In R. A. Thompson, J. A. Simpson, & L. Berlin (Eds.) (2021), *Attachment: The fundamental questions*. New York, NY: Guilford.

**Attachment Theory in the Twenty-first Century:**

**Introduction to the Volume**

Ross A. Thompson

*University of California, Davis*

Jeffry A. Simpson

*University of Minnesota*

Lisa J. Berlin

*University of Maryland*

 Attachment theory has held a prominent place in psychology for more than half a century. Inaugurated with Bowlby's (1951) seminal writings on the nature of the child's emotional tie to caregivers, and advanced by Ainsworth's (1967; Ainsworth et al., 1978) conceptual and methodological insights, the scope of attachment research has expanded during the last 70 years to encompass adult romantic relationships, the relational bases for social and personality development, developmental psychopathology, clinical intervention, and public policy problems in divorce and custody, child care, and child protection. At the same time, attachment theory and research have evolved in response to changes in families and family relationships, advances in developmental biology, and increasing sophistication in research methodology. Attachment theory has also progressed with seminal conceptual advances, such as the "move to the level of representation" in the 1980s, concerted work on adult attachment and its underlying interpersonal processes in the 1990s, and increased sophistication in intervention applications in the 2000s. An expanding research literature has provided new empirical perspectives to classic issues concerning attachment and development, raising new questions about stability and change in attachment relationships, the formative influence of early attachments, and attachment in relation to culture. Taken together, these efforts have helped to make attachment theory one of the most generative and influential theories in the social and behavioral sciences.

 Inevitably, and desirably, the increased research, expanded scope, and broadened applications have provoked new perspectives on classic theoretical questions and have created new debates within the field. As attachment theory moves into its eighth decade, it seems appropriate to take stock of where it stands with regard to some of these fundamental theoretical issues, many of which date back to Bowlby's seminal work. Here are some of the fundamental questions: What kinds of relationships constitute attachment relationships? What are the indicators of a secure attachment? What is the nature of the internal working models underlying secure or insecure attachments, and how do they influence behavior, thought, and emotions? How important are early attachment relationships for later behavior? What later behavior should these relationships impact, and what are the limits of their influence? How is attachment manifested in different cultures, and what are its key trans-cultural applications? What are the implications of attachment theory for clinical intervention and publicly funded services for children and families?

 The fact that these fundamental questions continue to inspire discussion and new perspectives attests to the generativity of attachment theory. This fact underscores the value of considering the different perspectives that have emerged about these issues as the field moves into the future. For example, the term "attachment" originally applied in Bowlby's (1969, 1973, 1979, 1980) theory to the affectional bond between a young child and the mother. Since then, however, it has been extended to children's relationships with fathers and child care providers, relationships between adult romantic partners, and even relationships with siblings, close friends, teachers and coaches. What do these different meanings of "attachment" have in common that distinguish them from other kinds of close, affectional relationships? Another way of understanding the defining qualities of attachment relationships is to consider how children and adults respond to separations from and the loss of their attachment figures. What are the key processes and mechanisms involved in these experiences of separation and loss, and what further insights do they provide about the nature of attachment?

 As another illustration of the generativity of contemporary attachment thinking, the view that attachment relationships can affect behavior, thought, and emotions via internalized mental representations of relationships (i.e., internal working models) is shared by researchers studying attachment in childhood and adulthood. However, these researchers have very different ways of conceptualizing how internal working models are organized, how they develop and change with experience, and how they function in different social contexts. Is there a common thread among these different ways of conceptualizing working models that may provide greater precision to this central theoretical concept?

 Further consideration of these fundamental issues is also required in light of new empirical advances. Longitudinal datasets including different measures of attachment have offered a new look, for example, at the question of whether early attachment remains consistent or changes over time and, if the latter, the correlates of changes in attachment. These longitudinal studies also invite reflection on early attachment as a predictor of later behavior, with evolutionary and biological models drawn from life history theory, neuroscience, and molecular genetics offering important new contributions to this question. When considered together, what can we say about which domains of later behavior that should be shaped by early attachments and their associated experiences, and why?

