

CHAPTER 7

Casting a Wider Net

Parents, Pair Bonds, and Other Attachment Partners in Adulthood

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All of us, from the cradle to the grave, are happiest when life is organized as a series of excursions, long or short, from the secure base provided by our attachment figures.

—JOHN BOWLBY (1988)

When the 2020 coronavirus pandemic required individuals to physically distance themselves from others, a common ritual emerged across the world: porch visits in which grown children of elderly parents visited while standing at a safe distance apart. The universal need to “touch base” with loved ones in order to feel whole reflects the important role attachment relationships play in supporting health and well-being throughout life. Adults, like children, seek contact with attachment figures who provide a sense of emotional security. Building upon Bowlby’s theory, adult attachment researchers have argued that attachment needs in adults are typically met within the context of sexual pair bonds—partnerships between sexual mates that also involve intense emotional bonds (Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Zeifman & Hazan, 2016). Many of the same features that characterize infant–caregiver attachments also distinguish adult pair bonds, including a desire to protect and maintain the relationship, and a strong resistance to separation. In addition to having similar psychological and behavioral dynamics, adult romantic relationships and childhood attachments also share similar neurochemical underpinnings (Feldman, 2017).

While adult pair bonds are the most common manifestation of adult attachment, shifting cultural norms and demographic patterns in recent

decades suggest that, for a growing segment of society, attachment figures may include other types of close relationship partners. DePaulo and others have argued that friends and family members, such as siblings, often provide the same support that spouses do in marriage (DePaulo & Morris, 2005). One profound difference between attachment in childhood versus in adulthood is that adults have the ability to choose, replace, or forgo attachment partners. In this chapter, we argue that future attachment research should explore the full range and diversity of adult relationships. As increasing numbers of adults delay or abstain from long-term sexual partnerships, researchers need to consider whether and how various types of nonsexual relationships function to satisfy attachment needs.

Because sexual partnerships are the most common context in which children are reared and long-term emotional bonds usually accompany sexual interactions, evolutionary psychologists have argued that pair bonds evolved because they confer unique advantages to individuals and their offspring. Having strong ties to sexual partners is associated with higher levels of life satisfaction and improved health outcomes for adult pairs, as well as for their children. A common view is that sexual attraction brings sexual partners together initially, and rewarding sexual interactions then promote the formation and persistence of emotional bonds (Zeifman, 2019). A logical question might therefore be: In the absence of sex, what serves to unite partners and keep them attached? Are close friendships characterized by the same features as attachment relationships? Are bonds between nonsexual partners as intense and enduring as sexual pair bonds? These are significant empirical questions that require further research.

In efforts to distinguish attachment relationships from other social relationships, attachment researchers have argued that four features characterize attachment relationships: a drive to maintain proximity to the attachment figure, the use of the attachment figure both as a safe haven and as a secure base in times of stress, and strong distress at separation (Zeifman & Hazan, 2016). Infant–caregiver relationships and adult sexual pair bonds typify these features, but do other relationships encompass these features as well? A central tenet of Bowlby's observations of children and Harlow's seminal work with monkeys is that close physical contact fosters the development of emotional bonds. In most cultures, intimate physical contact in adults is restricted to parents with their own children and sexual partners (Zeifman, 2019). Presumably, the psychological security derived from touch is at least in part mediated by the physiological changes induced by close physical contact. A recent study in which romantic couples were randomly assigned to touching or nontouching conditions demonstrated the positive effect of touch for producing feelings of emotional security (Jakubiak & Feeney, 2016). Repeated intimate contact surrounding caregiving in infancy and sexual encounters in adulthood

is rewarding, and at least partly responsible for the development of emotional interdependence (Zeifman & Hazan, 2016).

As a result of repeated, soothing physical contact, one hallmark feature of attachment relationships is that they are mutually physiologically regulating (Zeifman, 2019). Infants use their caregivers as a source of comfort, the person to retreat to in times of distress. Similarly, adults seek partners to reduce aversive arousal. For example, holding the hand of a spouse attenuates neural responses associated with threat of electrical shock in married women (Coan, Schaefer, & Davidson, 2006). Although holding the hand of a male stranger attenuates threat response as well, a spouse is more effective, and the magnitude of threat attenuation is associated with marital quality. Thus, the stress-modulating impact of adult relationships is similar to the caregiver's ability to buffer an infant's distress, an effect that is partially modulated by the quality of the attachment (Gunnar & Donzella, 2002). Both infants and their caregivers as well as pair-bonded couples experience distress at separation, and remain alert to perceived threats to themselves, their attachment figure, and the relationship. Although most adults are capable of tolerating longer separations from attachment partners than children are, even adults become dysregulated when they experience unanticipated or permanent separations from attachment figures (Weiss, 1976).

Neurochemical evidence points to distinct characteristics of pair-bonded couples' interactions that may not generalize to platonic friends. Cortisol levels are linked between romantic partners but not friends (Feldman, 2017). Oxytocin, a neuropeptide produced during labor and breastfeeding that is associated with feelings of closeness and well-being, is also released in a pulsatile fashion during sexual intercourse (Feldman, 2017). Although oxytocin is also released during interactions with friends, there is no evidence of a coupling of oxytocin response as there is with parent-child and romantic partners (Feldman, 2017). Like infant attachments, adult attachment relationships develop over time. This suggests that, at any age, attachments require experience with a particular significant other, learning, and repeated neurohormonal transformations.

