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.

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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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 of 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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