 New empirical initiatives during the past half-century have also been important in expanding the implications of attachment theory for clinical intervention and public policy. Concerning clinical intervention, what are the central mechanisms underlying the efficacy of attachment-based interventions? Concerning public policy, what can we learn about the applications (and misapplications) of attachment ideas with respect to the custody and care of children when parents divorce, the design of developmentally appropriate child care policies and effective child protection practices, as well as foster care, home visitation, and other programs?

 Finally, some fundamental issues deserve further discussion because of their importance to the next generation of attachment research. A central measurement issue, for example, is whether variability in attachment security is best captured using continuous measures (which most adult attachment researchers regularly use) or with categorical measures inspired by the Strange Situation (which still predominate in the developmental study of attachment). Considering the methodological pluralism that has historically characterized attachment research, does "attachment" mean the same thing when different operationalizations and measures are used? If not, how can we interpret them? Another research question concerns attachment and culture, which has been addressed by researchers both within and outside the community of attachment scholars, often yielding strikingly divergent conclusions about suitable methodology and appropriate research generalizations. What can we learn from this debate that might inform researchers who study attachment relationships in a world with increasingly diverse family structures and social conditions?

 The fundamental questions posed in this volume are clearly not *all* of the issues in attachment theory and research that could be considered "fundamental." It would require a much longer book to encompass those. Rather, the questions selected for discussion here are those that are currently unresolved, are important to the future of attachment thinking, and are the basis for continuing discussion and (sometimes) debate among attachment researchers. Even though these questions could have been addressed in a single-authored book, our preference was to enlist other attachment scholars to offer their own ideas and perspectives. After consultation with colleagues in the field, we identified a collection of contemporary issues and, for each issue, invited prominent and emerging scholars in the attachment field who have either addressed these issues in prior work or, we thought, had valuable views to offer. The format we chose is not "point-counterpoint" exchanges but rather a forum for articulating alternative perspectives. In doing so, the overall goal of the book is to inform the field, foster greater understanding of different perspectives, promote greater theoretical clarity, encourage more collaboration across perspectives and disciplines, and contribute to useful new research in coming decades. In the end, we hope that this volume will also convey to scholars and students outside the community of attachment researchers that many fundamental questions that undergird attachment theory still remain open, generative, and inviting of further inquiry.

**The fundamental questions of this book**

 Nine central issues relevant to attachment theory and research constitute this volume, as outlined below. We formulated each issue in terms of one or two central questions to clarify the topic and guide contributors. For each issue, we invited four to six experts to contribute short essays articulating their viewpoint and to comment about future directions for the field. Both established authorities and emerging scholars are included among our list of authors. Because attachment theory and research influence thinking in developmental, clinical, social/personality, and other areas of psychology, contributors from diverse fields were invited for most topics. We also attempted to include a diversity of theoretical and methodological perspectives to address each issue. Each chapter was limited to approximately 2200 words (and approx. 20 references) to encourage authors to profile their point of view succinctly rather than to write a literature review or summarize their research program. This resulted in more focused, concise, and direct essays. In addition, we provided each author with the list of the nine fundamental questions and those who had agreed to write about them so each author could consider their contribution within this broader context. Authors were not expected to address or respond to any perspective other than their own, however.

 The nine sections of the book follow, and the book concludes with an integrative commentary by us:

 ***Defining attachment and the security of attachment.*** The central questions we posed to authors are: *What kinds of relationships "qualify" as attachment relationships? What are the origins and nature of security?* These questions are foundational to attachment theory and research, and as the scope and applications of attachment theory have expanded over time, answers to these questions have broadened. Developmental attachment researchers initially focused exclusively on infant-parent attachments, regarding them as developmentally formative and as prototypical of later attachment relationships, before expanding their inquiry to parent-child attachments later in childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. Adult attachment researchers in social/personality psychology expanded the scope of attachment relationships to include adult romantic relationships and relationships with relatives, friends, and even coworkers. Developmental attachment researchers, however, typically perceive "adult attachment" as the adult's current state of mind with respect to attachment based on early caregiving experiences. At all ages, an individual is likely to have multiple attachment figures, including nonparental caregivers (like child care providers) and adult partners who may have some, but perhaps not all, of the primary functions of attachment figures. Is there a compelling reason, therefore, for calling certain close, affectional relationships "attachments" and not others? If so, what do they share in common? Within these portrayals of the meaning of attachment there are also variations in what constitutes security, although an emphasis on the proximity-seeking, secure-base and safe-haven functions of attachment may remain relevant throughout life. The authors we asked to profile these different perspectives are L. Alan Sroufe, Pasco Fearon and Carlo Schuengel, Liselotte Ahnert, Mario Mikulincer and Phil Shaver, Deborah Jacobvitz and Nancy Hazen, and Ashleigh Aviles and Debra Zeifman.

