

## **Attachment and Alternatives: Theory in Child Welfare Research**

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**Abstract.** *In an effort to improve the effectiveness of their services with children and adolescents, many social workers consult research guided by attachment theory. This article provides a brief overview of attachment theory with specific attention given to its application to contemporary child welfare research. Criticisms of attachment theory are discussed in detail, along with possibilities for alternative research frameworks including crisis intervention, anti-discrimination, social construction, and critical social work theories.*

**Key words:** *Child welfare, research, attachment theory, theoretical alternatives*

A substantial body of research now supports what child welfare workers have known for decades: The detrimental effects of child abuse and neglect are significant, long-lasting, and can impact every aspect of a child's life (Augoustinos, 1987; Cahill, Kaminer, & Johnson, 1999; Fagan, 2001; Glaser, 2000; Pollak, Cicchetti, Hornung, & Reed, 2000; Smetana & Kelly, 1989; Starr & Wolfe, 1991). Furthermore, many children experience additional trauma and problematic outcomes after they enter protective services (Dumaret, Coppel-Batsch, & Couraud, 1997; Fish & Chapman, 2004). Faced with the task of protecting some of the country's most vulnerable clients, those in the field of child welfare must continually seek out ways to improve the effectiveness of their services. For many, social work research guided by attachment theory has provided some answers.

### **ATTACHMENT THEORY**

The basic premise of attachment theory is that a child's relationship with a primary caregiver during infancy is critically important to later development and serves as a prototype for the child's relationships throughout the lifespan (Howe, 1995). The theory originated in the work of John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth who sought to explain and measure infants' responses to separation from their mothers. Bowlby (1969, 1973, 1980) viewed the infant as an active participant in shaping the relationship between mother and child, responding to innate drives to increase the proximity of the mother for reasons of safety and security. Ainsworth's most significant contribution to attachment theory was the now-famous "strange situation" test, which has become the standard method of assessing attachment (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978). During the strange situation test, an infant (12 to 18 months old) is observed experiencing the separation and return of a primary caregiver. Based on the observed responses, the infant is classified in one of four attachment categories: insecure-avoidant, secure, insecure-ambivalent, or insecure-disorganized. These attachment classifications have been used extensively in child welfare practice and research (Mennen & O'Keefe, 2005).

#### **Applications to child welfare**

Proponents of attachment theory stress its usefulness in understanding the psychological ramifications of child abuse and neglect. They argue that the challenges that

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children who have been mistreated introduced into the foster care system are more clearly understood and addressed by workers who are familiar with basic attachment concepts (Golding, 2003; Mennen & O'Keefe, 2005). Attachment theory attributes the problems that children continue to experience even after being removed from an abusive situation to the trauma that they endure when experiencing repeated separations from caregivers. Importantly, research has shown that difficulties are not restricted to interpersonal relationships. The quality of a child's attachments has been shown to predict performance socially, cognitively, behaviorally, and academically (Golding, 2003).

Researchers interested in the long-term consequences for children in out-of-home care have given considerable attention to attachment patterns due to evidence that children's attachment classifications are associated with the quality of their relationships and development over the entire lifespan (Howe, Brandon, Hinings, & Schofield, 1999). Children who are securely attached are typically able to balance autonomy with participation in satisfying, emotionally reciprocal relationships later in life. A child classified as insecure-avoidant may minimize the importance of connections to others as an adult and will likely find it difficult to empathize with emotional individuals. An insecure-ambivalent classification may predict impulsivity and a limited ability to regulate one's emotions in adulthood.

The insecure-disorganized classification category was not originally included in the work of Ainsworth and her colleagues. This pattern of attachment was recognized by Main and Solomon (1986) who noticed unusual responses in infants who had experienced significant trauma and/or behavior on the part of the primary caregiver that was frightening or unpredictable. Adult relationships for individuals who are classified as insecure-disorganized are typically volatile and may include emotional or physical abuse (Howe et al., 1999). Studies have shown that children displaying disorganized attachment patterns are significantly overrepresented in the child welfare system (Golding, 2003; Howe et al., 1999).

### **Criticisms of Attachment Theory**

Although attachment theory is widely used in child welfare, it is not without criticism. Some writers suggest that it is culturally-biased and may lead to decision making that ignores the importance of raising children in an environment consistent with their cultural heritage (Neckoway, Brownlee, Jourdain, & Miller, 2003). Others propose that attachment theory is particularly vulnerable to sociopolitical influence (Bolen, 2002; Olafson, 2002).

Arguably the most vocal opposition to attachment theory in recent years has come from the field of genetics. In the most recent formulation of the nature versus nurture debate, some researchers are exploring the idea of inborn temperament. Their findings suggest that many traits currently thought of as "personality" may be influenced by a person's biological make-up (Kagan, 1998, 2004; Kagan & Snidman, 2004). Further study in this area may challenge attachment theory's assertion that environmental factors, specifically parental behavior, are most significant in shaping the character of children.

