

ENCYCLOPEDIA OF

Human Relationships

HARRY T. REIS, EDITOR
University of Rochester

SUSAN SPRECHER, EDITOR
Illinois State University

VOLUME **1**



Los Angeles | London | New Delhi
Singapore | Washington DC

A SAGE Reference Publication

Copyright © 2009 by SAGE Publications, Inc.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or utilized in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

For information:



SAGE Publications, Inc.
2455 Teller Road
Thousand Oaks, California 91320
E-Mail: order@sagepub.com

SAGE Publications Ltd.
1 Oliver's Yard
55 City Road
London EC1Y 1SP
United Kingdom

SAGE Publications India Pvt. Ltd.
B 1/I 1 Mohan Cooperative Industrial Area
Mathura Road, New Delhi 110 044
India

SAGE Publications Asia-Pacific Pte. Ltd.
33 Pekin Street #02-01
Far East Square
Singapore 048763

Printed in the United States of America.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Encyclopedia of human relationships / editors, Harry T. Reis, Susan Sprecher.
p. cm.—(A sage reference publication)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-4129-5846-2 (cloth)

1. Interpersonal relations—Encyclopedias. 2. Social interaction—Encyclopedias.
I. Reis, Harry T. II. Sprecher, Susan, 1955-

HM1106.E53 2009
302.03—dc22

2008038165

This book is printed on acid-free paper.

09 10 11 12 13 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

<i>Publisher:</i>	Rolf A. Janke
<i>Editorial Assistant:</i>	Michele Thompson
<i>Developmental Editor:</i>	Sanford Robinson
<i>Sage Reference Manager:</i>	Letty Gutierrez
<i>Reference Systems Coordinator:</i>	Laura Notton
<i>Production Editor:</i>	Kate Schroeder
<i>Copy Editors:</i>	Robin Gold, Heather Jefferson, Renee Willers
<i>Typesetter:</i>	C&M Digitals (P) Ltd.
<i>Proofreaders:</i>	Penelope Sippel, Dennis W. Webb
<i>Indexer:</i>	Julie Grayson
<i>Cover Designer:</i>	Gail Buschman
<i>Marketing Manager:</i>	Amberlyn McKay

Adult Attachment Theory

Phillip R. Shaver

University of California, Davis, USA

Mario Mikulincer

Interdisciplinary Center (IDC) Herzliya, Israel

Author addresses: Phillip R. Shaver, Department of Psychology, University of California, Davis,
One Shields Avenue, Davis, CA 95616-8686, e-mail: prshaver@ucdavis.edu.

Mario Mikulincer, New School of Psychology, Interdisciplinary Center (IDC) Herzliya,
Herzliya 42150, Israel, e-mail: mario@idc.ac.il.

Bowlby and Ainsworth's attachment theory (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978; Bowlby, 1969/1982), which conceptualizes emotional bonds in close social relationships, is one of the most influential psychological theories of the past half century, having generated thousands of published studies and scores of books. It has adopted and used by all kinds of psychologists, including developmentalists, clinicians, personality and social psychologists, and even psychologists who study groups and organizations. There are several reasons for the theory's success: (a) It is both deep and broad. It has roots in psychoanalysis, cognitive developmental psychology, control systems theory, and primate ethology, and has provided a new approach for social and personality psychologist who study social relationships in adulthood. (b) The theory was expounded very clearly and systematically in Bowlby's trilogy on attachment and loss – *Attachment* (1969/1982), *Separation* (1973), and *Loss* (1980) – one of the most thorough and coherent integrations yet achieved of clinical insights and diverse research literatures concerning the impact of close relationships on personality development and psychopathology. (c) Although Bowlby was primarily a psychoanalyst and clinical theorist rather than a researcher, his close collaboration with Ainsworth, an empirically oriented research psychologist, resulted in measures and research paradigms that have been used effectively by basic researchers as well as clinicians. Here, we briefly summarize the current version of the theory, especially as it applies to adults. A much more detailed examination, with a complete review of research evidence, can be found in our book (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007).

The Attachment Behavioral System

According to Bowlby (1969/1982), human infants are born with a repertoire of behaviors (*attachment behaviors*) that were selected during evolution to increase the likelihood of maintaining proximity to supportive others (whom Bowlby called *attachment figures*). Attachment behaviors include making eye contact, smiling, crying, calling, following, hugging, and clinging. Attachment figures – such as parents, grandparents, neighbors, older siblings, and daycare workers – typically protect a child from threats and dangers, provide encouragement and promote safe exploration of the environment, and help the infant learn to regulate emotions.