 ***Measuring the security of attachment.*** The central questions are: *How should attachment security be assessed? What are the advantages and challenges of alternative measurement approaches?* As the scope and applications of attachment research have expanded, there has also been a broadening of well-established measures beyond the Strange Situation. These include narrative interviews that probe childhood representations, self-report measures that ask people how they relate to close others, attachment script-based assessments, the use of priming methodologies designed to activate representations of security, and other strategies. Some measures are relationship-specific, while others assess generalized characteristics of relational security or insecurity. Is there a central element of attachment relationships captured by each of these diverse assessments? In recent years, there have also been efforts to directly compare alternative methodologies (such as categorical vs. continuous measures) in their psychometric and analytic strengths and weaknesses, raising the question of what should be the criteria for preferring one measure of attachment over another. The authors who were invited to profile these alternative approaches are Howard and Miriam Steele, Lee Raby, Chris Fraley, and Glenn Roisman, Theo Waters, Judith Crowell, and Omri Gillath with Ting Ai.

 ***The nature and functioning of internal working models.*** The central questions are these: *What are internal working models? How do they operate?*  Bowlby's concept of mental representations deriving from attachment relationships has been one of the most generative aspects of attachment theory, but it has also produced disparate views regarding what internal working models actually are, how they operate, and their influence on personality, thinking, memory, and behavior. In some portrayals, working models are construed as relationship-specific and hierarchically organized; in others, generalized working models characterize individuals and their overall approach to relationships. Theoretical portrayals of working models also vary according to whether they are regarded as stable or dynamic over time, consciously accessible or primarily unconscious, whether they enlist well-known cognitive and social-cognitive skills (and if so, which ones), and the mechanisms by which working models are believed to influence behavior, thought, and feelings. Are there common elements to these diverse formulations that could provide a theoretically consistent portrayal of working models and their functioning? We invited Jude Cassidy, Harriet, Theo, and Everett Waters, David Oppenheim and Nina Koren-Karie, Ross Thompson, and Yuthika Girme and Nickola Overall to provide alternative views.

 ***Stability and change in attachment security.*** Our questions: *Should we expect attachment security to remain consistent over time? Is there evidence for stability in attachment security?* The expectation that early attachment quality leaves an enduring mark on later relationships of different types is one of the most enduring and debated elements of attachment theory, and it has been explored in several longitudinal studies. Does research support this view, and if so, how strong is the relation between earlier and later security? What conditions precipitate change in attachment? Stability and change in attachment have also been studied by attachment researchers from different disciplines within psychology. Do the dynamics of attachment relationships look different when they are examined as developmental processes or as interpersonal processes in adult relationships? We invited essays on these issues from Chris Fraley and Keely Dugan, Cathryn Booth-LaForce and Glenn Roisman, Joseph Allen, Ramona Paetzold, Steve Rholes, and Tiffany George, and Ximena Arriage and Madoka Kumashiro.

 ***Influence of early attachment.*** The core questions: *What domains of later behavior should early attachment relationships predict, and why? For what domains should we not expect an association with early security? What are, in other words, the boundary conditions for the influence of early attachment?* These questions are theoretically important for understanding the formative influence of early relationships on development, especially since an expanding research literature has documented a much broader range of later outcomes than Bowlby's theory initially envisioned. These questions are also significant given that new ways of understanding the impact of early experience have emerged since Bowlby's theory, including views from life history theory, molecular genetics, and developmental neuroscience. Does the cumulative body of research on this topic, combined with new theoretical models, alter or refine expectations for how and why early security is important? We invited Glenn Roisman and Ashley Groh, Marinus van IJzendoorn, Anne Tharner, and Marian Bakermans-Kranenburg, Katie Ehrlich and Jude Cassidy, Mario Mikulincer and Phil Shaver, and Ohad Szepsenwol and Jeff Simpson to contribute their perspectives to this section.