Additional criticism of attachment theory originates in feminist thought. Although attachment theorists do not claim that mothers are exclusively able to be primary caregivers, much of the research in this area focuses on females as the critical attachment figures in

children's lives. Therefore, feminist theorists have contributed significantly to the discussion regarding political issues inherent in the attachment theory movement (Contratto, 2002). Since attachment theory posits that a child's relationship to a primary caregiver (again, often female) serves a critical role in the child's psychological development, the theory logically implies that complications in development (i.e. psychopathology) can be attributed to problems within the child-caregiver relationship. This professionally sanctioned "mother-blaming" has been identified by feminist writers as problematic, sexist, and designed to support the status quo (Birns, 1999; Contrato, 2002).

### **Attachment's response**

With a few key exceptions, attachment theorists do not seem defensive regarding criticisms. The inclusive nature of attachment theory and its ability to adapt in light of new science has contributed to its staying power. For example, attachment theorists have not totally rejected the idea of temperament. In fact, contemporary attachment work has absorbed some of the ideas that guide temperament research and is currently exploring the interaction among biological factors, parenting styles, and attachment (Steele, 2002; Zeanah & Fox, 2004). Additionally, some professionals who use attachment perspectives in their work consider themselves to be feminists and disagree with criticisms of the theory. They explain that attachment theory actually honors women and the significant contributions that female caregivers make to society (Harvey, 2003).

## **ALTERNATIVE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS**

In his discussion of theory, Howe (1987) explains that social workers always employ some frame of reference when making practice decisions, even if they are not consciously aware that they are doing so. If theory serves as an anchor for decision making in child welfare, it is important that the theories be appropriate to and useful in child welfare practice, as well as in accordance with professional ethics. With regard to the utility of attachment theory, the jury is still out. However, even if attachment theory is accepted as a sound framework for research, use of a more diverse range of perspectives will almost certainly enhance studies in the field. Crisis intervention theories, anti-discrimination perspectives, social construction theories, and critical social work all contribute unique viewpoints and can be useful in forming research questions in child welfare. Table 1 summarizes the basic premises of these theories and research questions that emerge from each perspective.

### **Crisis intervention theories**

According to crisis intervention theories, individuals are typically able to cope with change (Roberts, 2000). When an event occurs that overwhelms a person's existing coping strategies, he or she may learn new and more effective coping skills and emerge from the situation better able to handle taxing situations. Conversely, if one is unable to acquire adequate coping abilities, he or she will fail to handle the stressor, resulting in a compromised level of functioning and an increased susceptibility to behavioral and mental health problems.

Children who enter protective services may experience events that challenge their ability to cope, including abuse and/or neglect and removal from their family of origin. Crisis intervention theories provide a useful framework for research into how, if at all, children are able to cope with maltreatment. Furthermore, studies may explore how children regain a sense of normalcy following removal from their home of origin, entry into the foster care system, and introduction of new caregivers.

<b>Table 1: Social work theories and potential applications to research in child welfare</b>		
Theoretical Framework(s)	Basic Premise	Child Welfare Research Questions
Crisis Intervention Theories	Individuals are typically able to cope with change. Crises challenge existing coping strategies and either result in improved skills or failure to cope, resulting in a decreased ability to manage life events (Roberts, 2000).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How, if at all, are children able to cope with removal from home of origin?</li> <li>• How, if at all, are children able to cope with experiences of abuse or neglect?</li> <li>• What is the relationship, if any, between family crises and child abuse/neglect?</li> </ul>
Anti-Discrimination Theories	Oppressive conditions exist to advance the power of privileged groups. Institutionalized discrimination is harmful to society and individuals and should be challenged (Thompson, 2003).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How can minority overrepresentation in child welfare system be explained?</li> <li>• Are culturally acceptable practices misunderstood or viewed as inferior (e.g. fictive kinships)?</li> <li>• How are homosexuals impacted by child welfare policies?</li> </ul>
Social Construction Theories	Human understanding of reality is the product of participation in social processes. Social “problems” are not inherently problematic. They become so only when a social group labels them as such and suggests that political or social action is required (Berger & Luckmann, 1971; Kituse & Spector, 1973).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How effective is the use of strengths perspectives in changing behaviors/attitudes of child welfare workers?</li> <li>• Do sociopolitical forces dictate which conditions are considered problematic or deviant?</li> </ul>
Critical Theories	Society as it is presently constructed is corrupted by political and economic inequalities that should be rectified. Rather than focus on the well being of individuals, people should strive to change exploitative societal practices (Pozzuto, Angell, & Dezendorf, 2005).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are child welfare decisions based on best interests or financial considerations?</li> <li>• How will privatization impact child welfare?</li> <li>• Are child welfare courts accessible and understandable to the people they serve?</li> </ul>

Research findings may also inform child welfare workers, law enforcement officers, and mental health professionals of which interventions improve the experiences of children in the child welfare system. In her qualitative study of children on the day they were taken

into custody, Folman (1998) found that virtually every child in her study who was removed from their home by a law enforcement officer was subsequently taken to a McDonalds® restaurant. Clearly, professionals are looking for answers on how to best support children when they are at risk of entering a crisis state. It is also clear that more answers are needed.