Proximity-seeking behaviors are part of an adaptive behavioral system (the *attachment behavioral system*) that emerged over the course of primate evolution because it increased the likelihood of survival and reproduction in species whose offspring are born before they are able to walk, explore their environment, find food and water, or protect themselves from predators and other dangers. This behavioral system governs the choice, activation, and termination of proximity-seeking behaviors aimed at attaining an attachment figure's protection in times of need. Although the attachment system is most important early in life, Bowlby (1988) claimed it is active over the entire life span and is evident in thoughts and behaviors related to proximity seeking in times of need. This claim provided the impetus for subsequent theorists and researchers to conceptualize and study adult attachment.

During infancy, primary caregivers (such as parents) are likely to occupy the role of attachment figure. During adolescence and adulthood, peer relationship partners often become attachment figures, including close friends and romantic partners. Teachers and supervisors in academic settings or therapists in clinical settings can also serve as important sources of comfort and support. Moreover, groups, institutions, and spiritual personages (e.g., God, the Buddha, the Virgin Mary) can also be recruited as attachment figures. In addition, mental representations (thoughts, memories, images, conscious and unconscious) of attachment figures can serve as internal sources of support, comfort, and protection). They can also provide models of loving behavior that help a person sustain a sense of security even in the absence of physically present attachment figures.

From an attachment perspective, a specific relationship partner is an attachment figure, and a specific relationship is an attachment relationship, only to the extent that the partner and the relationship accomplish three important functions. First, the attachment figure must be viewed as someone from whom comforting proximity can be sought in times of stress or need, which often implies that a degree of worry, distress, and protest will arise if proximity to this person is threatened by separation or reduced attentiveness. Second, the person should be viewed as an actual or potential "*safe haven*" who can provide comfort, support, protection, and

security in times of need. Third, the person should be viewed as a “*secure base*,” allowing a child or adult to pursue personal goals in a safe environment and sustain exploration, risk taking, and personal growth. In other words, the attachment figure should be viewed as a haven of safety when the world seems dangerous and as an encourager and support provider when the world seems safe and offers interesting challenges for the development of skills and knowledge.

According to Bowlby (1969/1982), the goal of the attachment system is to increase a person’s sense of security – a sense that the world is generally safe and challenging in a good way, that one can rely on others for protection and support when needed, and that one can confidently explore the environment and engage in social (affiliative) and nonsocial (skill learning) activities without fear of injury or failure. This goal is made particularly salient by actual or symbolic threats or by appraising an attachment figure as not sufficiently available or responsive. In such cases, the attachment system is activated and the individual is motivated to reestablish actual or symbolic proximity to an attachment figure (a set of behaviors and behavioral tendencies that attachment researchers call the “primary strategy” of the attachment system; Main, 1990). These bids for proximity persist until a sense of security is restored, at which time the individual comfortably returns to other activities.

During infancy, the primary attachment strategy includes mostly nonverbal expressions of need, such as crawling toward the attachment figure, reaching out to be picked up, crying, clinging, and so on (Ainsworth et al., 1978). In adulthood, this primary strategy includes many other methods of establishing contact (e.g., talking, calling someone on the telephone, sending an e-mail or text message, driving to the person’s workplace) as well as mentally conjuring up soothing, comforting, encouraging mental representations of attachment figures (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Such mental representations can bolster a person’s sense of security, allowing him or her to continue pursuing other goals without interrupting goal pursuit to engage in bids for proximity and protection.

Bowlby (1988) described many of the adaptive benefits of proximity seeking. Becoming and remaining physically and emotionally close to another person is necessary for forming and

maintaining successful, satisfying relationships. Moreover, seeking proximity to a loving, caring relationship partner helps a person learn to regulate and deescalate negative emotions, such as anxiety, anger, and sadness (Bowlby, 1973, 1980), which allows a person to be emotionally balanced and resilient in the face of life's inevitable stresses. Attachment security is also important as a foundation for learning about life's tasks and developing necessary and self-chosen skills of all kinds. A child or adult who feels threatened and inadequately protected or supported has a difficult time directing attention to free play, curious investigation of objects and environments, and affiliative relationships with peers. Extended over long periods, this kind of interference disrupts the development of self-efficacy, self-esteem, and trust in other people. Because of Bowlby's (1969/1982) emphasis on felt security, he rejected theoretical formulations that equated attachment with excessive dependency or childishness. In his view, secure attachment provides a foundation for personal growth and mature autonomy, states that continue to involve successful close relationships.

Individual Differences in Attachment Working Models

Bowlby (1973) also discussed individual differences in the quality of attachment-system functioning. In his view, these individual differences reflect the sensitivity and responsiveness of one's past attachment figures to bids for proximity and support, and they take the form of internalized *working models* (i.e., expectations, cognitive schemas) of self and others in relationships. These ideas have been empirically supported in several longitudinal studies running from infancy to early adulthood (e.g., Grossmann, Grossmann, & Waters, 2005). Interactions with attachment figures who are available and responsive in times of need allow the attachment system to function smoothly and effectively. They promote a sense of connectedness and security, create positive expectations concerning other people's likely responsiveness and social support, and enhance perceptions of oneself as valuable, lovable, and special. When a person's attachment figures are not reliably available and supportive, however, a sense of security is not attained, working models of self and relationship partners contain many negative,

distressing elements, and strategies of affect regulation other than normal proximity seeking (ones that Main, 1990, called *secondary attachment strategies*) are adopted and reinforced.