The case for pair bonds as attachments has been made elsewhere and often, but shifting demographics suggest that additional relationships might also qualify as attachment relationships. Increasing numbers of adults are delaying marriage into middle age or are choosing to remain single (DePaulo & Morris, 2005). Slightly over 50% of adults aged 18–34 did not have a steady partner in 2018 (Bonos & Guskin, 2019). These changing demographics raise important questions for attachment researchers. As more adults remain single for longer periods of time (Peppling & MacDonald, 2019), how are uncoupled adults getting their attachment needs met? Attachment researchers are only beginning to explore these questions and employ comparison groups that could shed light on

what types of relationships serve key attachment functions. A recent follow-up to the original Coan and colleagues (2006) study demonstrated that holding the hand of a close relative or friend was as effective as holding the hand of a spouse for attenuating neural threat response (Coan et al., 2017). Another study in which individuals envisioned being touched by a close friend or romantic partner demonstrated that the two were equally effective in producing feelings of security (Jakubiak & Feeney, 2016). In a second experiment in the same study, adults receiving touch from a romantic partner increased feelings of security to an even greater degree than just imagining touch, but this study did not examine the *actual* touch of a close friend. Further research should include various categories of relational partners and compare their effectiveness for promoting feelings of emotional security.

Adult attachment researchers have sometimes been criticized for implying that many adults who remain single do so because of personal deficiencies (DePaulo & Morris, 2005). Some recent studies have examined the trajectories of singles who are single by choice versus those who are single due to relationship difficulties, highlighting differences in outcomes between these groups. Individuals who are happily single cite their relationships with close friends and family as a key factor underlying satisfaction (Pepping & MacDonald, 2019). There is a dearth of research about close familial relationships and friendships in adulthood; studies often focus on these bonds only in adolescence. Future research ought to examine the range of single adults' attachments more fully and distinguish among types of friendships. In the same way that not all romantic relationships are full-blown attachments, not all friendships are attachments. It is also possible that close friendships function as attachments only when one or both friends are not in serious romantic or pair-bonded relationships with others, or when sexual relationships are insecure. Some studies suggest that adults high in attachment anxiety are more likely to develop nonsexual close relationships that satisfy some attachment needs (e.g., Pepping & MacDonald, 2019). Prospective studies would be helpful for understanding the developmental roots of choosing sexual partners versus friends as a primary means of satisfying attachment needs.

Another presumption of attachment theory challenged by modern trends is the assumption that attachment relationships are exclusive. An infant's preference for one caregiver over any other and explicit rejection of strangers is a tell-tale sign that a bond has been formed. Similarly, most conceptualizations of romantic sexual love assume or idealize exclusivity. There is, however, a growing trend for individuals to identify as polyamorous and choose to be in consensual, nonmonogamous relationships. Almost no empirical data has addressed the attachment dynamics of polyamorous relationships; what few data exist suggest that the majority of individuals in consensually nonmonogamous relationships have

secure romantic attachment orientations (Moors, Ryan, & Chopik, 2019). The fact that polyamorous individuals can be secure with their primary attachment partners suggests that sexual exclusivity is neither necessary nor sufficient for becoming attached. It would be valuable to understand the conditions, other than gratification of sexual needs, which promote the development of lasting emotional bonds. If sexual encounters are rewarding and promote bonding, why do some sexual relationships become attachments whereas others do not? In the context of multiple attachment targets, are all targets equal?

One possibility proposed by Fraley (2019) and others is that adults have attachment networks rather than hierarchies in which one attachment figure occupies a privileged position at the pinnacle (see also Fearon & Schuengel, Chapter 3, this volume). Although Bowlby (1969/1982) emphasized the primacy of the *primary* caregiver as the preferred source of comfort and security, adults may rely on multiple attachment figures to meet their needs, and this tendency may be functionally adaptive. The idea that having an attachment network might be an adaptive strategy for supporting adult mental health is also consistent with other recent conceptualizations of adult attachment. Finkel and his colleagues have argued that the expectation that a single marital partner can satisfy all of an individual's needs from physiological, to emotional, to higher-order needs such as self-actualization, is unrealistic, and is creating a crisis in marital satisfaction and personal well-being (Finkel, Hui, Carswell, & Larson, 2014).

Despite these controversies, throughout life, it is clear that individuals thrive when they have close relationships that confer feelings of security. Pair bonds remain a common source of attachment security in adulthood, but there is growing evidence that adults derive security from other social bonds as well. Given that many adults are increasingly postponing or forgoing marriage, future research should explore how attachment needs are being met during protracted periods of singlehood, and whether, and to what extent, friendships serve as attachments. If close friendships do serve as attachments and are equally effective in providing security, one important question is: How are attachment bonds among platonic friends formed and what neurohormonal processes underlie closeness? It is noteworthy that friendships forged during times of extreme stress, such as in the armed service, are notoriously intense, and that friendship bonding rituals, such as fraternity hazing practices, often involve artificially heightening arousal by placing individuals in physically or emotionally dangerous or distressing situations. Attempts to engage or coopt the distress-relief sequence that is at the heart of attachment processes may also explain why self-disclosure, which heightens personal vulnerability, is a common means of enhancing closeness as friendships are forming. Researchers are beginning to investigate the hormonal underpinnings

and dynamics of friendship development (Ketay, Welker, & Slatcher, 2017), but this research is still in its infancy, and more comparative research is needed.

Adult attachment researchers have always acknowledged important differences between attachment in infancy and later in life. Older children and adults are capable of mentally representing an attachment figure who is not physically present, and this capacity leads to a tolerance for longer periods of separation. Yet, despite this capacity, even adults find physical contact comforting and ultimately necessary. The proliferation of popular articles with titles such as “Why Zoom Is Terrible,” and “The Stark Loneliness of Digital Interaction” during the 2020 pandemic drives home the inadequacy of mental imagery or physically restrained porch visits. Digital communications and porch visits are meager substitutes for the rich, physical closeness humans crave and need from friends and loved ones. One reason might be that close physical contact is, as many attachment researchers have surmised, the bedrock of attachment.

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