner Modell*), which aims to enable a child's transition into day care (Laewen et al. 2006). Offering this program contributes to a daycare center's reputation for educational quality. Two additional programs directed at early education were developed by Karl Heinz Brisch, a pediatrician: SAFE (*Sichere Ausbildung für Eltern: Safe Attachment Family Education*), a training program for promoting secure attachment

between parents and children, and BASE (Babywatching), a program designed “to counter aggression and fear and to foster sensitivity and empathy” in nurseries and elementary schools.

In Germany, then, it is understood that education should follow the principles of attachment theory, and that attachment on the child’s part is necessary for a successful education. Thus school is a locus for the application of this theory (Becker-Stoll 2013). Learning is considered to be based on a child’s self-directed exploration. The individual child decides what s/he wants to do, thereby making free play a fundamental activity. The educational partner of the child is an adult who is taught to resemble the sensitive mother. The *Berliner Modell* requires the primary caregiver (usually the mother) to spend decreasing amounts of time, over a period up to four weeks, with the child in the daycare setting, so as to familiarize the child with the *Bezugserzieherin* (the childcare worker who has primary responsibility for the child). Since the introduction of the theory into Germany by attachment theorists Karin and Klaus Grossmann, the challenge of successful learning in schools based on attachment theoretic principles has been strongly promoted and advocated by others (e.g., Claus Koch from the Berlin Pedagogical Institute).

In the United States, day care has not been viewed so benignly. As Howes and Spieker (2016:319) observe:

A dramatic demographic shift in the rearing experiences of infants in the United States occurred in the closing decades of the 20th century. By the mid-1980s, the number of mothers in the paid labor force with infants under 1 year of age reached 50%. Social scientists began to ask whether the experience of repeated separations from mother, and time away from mother during the development of a child’s primary attachments, had adverse consequences for the quality of infant-mother attachment.

Some theorists raised the alarm about the effect of day care on attachment security. However, Howes and Spieker (2016:316) conclude that:

The formation of toddler-childcare provider attachment relationships appears to be similar to the formation of an infant-mother attachment. When toddlers begin child care, they direct attachment behaviors to the caregivers, and with increased time in the setting, children’s interactions with the caregivers become more organized, similar to attachment organizations found in mother-child dyads.

Nevertheless, Howes and Spieker (2016:315) temper their assessment of this similarity:

While research published in the interval between the second and third editions of the *Handbook of Attachment* has not challenged the assumption that children may establish attachment relationships with their nonparental childcare providers, there is some evidence that asking these caregivers for their perceptions of their relationships with particular children may result in relationship descriptions less aligned with attachment theory than observations of child-caregiver attachment behaviors in childcare settings.

They give the example of “childcare providers as teachers who are responsible for children’s school readiness,” so that these providers perceive their relationships with their charges in terms of self-efficacy as well as warmth and intimacy. This analysis does not consider, however, whether the very definition of attachment ought to be expanded to include a wider variety of providers or a combination of functions.

Indeed, their chapter in the third edition of the *Handbook of Attachment*, though it is entitled “Attachment Relationships in the Context of Multiple Caregivers,” is entirely occupied with the question of whether children can become attached to their daycare providers (Howes and Spieker 2016). The range of multiple attachments that can occur cross-culturally, and the various divisions of labor that may apply among these multiple caregivers, is not even addressed. Instead, as the passages already quoted from this chapter illustrate, its sole concern is how children’s attachments to institutional providers might fare in comparison to those with mother. While the authors note other attachment relationships in passing (e.g., relationships to fathers, grandparents, and other relatives), they do not pursue the nature of these relationships. Howes and Spieker (2016:316) do note, however, that “there is almost no literature on grandparent-child attachment relationships constructed concurrently with child-parent relationships,” despite the fact that grandmothers are crucial child caregivers everywhere in the world (see Keller and Chaudhary, this volume).

Clarke-Stewart (1989) offers quite a different interpretation of the possibility that children who attend daycare programs early in life, and spend many hours a day there, may end up “insecure-avoidant.” She suggests that the autonomy and independence which children gain through their daycare experience is being improperly mistaken for avoidance in the Strange Situation Procedure. She points out that this experimental procedure may not stress children with daycare experience as much as those without it, because it replicates the experience to which they have become habituated in key respects: children with daycare experience expect their mothers to leave them and know that they will return; they are also used to playing with toys that are not their own and being cared for by adults other than the mother. Attachment theory researchers would do well to consider this alternative interpretation.

