

# Social & Developmental Psychology Accounts of Attachment Theory with the Confirmation Bias & Self-Fulfilling Prophecy

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Our last day of class together, I highlight common threads throughout our semester. I hope to leave students with a cohesive picture of Social Psychology rather than lots of disjointed topics. An overarching common thread is our role of construal shaping our experiences of social situations, a startling example of which is how our beliefs impact reality as a self-fulfilling prophecy (figure 1)

Figure 1. Examples of Self-Fulfilling Prophecy

Class Topic	Examples of Beliefs Impacting Reality
Group Processes	GroupThink; Group Polarization
Self-Concept	Self-Esteem; Attributional Style
Relationships	Attachment Theory (canalization)
Obedience	Milgram (perceived as legitimate authority)
Conformity	Pluralistic Ignorance
Social Perception	Primacy Effect (first impressions)
Attitude	Dual Process Models
Prejudice	Stereotype Threat; Pygmalian Effect

Attachment Theory revolutionized the history in our field. Attachment refutes a core Freudian developmental claim about what bonds children to their moms. The theory challenges Behaviorism when 'reinforcing' cries by comforting our children leads to *less* crying in the long-term because we build a secure attachment. Despite Attachment Theory's historical significance, coverage in Social Psychology textbooks focuses on prototypical descriptions (figure 2) and connections to other aspects of relationships like self-disclosure (e.g., Collins & Freeney, 2004; Mashek & Sherman, 2004). While sensible because the revolutionary aspects are commonly covered in Developmental Psychology, I recommend adding a key Developmental aspect of the theory to Social Psychology classes – Canalization (Bowlby, 1969).

In genetics, canalization is the process by which the same phenotype emerges across different environments because it is difficult to break out of a metaphorical "canal." Once an internal working model establishes an attachment style, regardless of contextual changes (e.g., friendships, romantic partners in contrast with parents) we keep reaffirming our attachment style. To illustrate canalization more concretely, I perform 5 minutes audience participation "play" of lifespan growth as we face each new kind of relationship. The dramatic impression it makes on students is apparent in students' facial reactions and body language.

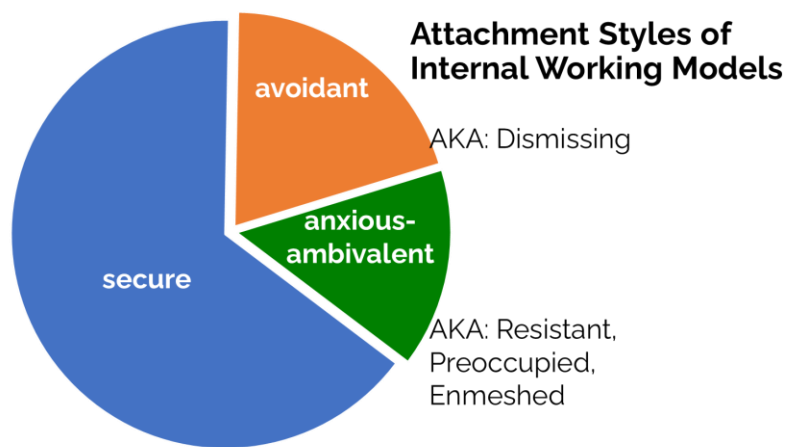
Figure 3. Prototypical Attachment Styles (Bartholomew and Horowitz, 1991)

- Secure: It is easy for me to become emotionally close to others. I am comfortable depending on them and having them depend on me. I don't worry about being alone or having others not accept me.
- Avoidant: I am uncomfortable getting close to others. I want emotionally close relationships, but I find it difficult to trust others completely, or to depend on them. I worry that I will be hurt if I allow myself to become too close to others.
- Anxious-Ambivalent: I want to be completely emotionally intimate with others, but I often find that others are reluctant to get as close as I would like. I am uncomfortable being without close relationships, but I sometimes worry that others don't value me as much as I value them.

## Defining Attachment Styles

Prior to discussing canalization as a mechanism, students need a grasp of basic attachment styles. I teach them with slides showing Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991) prototypical descriptions. Recently, I added pictures from the Disney movie *Frozen* (2013) as a common cultural reference point and as a way of intuitively portraying insecure attachment without caricature. Olaf represents secure attachment. Avoidant Else illustrates immense discomfort with letting others get too close. After all, she was taught to conceal – not feel – because if anybody knew her 'defective' nature they'd know the unlovable monster within her. Else cultivates incredible independence, a rational solution. Anxious Anna learned from childhood loving relationships can vanish in a moment when mom and dad suddenly have a secret preoccupation, and a loving sister suddenly shuts her out. Anna clings to anything resembling love, especially when she gets a hint of the affection she so desperately misses, a rational solution.

Figure 3. Attachment Styles and Proportions of Each



## Attachment Style Dramatization

Bowlby suggested attachment styles remain the same throughout our lifespans once they crystalize into an internal working model around 4 years old. Infants securely attached to their *parents*, becomes securely attached to *friends*, to crushes and romantic partners, to a *spouse*, and securely attach to their own *children*. The process behind this stability is canalization and it's more intuitively understood with an insecure attachment style.

Let's consider having an Anxious-Ambivalent Style. I choose Anxious-Ambivalent rather than Avoidant for dramatic effect because I'll emote sadness and anxiety with my voice and body language. But please feel free to dramatize avoidance. I end the class segment by asking students to explain the other core insecure style with canalization. While dramatizing, I walk across the classroom nonverbally conveying a timeline, from stage left to stage right. Here is an outline of what I ad lib with lots of affect, often with examples given when we discussed the attachment styles.

