An Attachment Primer: Research and Clinical Implications for Couple Therapists

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Attachment and Couple Therapy

- **Attachment**: A potentially secure base from which individuals explore and seek safety and comfort when distressed.
- Increasingly used as an organizing construct in couple therapy
- Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy
- Lack of empirical attachment research in couple therapy
- Couple therapists may be uniquely qualified to conduct attachment research
Adult Attachment: Two Alternative Approaches

- Social and Personality Psychology
  - Self-report

- Developmental Psychology
  - Narrative / Discourse

- Very little overlap between attachment constructs measured by the two approaches

- Often, no distinction is made and results are generalized across both approaches
The Adult Attachment Interview

- Mary Main and the Adult Attachment Interview
- Attachment representations are based on how someone discourses about their early experiences with attachment figures.
- Labels parallel those of the Strange Situation
- Typically between a 70% (three category) to 75% (two category) match between parent AAI and child SS.
Attachment and Couple Interaction

- Importance of couple interaction research
- 30 year longitudinal study
  - SS Security $\rightarrow$ higher ratings of social competence by elementary teachers $\rightarrow$ more secure relationships with friends at 16 $\rightarrow$ higher reports of positive daily emotional interaction and lower observer-rated negative interaction
- Attachment insecurity is associated with higher levels of conflict
- Lower AAI coherence $\rightarrow$ more negative affect, less respect, less openness, more avoidance, and less negotiation in partner interaction
CLINICAL IMPLICATIONS OF ATTACHMENT
Attachment Stability and Change

Stability and the Prototype Hypothesis:

- Prototype hypothesis versus Revisionist perspective
- Studies of attachment across transition to adulthood, marriage, and parenthood
  - At least a two category match of 70%
  - In some cases, a three category match of 80%
Attachment Stability and Change

Factors Relating to Attachment Change:

- Parental divorce, parental death, or serious parent/child illness were associated with shifts to insecurity
  - 20 year continuity rates of secure attachment shifted from 85% to 33% when one of the above happened.

- Understanding positive attachment change has been more difficult
  - Potential partner buffering effect
  - Categorical versus quantitative attachment change
The Effects of Attachment on Therapy

Client-Treatment Matching:

- Therapy outcomes may be improved by “carefully matching techniques to client dispositions, personality traits, and other diagnostic differences” (Lambert & Ogles, 2003, p. 180)

- Few significant results have been found. Why?

- Common factors perspective of client-treatment matching
The Effects of Attachment on Therapy

Attachment as a Potential Match Variable

- How can attachment theory actually inform clinical practice? (Eagle, 2006)
- Secure attachment
  - Linked to more compliance
  - More commitment to behavioral change
- Dismissing attachment
  - Less likely to self-disclose
  - Less invested in treatment
- More research is needed to understand how attachment differentiates between clients’ approaches to therapy and their overall experiences in order to effectively adapt treatment to their needs.
Conclusion

• Attachment theory has great potential implications for both research and clinical work
• More research is needed to fully understand its role in couple therapy
References