### **Anti-discrimination theories**

Anti-discrimination theories focus on the oppressive forces that are present in our society's institutions and policies. According to anti-discrimination theories, these conditions exist to advance the power of privileged groups and are harmful to both individuals and society (Thompson, 2003). Some theorists do not consider anti-discrimination perspectives to be a separate set of ideas, but argue that issues pertaining to equality and social justice should permeate all social work practice, policies, and research (Payne, 2005).

It is common knowledge that individuals experience discrimination on the basis of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and religion, despite countless laws and policies designed to protect marginalized groups. Child welfare is not immune to these discriminatory practices. Anti-oppressive research may seek to explain minority overrepresentation in the child welfare system. Are culturally sanctioned practices (e.g. fictive kinship, group care) misinterpreted by child welfare workers or viewed as somehow inferior? Research may also attempt to answer the question asked by many social work practitioners: If social work is dominated by women, why are so many supervisors men?

Perhaps the most discussed discrimination in child welfare over the past decade is that pertaining to members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered community. Politics and religion aside, objective research can provide answers to whether or not homosexual couples or individuals are as capable as their heterosexual counterparts of providing stable, nurturing environments for children awaiting foster homes or adoption. Further study may also determine whether or not homosexual adolescents are adequately supported in foster homes or alternative care settings.

Not only do anti-discrimination theories provide a background for innovative research, they also allow social workers to fulfill obligations dictated by the profession. Ethically, social workers must work toward increasing equality and social justice for all people (NASW, 1999). This is an honorable goal; however, it is impossible to achieve without a clear understanding of oppressive practices as they presently exist. Continued research will grant the profession insights into the current status of discrimination in society.

### **Social construction theories**

Social construction theories take objection with the notion that there is a singular, fixed reality upon which everyone naturally agrees. According to Berger and Luckmann (1971), human understanding of reality is the product of participation in social processes. Kituse and Spector (1973) expanded on the work of earlier social constructionists, explaining that there is nothing inherently problematic about the social phenomena that are labeled "social problems." Social problems only become defined as such when a group with considerable power or influence suggests that political or social action is required to change a given condition. Research informed by social construction theories may seek to determine if

there is something inherently dysfunctional about single parent families, all other things being equal. Furthermore, would studies investigating the “problem” of children being raised by grandparents obtain different results if society viewed this family arrangement as legitimate, or at least adaptive?

In recent years, the strengths perspective has gained popularity in child welfare settings, challenging workers to reconstruct the ways they think, write, and talk about clients and their families, viewing what would previously have been labeled as “problems” as opportunities or needs (Saleebey, 2001). As professionals work to integrate strengths into practice models, it seems fair to ask how effective the use of the strengths perspective is in changing attitudes of child welfare workers and clients. Furthermore, if thoughts and attitudes are changing, are these changes resulting in better outcomes for clients? Research can contribute findings to answer these questions.

### **Critical theories**

Critical theorists believe that society as it is presently constructed is corrupted by political and economic inequalities that should be rectified. Rather than focus on the well being of individuals, critical theories suggest that members of society should strive to create macro-levels changes that minimize exploitation and distribute power more equitably (Pozzuto et al., 2005).

Research in this area may seek to illustrate ways that social work supports and participates in an unjust society. Studies may focus on the “hidden agendas” of social work decision makers by asking whether child welfare decisions are actually based on what is believed to be in the child’s best interest or if they are based on economic or public relations considerations. This will be a decidedly important focus as increasing numbers of private agencies provide child welfare services. With regard to individual rights of children and families, critical theorists may study the legal processes involved in the child welfare system, asking whether children (or their families, for that matter) adequately understand and are able to successfully navigate the complex world of guardians, child welfare workers, juvenile officers, therapists, and judges. Research can then be used as a catalyst for systems-level change.

### **CONCLUSION**

Albert Einstein once said that it is the theory that decides what can be observed. If this is true, then research guided by a diverse range of theories can only expand social work’s knowledge base and improve the profession’s ability to thoroughly explore important social conditions. With nearly 300,000 children entering foster care each year (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2003), the child welfare system undoubtedly deserves the highest quality of research and attention available. Through continued diligence, study, and effort, social workers can create changes that improve the lives and futures of children.

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