Another approach to early education different from those reviewed above has been described by Serpell and Nsamenang (2014). Using the instance of sub-Saharan communities in Africa, they present the case that policy and services should be constructed around local knowledge systems, the distinctive cultural practices that have come to surround that knowledge, and the unique environmental context in which it is set. Unless this is done, they argue, children will always remain at a disadvantage. Everything that a child learns in existing centers, which have been designed to provide compensatory education to disadvantaged children, is irrelevant to what they actually need to know in order to thrive in their worlds. Moreover, these Westernized

centers treat local knowledge, including knowledge of social life, as inadequate and inferior.

## Legal Implications

When it comes to the welfare of children, attachment theory influences the law and its practitioners directly, as well as the guidelines adopted by these experts (e.g., court counselors, family therapists, and health professionals including psychologists, pediatricians, and social workers) whose role it is to advise jurists and to testify before the court. Attachment theorists have generally interceded in conversations about child custody by refuting earlier judicial biases toward maternal or, more recently in Western countries, joint or shared custody that typically accompanies dual residence (Maccoby and Mnookin 1993).<sup>4</sup> Instead, these theorists advocate a more child-centered approach, one independent of gender or biological parenthood. In the language of the study discussed earlier (Goldstein et al. 1973:17–20), but fully in line with their own emphasis on sensitive parenting, they ask: Who is a child’s “psychological parent”? The common idea that there is one such individual, and that the child should be assigned exclusively to that parent in the case of divorce, has sometimes reintroduced the biased assumption that mothers are the natural child caregivers, with the result that fathers have been needlessly excluded from meaningful engagement in their children’s lives (Kelly and Lamb 2000).

Contributors to a special issue of *Family Court Review*, devoted to attachment theory, entertain the possibility that fathers can also be attachment figures. While some consider this strictly a gender-neutral matter (e.g., Siegel and McIntosh 2011:519), others are inclined to posit a division of labor in which “mothers” are more likely to provide “close emotional scaffolding,” whereas “fathers” are the ones who encourage autonomy and exploration (Bretherton et al. 2011:542). We support the general observation that the care of children may be divided into different roles. However, these roles can be many and widely varied (see Morelli et al., this volume). We disagree with the ethnocentric notion that these two roles exhaust the cross-cultural possibilities or that one role is more conducive to attachment than the other.

In this special issue of the *Family Court Review*, the most adamant endorsement of a binary difference between a mother’s and father’s capacity for care, and consequently of the mother as the primary child caregiver in all cases, comes from Allan Schore. As a clinical neuropsychologist, Schore claims that the difference between “females and males” is dichotomous and universal, presumably because it is neurobiologically based (Schore and McIntosh 2011:504, italics added for emphasis):

---

<sup>4</sup> In Spain, shared custody of children no longer lactating has been federal law since 2000 (García and Otero 2006).

...we know that there is a difference between the father and the mother even in the 1st year and that the father's play is more arousing and energetic, while the mother's is more calming. There are extensive differences between females and males in terms of the ability to process emotional information. Females show an enhanced capacity to more effectively read nonverbal communications and to empathically resonate with emotional states than men. When it comes to reading facial expressions, tone of voice, and gestures, women are generally better than men. This is why, *in all human societies*, the very young and the very old are often attended to by females.<sup>5</sup>

This is a woefully ignorant list of claims, without support from the literature on gender differences. While some gender differences in humans certainly exist, they are not of the categorical kind to which Schore subscribes. Moreover, there is no proof that gender differences that do or may exist would affect caregiving. This is an especially disturbing example of gender bias, because judges have so much leeway to form opinions based on whatever academic positions they encounter and regard favorably.

Arguably, no sector of society today relies more routinely and confidently on attachment theory than do the courts in their consideration of cases involving child custody and child placement. Attachment theorists may demur, cautioning as do Main et al. (2011:428, italics in original) that

...all present methods of assessing attachment were designed for research purposes...and have yet to be sufficiently tested for their predictive powers with respect to the assessment of individuals.