 ***Culture and attachment.*** Our core questions are: *How are attachment processes manifested in different cultures? How does culture manifest itself in attachment processes?* Attachment relationships develop in increasingly diverse families, contexts, and cultures, yet Bowlby's theory addressed processes underlying human adaptation that potentially have universal implications, at least according to many attachment theorists. Most attachment research to date has been conducted in Western industrialized societies, although some researchers have extended their inquiry to a wider range of non-Western contexts. Nevertheless, researchers who study children in small communities in low- and middle-income countries have been critical of the generalization of attachment formulations and methods beyond Western contexts. How, then, do culture and attachment intersect? How should attachment be studied in a culturally appropriate manner? We invited Heidi Keller, Gilda Morelli, Judi Mesman, and James Chisholm to contribute their perspectives on this issue.

 ***Separation and loss.*** Here are the questions we posed: *How do people respond to the loss of an attachment figure? What are the key processes and mechanisms involved?*  The loss of an attachment figure was of central concern to Bowlby in his *Attachment and Loss* trilogy, and it remains an important concern in both developmental and adult attachment research. Diverse perspectives on the consequences of loss have emerged from studies addressing Bowlby's concerns (a child's traumatic loss of a parent) and from research on adult romantic breakups, dysfunctional marriages and divorce, and bereavement in older adults. These studies have examined psychological and biological processes as well as normal and pathological mourning. Are there common threads in the process of loss and "detachment" across ages and contexts that can clarify our understanding of why attachment relationships are so significant? We invited Ann Chu and Alicia Lieberman, Phil Shaver and Mario Mikulincer, David Sbarra and Antina Manvelian, Brooke Feeney and Joan Moin, and Fiona Mccallum to offer their perspectives.

 ***Attachment-based interventions.*** Our core questions: *How do attachment-based interventions work? What are the key processes and mechanisms involved?* Clinical applications of attachment theory have been an enduring part of attachment thinking from the beginning, but they have expanded considerably in recent years as a range of new attachment-based interventions for children and adults have been developed and evaluated. Unsurprisingly, a focus on relationships is a shared characteristic of these interventions, but what are the processes through which relationships are repaired or improved? Are there common characteristics of attachment-based interventions across the life span? Is it possible to identify the core contributors to therapeutic efficacy and, if so, do they provide greater understanding of the nature of attachment relationships, both healthy and dysfunctional? We invited Marian Bakermans-Kranenburg and Mirjam Oosterman, Mary Dozier and Kristin Bernard, Sheree Toth, Michelle Alto, and Jennifer Warmingham, Alessandro Talia and Jeremy Holmes, and Sue Johnson to contribute essays about these issues.

 ***Attachment, systems, and services.*** Here are the central questions: *How are attachment theory and research relevant to systems and services for children and families? What lessons can we learn from these programs?*  Attachment theory has become increasingly applied to the design of public policies affecting children and families, including custody standards when parents divorce, the design of child care programs and child protection policies, as well as early home visitation, early childhood care and education programs, and foster care. Attachment theory can contribute to these policies and programs because of its focus on maintaining continuity in significant relationships for children, recognizing the importance of multiple attachment figures, and emphasizing the quality of care. Are there other lessons for attachment theory that stem from the design and evaluation of these programs? Do these lessons provide ideas for how current policies and practices can be improved in the future? We invited Margaret Tresch Owen and Cynthia Frosch, Bridget Hamre and Amanda Williford, Michael Lamb, Jody Manly, Sheree Toth, and Dante Cicchetti, Charley Zeanah and Mary Dozier, and Lisa Berlin, Brenda Jones Harden, and Allison West to address these issues.

 ***Commentary.***In the final chapter, we draw together various themes and issues raised for each of the nine fundamental questions, considering the points of convergence, divergence, and what we have learned about each central issue. As we wrote to contributors, our goal was not -- and is not -- to offer a final position on any of the questions, nor to take sides; rather, it is to sharpen perspectives, assess where the field currently stands, and suggest how it could fruitfully proceed into the future. We also raise some additional questions for the future of attachment theory and research.