### Parent

Sometimes my parents are there for me. They change me, feed me, cuddle me to sleep. It's wonderful. But then, suddenly, for no reason at all, they become cold. It makes no sense at all. I really need love so I'll try everything I can to make the love last. I'll hold tightly because I never know when it might disappear.

## Friends

I'm older, a very big Kindergartner, and starting my first real friendships. But how do friendships work? With no previous friendships, I look to the most central relationships in my life – my parents. Will this friendship be unreliable too? I'd better cling tightly to make sure. Lots of times our friendship goes well. Yay! There's conflict sometimes. That's worrisome. I better absolutely avoid that because I don't want my friendship to go away. But it's frustrating they're not being so accommodating. Sometimes I lose control, I lash out with my pent-up resentment, which my friend thinks comes from nowhere. Later my friend plays with someone else. Oh no, that's a scary sign. I could love them! I better hold even tighter.

(asking the class) If I'm clinging like this, what happens to our friendship? (It falls apart.)

Oh no! You're right! My friend isn't my friend anymore.

So now what???

Rarely do students have clear responses, so I offer one. Maybe I go, "Wait a minute? I have a mistaken understanding of how relationships work. Let me step back and evaluate what assumptions I've made and how I might behave differently in the future."

Students instantly recognize how unnatural and unlikely such a reaction is. And prompting with an absurd reaction, elicits natural reactions from students. And I can elaborate.

Of course not. Honestly, how astounding it is when anybody steps back and reconsiders their core beliefs. And that's adults! How is a small child going to challenge their assumptions, or even notice they make them. Instead "I" react with:

See!!! I'm totally right. Relationships are unreliable. And I screwed up. So next time I'll do even better holding on!

What happens to the next friendship, and the next, and the next? I keep digging myself deeper into a "canal" with ever more evidence confirming what I already "know" about relationships.

By now in class, I see lots of students having big, but quiet, emotional reactions while they're seeing themselves and others in a new light.

## Crushes and Romantic Relationships

Now I'm a teen. How do I date? Having never dated, how do I know what it's like? (Friendships.)

Oh it's kind of like a friendship. But it's really fun, and new, with very intense feelings. And I love it! We spend so much wonderful time together. We fight a little, but I soothe over any hurt feelings to keep it going.

But wait a minute. My romantic partners wants to hang out with friends instead of me today. Oh no! What am I doing wrong? I better cling even tighter!

But what happens to my romantic relationship if I expect we'll be completely enmeshed? (We break up).

Exactly! And I'm just even more convinced I know how relationships work. I mean, parents, friends, crushes. They're all deep down the same. They're so wonderful, but unreliable. But I'll do better next time. I dug myself into a canal even deeper.

## Spouse

My spouse is essentially a romantic relationship. Kind of. Just like studies show, insecure persons are much more likely to end up in committed relationships without marital satisfaction (e.g., Kirkpatrick & David, 1994; Davila & Bradbury, 2001). But I'll accept what I can get. I mean, why would I expect anything different. This is just how relationships work.

## Children

Now I'm a parent, I love my child so much. And they're mine. This relationship will be different. And in lots of ways, it is. I feel so much love. But sometimes - no matter what I do - my baby won't stop crying.

Oh no, my baby hates me!! (Students usually look surprised and I break character to say I actually had a conversation with new parent who told me her baby hates her.)

And if my baby hates me, then fine, whatever, cry it out! Breaking character I walk back to stage left and remind them how as a baby we sometimes lost our parents' affection for no reason. We're doing the same to our own child as the parent. It's part of how attachment styles perpetuate through generations (e.g., Vaughn et al., 1979; Main, Kaplan, & Cassidy, 1985; Fraley, 2002). I return to my parent "mark."

And it just continues. My teen screams, "I hate you." And maybe in my ambivalence I withdraw. I'm insecurely attached to my child. But even worse than the hurt inside me, I'm unintentionally teaching my child to be insecurely attached like me.

## Afterward

By now, simply by chance we can expect a third of our class to look horrified as they self-reflect (figure 3). In my classes, it's usually far more. So it's very important not to leave class with students thinking they're stuck in a never-ending unchangeable canal. Please time class so you'll have plenty of time following the dramatization.

Emphasize how research shows that the canalization is not nearly as strong as Bowlby suggested. People really do change. *Current events* in someone's life (e.g., parent's death, divorce, a stable romantic relationship) matter more than attachments from years past so forming healthy relationships as adults helps us construct a new secure attachment style (e.g., Fraley, 2010).

Furthermore, most people don't take psychology classes and don't recognize how much a role we play in our own environments. We can make choices to behave differently, like pretending to be a confident person and fake-it-till-you-make it. We can experience "reality" differently. I personally self-disclose how I go to therapy and I find it incredibly helpful. Students speak with me after class and many have sought therapy after our conversations so I consider my choice to be vulnerable worthwhile, but I'm making a deeply personal choice and I respect professors who choose differently. Please be aware, whether you say so or not, your childhood experiences will likely "leak" during your dramatization.

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Grobman, K. H. (2015, February). Canalization: Bridging Social & Developmental Psychology Accounts of Attachment Theory with the Confirmation Bias & Self-Fulfilling Prophecy. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Society for Personality and Social Psychology, Long Beach, CA.

Abstract: Canalization is a profound mechanism illustrating the confirmation bias and a self-fulfilling prophecy while covering relationships, allowing psychology instructors to draw connections across topics. Here I describe how, using the Disney movie *Frozen*, I explain attachment styles to students without caricature and help students appreciate why we form insecure attachments rationally in less-than-ideal childhood circumstances. I perform an interactive demonstration with students illustrating how internal working models helpful during our childhoods can persist into adulthood, even when they outlive their usefulness, because of canalization, our inherent confirmation bias, and self-fulfilling prophecy.

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