Previous authors (e.g., Byrne et al. 2005; Emery et al. 2005; Mercer 2009; Symons 2010) as well as other contributors to this same journal issue on attachment theory and family law (Bretherton et al. 2011) warn sharply about the fallibility of the evidence supporting these methods. Still, Main et al. (2011:427–428) recommend, for use in making custody decisions, what they consider to be the “gold standard measures” developed by attachment theorists: the Strange Situation Procedure, the Attachment Q-Sort, and the Adult Attachment Interview. They recommend these instruments (never to be applied singly, they advise, but in combination with one another) because these procedures “come as close as possible to providing scientific evidence” (see Herman 1997; Main et al. 2011:448). Yet, other reports question the reliability of attachment measures like the Strange Situation Procedure and the Attachment Q-Sort, and demonstrate that they produce different results (Ahnert et al. 2006). In addition, parenting is evaluated and decisions about child placement are made on the basis of sensitivity and other attachment tenets, even though the families under evaluation may have profoundly different philosophies about what is best for the child.

<sup>5</sup> A similar claim about differences between men and women was made earlier by Bowlby himself when he wrote of the latter being biologically primed to behave in “motherly ways.”



### Implications for Public Policy

Both governmental agencies and nongovernmental organizations promote attachment theory assumptions in the areas of child development, child care, and breastfeeding. One example of a national policy advocating attachment theory is the Chilean government's Spanish-language Internet program: *Chile Crece Contigo* (Chile Grows with You). In existence since 2005, this program contains a section devoted to "*Apego*" (attachment), which teaches users (a) about sensitive parenting; (b) that infants need parental attention, stimulation, and interaction; and (c) that within this interactional context, infants are already separate "individuals." The program also promotes breastfeeding and offers fully paid six-week maternity leave in support of that practice as well as to foster overall attachment.

When attachment theory is exported from the West to the Global South, ethical problems arise due to the theoretical and methodological bias imposed on children and their caregivers in these non-Western societies. In sub-Saharan Africa, for example, Early Childhood Care and Education programs take a definite colonialist overtone, based on "the progressive appropriation of Western culture in opposition to African traditions" (Serpell and Nsamenang 2014). Their intent is to displace these traditions because they have been deemed to be "deficient and/or outdated." Western standards of nurturing are often held up as being "scientific" and used as the basis for such interventions. This tendency is heightened by the fact that research findings from Western settings have been compiled into readily available databases, whereas there is a paucity of cross-cultural research sensitive to local realities.

There is ample research to demonstrate the strong preference for multiple caregivers (men and women, children and adults) in Indian homes (Trawick 1990; Kurtz 1992; Roland 2005; Seymour 2004; Sharma 2003; Chaudhary 2004). This pattern stands in sharp contrast to the notion of a single sensitive female caregiver, who devotes her time exclusively to raising her children. Breastfeeding, co-sleeping, and physical stimulation of the child are all promoted, but not by a single person. In fact a mother who is alone in bringing up her child is considered to be in a difficult situation because she lacks the support of others. The ideology behind multiple caregiving is founded on the importance of relationships, including the active engagement of elders and other people in the socialization of young children, which is believed to be beneficial for them, for other members of the family, and for overall family cohesiveness.

One telling example of the questionable value of interventions into traditional childcare practices comes from a report by UNICEF, India (UNICEF 2011). This report describes a program, Behaviour Change Communication (BCC), whose proponents argue for transformations in communication patterns in the interests of "better practice." This program seems to have become the latest trend, and its name the latest buzz word, in village-level interventions. However, the program's efficacy is another matter. The report shows, for

instance, that there was already a high prevalence of breastfeeding among the families being served prior to introduction of BCC (UNICEF 2011:9). Thus, it is hard to understand how this rate could be attributed to a subsequent intervention resting on a new claim regarding change!

Even as common cultural practices, such as multiple caregiving and breastfeeding, continue today, international NGOs question other of these practices as part of their campaign for what they consider to be universal child rights. Under this banner, welfare programs of all kinds often cast the child as an individual rather than as a member of a collective, within which work and responsibility are routinely shared. Some of the key debates in this domain, in India and elsewhere, relate to (a) care of children by siblings (which counts as child labor by UN standards), (b) children doing household chores and participating in agricultural work in their families (again, conceived of as child labor), (c) care by relatives as an alternative to early childcare centers for young children (which are automatically assumed to be superior), and (d) supposed evidence of child abuse by family members (Aiyar 2015).

Our concern is that international “standards” for child care will make inroads into local practices through various interventions of this kind. When policy and interventions are shaped by such international (Euro-American) standards and imported by NGOs, they may upset the ecological wisdom of community living, all in the name of the millennial development goals that the NGOs pursue. We would guess that social workers as well as legal and medical practitioners, all familiar with village-level practices and their context, may still reasonably accept the local cultural patterns of child care that they encounter, although the absence of corroborating research makes it difficult to be certain.

