

Live Long and Prosper: A Note on Attachment and Evolution

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Attachment theory describes someone as secure if they are able to use one or a few figures as a secure base from which to explore and as a haven of safety in retreat. These correspond to the ordinary or non-emergency and the emergency functions of attachment.

It is obvious to anyone that attachment is a source of comfort in emergencies. From the beginning, both Bowlby's and Ainsworth recognized the important role attachment plays as a context supporting exploration, play, and learning. Simply put, from infancy to adulthood we are far more able to explore and exploit and adapt ourselves to the environment in which we develop if we are confident that someone who is available and powerful enough to help is "always there for me".

Emotion regulation is not simply a matter of reducing emotion when it is aroused - an emphasis rooted in Freud's notion that emotions are toxic. In fact, the emotional side of life is less unruly, a more valuable source of information, and more coherent with other aspects of the self when it is played out within a trusting relationship. This is one of the two or three key insights of attachment theory.

At times Bowlby seemed to place greater emphasis on attachment as an emergency behavior system. This was especially true in his discussions of the evolutionary origins of the attachment behavioral system. Turning to evolutionary theory to explain the existence of an attachment control system was an important element in Bowlby's argument. Certainly a wide range of vertebrates use proximity to adults for safety. But his emphasis on predators owes more to classical evolutionary thinking than to modern perspectives. The evolutionary origins and functions of a behavior pattern are rarely so simple. Indeed flight and proximity seeking are very old

responses that surely evolved independently in a number of animal families. They are much more likely to have played the role of preadaptations (traits that make evolution in a particular direction possible and can be altered to serve new functions) than a driving force in the evolution of secure base behavior in primates and hominids.

Simply put, most of our predator problems wouldn't be materially changed by running to Mommy. A large cat, for example, would have you long before you got there; and if you made it, it would take you both. We are small, slow, unarmed, and our skin is very thin - cut it and all the juice runs out and we are dead. We fancy ourselves great problem solvers but in fact the problems we handle best are the one's we avoid. My guess is that foresight, learning the habits of predators, and group living are far better anti-predator strategies than secure base behavior.

Perhaps instead the adaptive significance of human attachment lies more in its non-emergency (ordinary), exploration-related components. Accidents, fights among conspecifics, and bystander injuries are major sources of mortality among non-human primate young and, some would point out, among human offspring as well. An adult who is on guard and anticipates such problems can significantly reduce injuries and mortality. It is the adult's job to do so - but the job is significantly easier if the infant or child maintains an orientation toward her, signals its state and intentions, is sensitive to significant cues in the environment, and backs up her vigilance with signals, proximity seeking, and separation protest. It is just a little bit easier to supervise a baby or child that makes itself a bit more supervisable by favoring just one or a few caregivers as a home base from which to explore.

Effective supervision is a prerequisite for the second, more familiar, component of the secure base phenomenon - support for learning. One of the key components of any species' evolutionary endowment is its "life history strategy" - its solution to the problem of when to be born, how long to grow, when to reproduce, and when to die. There is no disputing that our extraordinarily long period of immaturity is one of the most distinctive features of the human evolutionary endowment. Both precondition for and an accommodation to our complex brain and highly flexible behavior patterns, growing up slowly is very much at the center of growing up human. It is how we build a nervous system and behavioral repertoire adapted to our experience. Any behavior that helps insure supervision and support and helps us make the most of this long period of development and learning is surely of great evolutionary significance.

Attachment theorists have long recognized that insuring safety is not the sole function of the attachment system. If it were, why not spend our early years clinging to mother and never venturing beyond her reach? Clearly one of the major functions of attachment relationships is to support exploration and learning. This is equally true in infancy and adulthood. Like infants, adults can do more, reach farther, and better rebound from occasional setbacks if they can count on the availability and responsiveness of a secure base. We have shown in several papers that a secure caregiver or partner relationship provides more effective supervision and better support for exploration (see Kondo-Ikemura & Waters, 1995 SRCD Monograph; Posada et al., 1995 SRCD Monograph; Gao et al., 1997 SRCD presentation).

The distinction between ordinary and emergency functions of the attachment behavioral system has important implications for assessment. The Strange Situation, of course, emphasizes emergency behavior. There is good reason for this. The rates of diagnostically significant behaviors are typically higher. And performance under stress is often a good test of how well integrated a system is. But we should keep in mind that the validity of the Strange Situation is rooted on its links to ordinary (largely non-emergency) secure base behavior in naturalistic settings. The key observations underpinning Bowlby's attachment theory are Ainsworth's Uganda and Baltimore home observations, not Strange Situation classifications.

The Adult Attachment Interview asks about both ordinary and emergency situations. Responses in emergency situations certainly play a significant role in assigning classifications. But in most transcripts well coordinated behavior and a coherent narrative about ordinary and emergency experiences go hand in hand.

The secure base phenomenon is the core concept in Bowlby-Ainsworth attachment theory. Relations between ordinary and emergency components of the secure base phenomenon deserve high priority in attachment research. There are important unresolved issues here. But in the end Bowlby intended attachment theory to handle the emergency and ordinary functions of secure base relationships equally well. Both he and Ainsworth emphasized that safety alone is not enough - secure base relationships are critical to learning and adaptation. Our wish for loved ones is not simply that they live long. In past, present, and imagined worlds, our wish is that they "Live long ...and prosper". Attachment relationships are very much about becoming human and living a larger life than we could manage on our own.