Attachment theorists emphasize two secondary strategies: hyperactivation and deactivation of the attachment system. Hyperactivation is manifested in energetic, insistent attempts to get a relationship partner, viewed as insufficiently available or responsive, to pay more attention and provide better care and support. Hyperactivating strategies include being overly vigilant and intrusive regarding a relationship partner's interest, availability, and commitment or reliability; clinging to and attempting to control the partner; energetically attempting to achieve greater physical and emotional closeness, and being too dependent on relationship partners as constant sources of protection or reassurance. Deactivation of the attachment system includes inhibition or suppression of proximity-seeking tendencies and development of a personal style that Bowlby (1980) called "compulsive self-reliance." Deactivating strategies require a person to deny or downplay attachment needs; avoid closeness, intimacy, commitment, and dependence; and maintain cognitive, emotional, and physical distance from others. They also involve active inattention to threatening events and personal vulnerabilities, as well as suppression of thoughts and memories that evoke distress, because such thoughts might cause unwanted urges to seek proximity to and rely on other people.

According to attachment theory (Bowlby, 1988), a particular history of attachment experiences and the resulting formation of a person's attachment-related working models lead to relatively stable individual differences in *attachment style* – a habitual pattern of expectations, needs, emotions, and behavior in interpersonal interactions and close relationships (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Depending on how attachment style is measured, it includes a person's typical attachment-related thoughts, feelings, and behavior in a particular relationship (relationship-specific style) or across relationships (global attachment style).

The concept of attachment patterns or styles was first proposed by Ainsworth (1967) to describe infants' responses to separations from and reunions with their mother in a laboratory "strange situation" designed to activate the infants' attachment systems. Based on this

procedure, infants were originally classified into one of three categories: secure, anxious, or avoidant (Ainsworth et al., 1978). In the 1980s, researchers from different psychological subdisciplines (developmental, clinical, personality, and social psychology) constructed new measures of attachment style to extend attachment research into adolescence and adulthood. Based on a developmental and clinical approach, Main and her colleagues (see Hesse, 1999, for a review) devised the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI) to study adolescents and adults' mental representations of attachment to their parents during childhood. In an independent line of research, Hazan and Shaver (1987), who wished to apply Bowlby and Ainsworth's ideas to the study of romantic relationships, developed a self-report measure of adult attachment style. In its original form, the measure consisted of three brief descriptions of constellations of feelings and behaviors in close relationships that were intended to parallel the three infant attachment patterns identified by Ainsworth et al. (1978).

Hazan and Shaver's (1987) study was followed by hundreds of others that used the simple self-report measure to examine the interpersonal and intrapersonal correlates of adult attachment style (reviewed by Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Over time, attachment researchers made methodological and conceptual improvements to the original self-report measure and reached the conclusion that attachment styles are best conceptualized as regions in a two-dimensional space (e.g., Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998). The first dimension, attachment-related *avoidance*, concerns discomfort with emotional closeness and depending on relationship partners, as well as a preference for interpersonal distance and self-reliance. Avoidant individuals, identified by using self-report measures, employ deactivating strategies to cope with insecurity and distress. The second dimension, attachment-related *anxiety*, includes a strong desire for closeness and safety, intense worries about partner availability and responsiveness, and about one's value to the partner, and the use of hyperactivating strategies (crying, begging, intruding, demanding) for dealing with insecurity and distress. People who score low on both dimensions are said to be secure or to have a secure attachment style.

Attachment styles are formed initially in early interactions with primary caregivers (as documented in a research anthology edited by Cassidy and Shaver, 1999, and in the volume edited by Grossmann et al., 2005), but Bowlby (1988) contended that notable interactions with significant others throughout life have the effect of updating a person's attachment working models. Moreover, although attachment style is often portrayed as a single, global orientation toward close relationships, there are theoretical and empirical reasons for viewing working models as parts of a memory network that includes a complex, heterogeneous array of specific and generalized attachment representations (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). In fact, research indicates that (a) people possess multiple attachment schemas; (b) both congruent and incongruent working models can coexist in a complex memory network; and (c) actual or imagined encounters with supportive or unsupportive interaction partners can activate particular attachment-related memories and expectations even if they are incongruent with a person's global attachment style. These various representations can be experimentally or therapeutically "primed" in order to change a person's attachment orientation in either the short run or the long run (see review by Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007).