Another, equally disturbing manifestation of this same cultural conflict between local practices and international expectations has arisen among Indian immigrants to other countries (e.g., in Norway, the United States, and the United Kingdom). Practices such as co-sleeping with parents, feeding by an adult, and discipline by means of physical punishment are still prevalent within Indian families. However, unbeknown to parents, usually recent migrants to the West, these practices come under the scrutiny of childcare services through alerts from daycare facilities, schools, or clinics. Several instances have been reported in which parents who follow these traditions have been treated as being potentially harmful for the children, who were then removed from their families and placed in foster care—the most common solution to such problems (Chaudhary and Valsiner 2015). Long drawn-out legal battles ensued, during which the children are kept separated from parents and not even allowed visits with extended kin.

The same situation faced by these Indian immigrants has transpired elsewhere, for instance among autochthonous Bribri people in Costa Rica, as reported by social welfare staff and local community leaders. Bribri parenting departs sharply from the dominant, Western-oriented caregiving practices that prevail in Costa Rica. For example, it is a Bribri practice to include children

in housework. This tends to be interpreted by policy-makers, once again, as forced child labor, and can lead to the removal of children from their households (Keller and Rosabal-Coto, pers. comm., March, 2017).

## Conclusion

Attachment theory has had an inordinate influence over a variety of practices by professionals whose province is children: family therapists, educators, jurists, policy-makers, pediatricians, as well as parents themselves. From the start, attachment theorists have noted the practical implications of their views, even if they have distanced themselves from some applications. In addition, some practitioners have borrowed from attachment theory to buttress the scientific credibility of programs for intervention into child care. Moreover, conclusions communicated in academic venues with cautionary notes and conditional qualifications often metamorphose into indisputable, unconditional scientific facts in the hands of those whose responsibility it is to solve real-world problems.

The cultural critique of attachment theory applications that we have raised is far from an idle academic exercise. It is a matter of social responsibility. Attachment theory is being used in a number of areas before sufficient evidence exists to support specific applications. Applications of the theory (e.g., in such venues as child-rearing manuals, the courts, and organizations both governmental and private devoted to public policy) are being made without consideration of cultural context as a fundamental dimension of the practices being addressed. As a result, spurious, often ethnocentric, recommendations for child caregiving are being promoted. We call on the scientific community to undertake the task of uncovering these misuses and to work to rectify the situation.

Morelli et al. (this volume) provide ample evidence that there is no single “best” practice or set of practices for the care of young children. The existence of a single person (the mother), who completely devotes all of her time and energy to the care of her young child, is hardly universal, nor is it realistic or practical. Numerous solutions to child-rearing have been invented by communities in response to their own particular histories, cultures, and ecological settings. Cultural sensitivity in policy, planning, and the delivery of services is a fundamental need for children, families, and communities all over the world. The only way to achieve this is to adopt a pluralistic approach to understanding the variety of attachments that children form as they grow up, and the long-term effects this has on their adult psychological makeup. We argue that practices of child-rearing vary among cultures, and that the variety of values that motivate those different practices need to be recognized (Morelli et al., this volume). To return to our earlier example of how a one-size-fits-all model for child-rearing can lead to profound misfit, we recall the working-class mother who watched her son through a one-way mirror, during a mother-absent phase in the Strange

Situation Procedure, as he played with the toys in the room. In contrast to the researchers running the study, this mother did not observe insecure-avoidant behavior: she saw her son exhibit independence and this made her very proud.

The methodological conclusions delineated by Morelli et al. (this volume) are critical to real-world applications of attachment theory, such as the ones discussed here. It is impossible to fathom what manner of programs, guidelines, and policies are needed by parents and other child caregivers in different societies and ethnic groups other than our own, without accounting for what they want for their children, how they raise them, and how they perceive recommended practices by comparison with their own. To be sure, this intensive method of inquiry and the wide variation it is likely to reveal complicates the practice of therapy, the task of educating children, legal decision making, policy-making, and pediatric advice in all kinds of ways. This poses a fundamental challenge that must be addressed if better social outcomes, of any kind, are to be engineered, especially in complex societies and in societies other than the practitioners' own. To meet this challenge, the goal or goals of such engineering must first be interrogated, understood, and agreed upon by all concerned. Attachment theory does not do a very good job of this.