**Who is this book for?**

 This is a time of widening interest in attachment theory, and this book exists alongside others that provide perspective on the field. These include a revised edition of Robert Karen's classic *Becoming Attached* (Karen, in press) and Robbie Duschinsky's (2020) *Cornerstones of Attachment Research,* among many others. This book, however, is unique in its goals and format, and we hope it has a unique contribution to attachment theory and research. Much more than reiterating perspectives that they have articulated elsewhere, the authors of these chapters have synthetized their views into fresh perspectives that, juxtaposed with others addressing the same questions, offer novel and useful insights into the current status of attachment theory and research, and perspective on its future.

 Our primary audience is the community of attachment-informed scholars, researchers, and clinicians. They will find new ideas in these chapters that, we hope, will develop and extend their own thinking about close relationships and the psychological and developmental impact of close relationships throughout life. In particular, we hope that reading this volume will help our colleagues attain deeper understanding and appreciation of other views and perspectives in the field, facilitate clearer communication with those who hold different views, promote collaborative thinking that improves theory and research, and contribute to a generative future for the field. A much broader audience for this volume is those who use the ideas of attachment theory in their research in allied fields (such as clinical psychology and developmental psychopathology, family sociology, and evolutionary biology) and in practice, whether in law and public policy, social work, education, or other fields. The format of the chapters and our selection of contributors was guided by the expectation that this volume would be useful to a broad audience outside the attachment field, including interested readers in the general public who find attachment theory valuable.

 This volume has also been shaped by the hope that it will be used by teachers and their students in advanced undergraduate courses and graduate seminars. Indeed, such a seminar was one of the motivating reasons for this book -- to provide a resource that did not previously exist for students. When combined with the most recent edition of the *Handbook of Attachment* (Cassidy & Shaver, 2016), this volume can be part of a thought-provoking introduction to the field. Perhaps the most fundamental lesson of these chapters is one intended for emerging scholars: After a half-century, a theory that has generated an enormous amount of research, reshaped important areas of public policy, had significant implications for therapeutic intervention, and penetrated public thinking about the developmental impact of early relationships still has many questions that remain open, interesting, and inviting of further inquiry.

**And our thanks**

 When we began this project, we did not know whether our ambitious plan for a collection of more than 45 chapters by leading scholars would elicit a receptive response. Consequently, we were pleased that, with only a few exceptions, every invitation we sent to contributors was accepted. Even more gratifying was how helpfully the authors worked with us, within the contexts of their own demanding schedules and the emergence of a pandemic, and within the constraints of length and citation count, to create thoughtful and forward-looking discussions of fundamental questions of attachment theory. Although several commented that writing with such brevity was more difficult than writing a chapter of conventional length, each author responded constructively and creatively in crafting their chapters. To them, our greatest thanks.

 Seymour Weingarten acted as an excellent and highly supportive editor-in-chief at Guilford by planting the idea for the book, waiting for it to gestate, and then facilitating the introduction of three attachment researchers who had not previously met to enact the vision. We are grateful for that vision and his persistence.

 Finally, we three have experienced this collaboration as a wonderful meeting of minds and generous spirits. Any one of us drafting this introduction would have thanked the other two for making this enterprise immensely enjoyable, stimulating, and enriching, so we do so now.

References

Ainsworth, M. D. S. (1967). *Infancy in Uganda.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins.

Ainsworth, M. D. S., Blehar, M., Waters, E., & Wall, S. (1978). *Patterns of attachment.* Erlbaum.

Bowlby, J. (1951). *Maternal care and mental health.* World Health Organization.

Bowlby, J. (1969). *Attachment and loss: Vol. 1. Attachment*. Basic Books.

Bowlby, J. (1973). *Attachment and loss: Vol. 2. Separation: Anxiety and Anger*. Basic Books.

Bowlby, J. (1979). *The making and breaking of affectional bonds*. Tavistock.

Bowlby, J. (1980). *Attachment and loss: Vol. 3. Loss*. Basic Books.

Cassidy, J., & Shaver, P. R. (2018). *Handbook of attachment: Theory, research, and clinical applications* (3rd Ed.). Guilford.

Duschinsky, R. (2020). *Cornerstones of attachment research.* Oxford University Press.

Karen, R. (in press). *Becoming attached: First relationships and how they shape our capacity to love* (Rev. Ed.). Oxford University Press.