According to attachment theory, the physical and emotional availability of an actual security provider, or access to mental representations of supportive attachment figures, increases the sense of felt security and fosters a broaden-and-build cycle of attachment security. This cycle includes a cascade of mental and behavioral processes that increase a person's resources for maintaining emotional stability in times of stress, encourage intimate and deeply interdependent bonds with others, increase personal adjustment, and expand a person's perspectives and capacities (e.g., by allowing the person to be more creative, resourceful, or thoughtful). In the long run, repeated experiences of attachment-figure availability have an enduring effect on intrapsychic organization and interpersonal behavior. At the intrapsychic level, such experiences act as a continuing resilience resource, sustaining emotional well-being and adjustment. At the interpersonal level, repeated experiences of attachment-figure

availability provide a foundation for attachment security, which encourages the formation and maintenance of warm, satisfying, stable, and harmonious relationships.

Although secondary attachment strategies are initially aimed at achieving a workable relationship with a particular inconsistently available or consistently distant or unavailable attachment figure, they are often maladaptive when used in later relationships where proximity, intimacy, and interdependence would be more rewarding. Moreover, according to Bowlby (1980, 1988), these insecure attachment strategies are risk factors that reduce resilience in times of stress or loss and increase the probability of emotional difficulties and poor adjustment. Anxious attachment encourages distress intensification and evokes a stream of negative memories, thoughts, and emotions, which in turn interferes with cognitive organization and, in some cases, precipitates psychopathology. Although avoidant individuals can often sustain a defensive façade of security and imperturbability, they ignore, misinterpret, or misunderstand their emotional reactions and have difficulty dealing with prolonged, demanding stressors that require active problem-confrontation and the mobilization of external sources of support (e.g., Berant, Mikulincer, & Shaver, 2008). In addition, although avoidant individuals are often able to suppress or ignore distressing emotions, the distress can still be indirectly manifested in somatic symptoms, sleep problems, and other physical health problems. Moreover, avoidant individuals are prone to transform unresolved distress into hostility, loneliness, and estrangement from others.

Adult attachment research is currently being extended in studies of stress-related physiological processes (e.g., secretion of the stress hormone cortisol) and patterns of brain activation (e.g., over-activation of emotion generators and under-activation of frontal executive functions needed for emotion regulation). Moreover, what Bowlby called the attachment behavioral system has been linked to the functioning of other innate behavioral systems, such as caregiving, exploration, and sex, with results that are being applied clinically in individual and couples therapy. In sum, Bowlby and Ainsworth's concept of attachment has become central to

most psychological subdisciplines, and the scientific and clinical influence of attachment theory shows no sign of waning.

References

- Ainsworth, M. D. S. (1967). *Infancy in Uganda: Infant care and the growth of love*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Ainsworth, M. D. S., Blehar, M. C., Waters, E., & Wall, S. (1978). *Patterns of attachment: Assessed in the Strange Situation and at home*. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Berant, E., Mikulincer, M., & Shaver, P. R. (2008). Mothers' attachment style, their mental health, and their children's emotional vulnerabilities: A 7-year study of mothers of children with congenital heart disease. *Journal of Personality, 76*, 31-65.
- Bowlby, J. (1982/1969). *Attachment and loss: Vol. 1. Attachment* (2nd ed.). New York: Basic Books. (First ed. 1969)
- Bowlby, J. (1973). *Attachment and loss: Vol. 2. Separation: Anxiety and anger*. New York: Basic Books.
- Bowlby, J. (1980). *Attachment and loss: Vol. 3. Sadness and depression*. New York: Basic Books.
- Bowlby, J. (1988). *A secure base: Clinical applications of attachment theory*. London: Routledge.
- Brennan, K. A., Clark, C. L., & Shaver, P. R. (1998). Self-report measurement of adult attachment: An integrative overview. In J. A. Simpson & W. S. Rholes (Eds.), *Attachment theory and close relationships* (pp. 46-76). New York: Guilford Press.
- Cassidy, J., & Shaver, P. R. (Eds.). (1999). *Handbook of attachment: Theory, research, and clinical applications*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Grossmann, K. E., Grossmann, K., & Waters, E. (Eds.). *Attachment from infancy to adulthood: The major longitudinal studies*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Hazan, C., & Shaver, P. R. (1987). Romantic love conceptualized as an attachment process. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 52*, 511-524.

Hesse, E. (1999). The Adult Attachment Interview: Historical and current perspectives. In J. Cassidy & P. R. Shaver (Eds.), *Handbook of attachment: Theory, research, and clinical applications* (pp. 395-433). New York: Guilford Press.

Main, M. (1990). Cross-cultural studies of attachment organization: Recent studies, changing methodologies, and the concept of conditional strategies. *Human Development*, 33, 48-61.

Mikulincer, M., & Shaver, P. R. (2007). *Attachment in adulthood: Structure, dynamics, and change*. New York: Guilford Press.