

Beyond Broken Bonds and Broken Hearts: The Bonding of Theories of Attachment and Grief

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Attachment theory describes the establishment and long-term impact of infants' early relationships. Theories of grief and mourning have acknowledged that the disruption of attachment bonds is loss and grief, but the attachment literature shows little development toward a conceptual linkage with these theories. The connection is important given the current discussion of whether bonds with the deceased are broken or continued. The purpose of this article is to link the strengths of each perspective to inform us about the process of grief as mourners work through the reconstruction of their relationships. It presents a developmental model integrating attachment theory and cognitive developmental approaches in order to further our understanding of the processes involved in loss and grief. © 2000 Academic Press

Attachment theorists describe the process by which infants establish their earliest relationships and the subsequent impact of these relationships. The original theory was proposed by John Bowlby (1969, 1973, 1980) as an alternative to the psychoanalytic theory of object relations. Bowlby developed attachment theory in order to explain the anxiety infants experience when they are separated from people with whom they have an enduring emotional tie, the construction of defensive reactions when such relationships do not fulfill the affiliative needs of infants, and the parallels between adult and childhood mourning (Bretherton, 1985). Once considered to be “one of psychology's best kept secrets” (Karen, 1994), attachment theory and associated research have become increasingly visible and influential in lifespan social and emotional developmental studies and in such areas as understanding the impact of early child care (NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 1997), peer group development (Elicker, Sroufe, & Englund, 1992), and psychopathology (Atkinson & Zucker, 1997). The study of attachment has also been enriched by an examination of its relationship with cognitive develop-

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ment. For example, Main (1991) and Fonagy, Steele, Steele, Leigh, Kennedy, Mattoon, & Target (1995) convincingly argue that children's security of attachment is influenced both by their parents' and their own mental representations of relationships. Such recent work on self-reflective thinking and the evolution of the theory of mind has highlighted the implications of cognitive development for understanding the development of attachment relationships.

Because the complement to attachment is loss and grief, it is not surprising that the links between the two have also been acknowledged in theories of grief and mourning (e.g., Fraley & Shaver, 1999; Parkes, 1991; Weiss, 1993). In recent years, the conceptualization of grief and mourning has also undergone interesting changes, as a number of scholars have questioned the notion that "successful" resolution to grief involves an emotional disengagement from the deceased (Stroebe, 1992) or the severance of the attachment between the living and the dead (Fraley & Shaver, 1999; Klass, Silverman, & Nickman, 1996). Clearly, attachment theory and the work on grief and mourning have a common parentage. However, beyond the work of Bowlby, careful examination of the attachment literature shows limited theoretical linkages with theories of loss, grief, and mourning and not much in the way of empirical investigations.

Although a greater emphasis on attachment is seen in the thanatological literature, this area seems to be fraught with misinterpretations of the tenets of attachment theory. Thus, there is a missed opportunity to further a truly developmental approach, which is necessary for a full understanding of the dimensions of bereavement and grief (Corr, 1998). Sadly, these two fields of inquiry appear to be siblings that frequently experience poor communication. Attachment theory reflects the initial establishment and psychological incorporation of relationships, whereas many theories of bereavement and grief are either about the reworking of relationships or the detachment from such relationships in the face of physical loss. Beyond such common ground, attachment theory and theories of grief have recently moved in the direction of capturing the dynamic evolution of relationships by underscoring the significance of context. In our own research on attachment relationships of infants in child care, I and my colleagues have been impressed by the way in which infants either in family day care or child-care centers form different attachment relationships with their mothers and with their caregivers (Elicker, Fortner-Wood, & Noppe, 1999; Noppe, Fortner-Wood, & Elicker, 1999). We have also been interested in examining how the relationship between mothers and caregivers affects the infant's attachment security with the special people in his or her life. Seeing the dynamics of these relationship issues played out before our eyes brought home the notion that attachment security is about evolving social relationships that do not exist in isolation of time and space. Similarly, newer approaches to bereavement and grief have broadened beyond individual response to loss to examine grief as a relational issue (Silverman, 1999) and deriving meaning from socially con-

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