

Why has Attachment not moved beyond theory outside academia—and why does it matter?

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Abstract

Attachment is often treated as one psychological theory among many. Yet Bowlby originally conceptualised attachment as a biologically grounded regulatory system for managing safety and threat. We argue that recovering this broader understanding may provide a unifying framework across disciplines and strengthen recognition of stable, responsive caregiving relationships as foundational to human development.

Keywords: Attachment Theory

In everyday language, the word “theory” often refers to a tentative idea - something that may or may not be true. In science, however, theories represent something quite different: they are comprehensive frameworks that organise large bodies of evidence. Evolution, germ theory, and relativity are not “just theories”; they structure how we understand fundamental processes in the natural world.

Attachment theory, however, is often presented in the former sense - as one psychological theory among many explaining aspects of human development. This framing may obscure something essential. Attachment can be understood not simply as a theory of relationships, but as a regulatory system concerned with how human beings detect, respond to, and manage safety and threat. From its origin, attachment theory was never the product of a single disciplinary perspective. John Bowlby developed his ideas through an integration of findings from psychoanalysis, developmental psychology, evolutionary biology, and ethology. He described attachment as a behavioural control system that functions to maintain proximity between infants and caregivers in situations of threat (1–3). This formulation was supported by empirical work across many species. Studies of contact comfort in rhesus monkeys, imprinting in birds, and the effects of institutional deprivation in infants all pointed toward the same

conclusion: the need for a stable, protective relationship is not merely culturally shaped, but biologically rooted (4–6).

Seen in this light, attachment is best understood as a regulatory system that coordinates proximity-seeking, exploration, emotional regulation, and responses to danger. Through repeated interactions with caregivers, children gradually develop expectations about the availability and responsiveness of others. These expectations, in turn, shape how they experience safety, how they explore their environment, and how they regulate distress (7).

Subsequent research has extended these insights far beyond their original formulation (8,9). Findings from developmental neuroscience, stress physiology, and related fields increasingly demonstrate how early relational experiences become biologically embedded. Patterns of caregiving influence the development of neural systems involved in emotion regulation, shape the calibration of stress response systems, and are associated with long-term outcomes in both mental and physical health. Research on social buffering and caregiving further illustrates how the presence of trusted others can modulate physiological stress responses across the lifespan. Taken together, this body of evidence suggests that attachment processes are not peripheral aspects of development, but central mechanisms through which human beings regulate safety, exploration, and emotional balance. In this sense, attachment functions

less as a competing psychological theory and more as a cross-disciplinary framework that organises findings across multiple domains of research.

Treating attachment theory as just one among many competing theories may have practical consequences. When attachment is framed primarily as a theoretical viewpoint, its implications can more easily be regarded as optional within policy and practice. The substantial evidence indicating that young children depend on stable and responsive caregiving relationships may then be weighed alongside other considerations, rather than recognised as a foundational condition for healthy development. If attachment is instead understood as a regulatory system for safety, grounded in biology and supported across disciplines, it invites a different set of questions. How are early environments structured in ways that support or disrupt the development of such systems? And how might variations in early relational stability relate to later patterns of distress, in the context of widely reported increases in psychological distress among children and adolescents?

While these trends are shaped by many factors, an attachment-informed perspective highlights the importance of considering how early experiences of safety, continuity, and responsiveness are organised. In this light, how attachment is conceptualised may influence how priorities are set in decisions concerning early childhood. An attachment-informed perspective highlights the importance of considering how early experiences of safety, continuity, and responsiveness are organised. Reframing attachment in this way does not reduce the complexity of human development. Rather, it provides a unifying lens through which diverse findings can be understood. If attachment processes indeed constitute a fundamental system for regulating safety and stress, then recognising this may be essential. Not only for theory, but for how societies support the conditions under which development unfolds.

Acknowledgements

AI-assisted language editing was used in the preparation of this manuscript. The authors take full responsibility for the content and final text.

Funding

No funding was obtained for this work.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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