

Family Systems Theory, Attachment Theory, and Culture*

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Family systems theory and attachment theory have important similarities and complementarities. Here we consider two areas in which the theories converge: (a) in family system theorists' description of an overly close, or "enmeshed," mother-child dyad, which attachment theorists conceptualize as the interaction of children's ambivalent attachment and mothers' preoccupied attachment; (b) in family system theorists' description of the "pursuer-distance cycle" of marital conflict, which attachment theorists conceptualize as the interaction of preoccupied and dismissive partners. We briefly review family systems

theory evidence, and more extensively review attachment theory evidence, pertaining to these points of convergence. We also review cross-cultural research, which leads us to conclude that the dynamics described in both theories reflect, in part, Western ways of thinking and Western patterns of relatedness. Evidence from Japan suggests that extremely close ties between mother and child are perceived as adaptive, and are more common, and that children experience less adverse effects from such relationships than do children in the West. Moreover, in Japan there is less emphasis on the importance of the exclusive spousal relationship, and less need for the mother and father to find time alone to rekindle romantic, intimate feelings and to resolve conflicts by openly communicating their differences. Thus, the "maladaptive" pattern frequently cited by Western theorists of an extremely close mother-child relationship, an unromantic, conflictual marriage characterized by little verbal communication and a peripheral, distant father, may function very differently in other cultures. While we believe that both theories will be greatly enriched by their integration, we caution against the application of either theory outside the cultures in which they were developed.

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THERE are notable similarities between attachment theory and family systems theory (Byng-Hall, 1999; Marvin & Stewart, 1990; Minuchin, 1985; Stevenson-Hinde, 1990). Some similarities are at a broad, conceptual level, such as the theories' grounding in systems thinking and their concerns about intimate human relationships (e.g., what draws people together, what drives them apart, how they deal with conflicts, and intergenerational transmission). Other similarities are at a more specific level, such as the correspondence between attachment classifications of secure, ambivalent, and avoidant relationships, on one hand, and family systems categories of adaptive, enmeshed, and disengaged relationships on the other (Byng-Hall, 1999; Stevenson-Hinde, 1990).

There are also impressive differences between the theories: (a) attachment theory is focused on dynamics involving protection, care, and felt security, whereas family systems theory is concerned with family dynamics, involving structures, roles, communication patterns, boundaries, and power relations; (b) attachment theory is focused on the dyad, with much of the action occurring within individuals (e.g., "internal working models"), whereas family systems theory is focused on the triad, with much of the action occurring within groups; (c) attachment theory is relatively more concerned with children and development, whereas family systems theory is relatively more concerned with adults and current functioning; and (d) attachment theory has historically relied primarily on empirical research with normal populations, whereas family systems theory relies primarily on case studies involving clinic populations. Interestingly, theorists in both camps emphasize the ways in which these differences in orientation complement one another. The differences are seen as mutually enriching, especially as attachment theory

moves toward consideration of myriad external forces beyond the dyad that influence the attachment system (Belsky, 1999b). Both the similarities in and differences between the theories are seen as contributing to their compatibility and, ultimately, their integration (Byng-Hall, 1999; Marvin & Stewart, 1990; Minuchin, 1985; Stevenson-Hinde, 1990).

Our focus in this article is on cultural factors that contribute to the rather remarkable synchrony between these theories. We highlight ways in which both theories are grounded in Western ideas and experiences and how these contribute to their compatibility. The term "Western" is used here because of the variety of North American and European cultures in which the theories have been tested. While there is a venerable tradition of testing attachment theory in other cultures (van IJzendoorn & Sagi, 1999), the overwhelming majority of studies were conducted in the West, particularly in the US. It is our claim that the synchrony between the theories reflects, in part, Western investigators' assumptions and interpretations (i.e., *the lens through which behavior is viewed*) as well as Western ways of functioning (i.e., *the incidence and pattern of behavior per se*). While a cross-fertilization of the theories is likely to enrich both of them, it is unwise to assume that the theories are relevant to other cultures in which the concepts have been infrequently tested. Several other reviews have highlighted the Western bias evident in prevailing theories (e.g., Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Spence, 1985), including attachment theory (Rothbaum, Weisz, Pott, & Miyaki, 2000) and family systems theory (Tamura & Lau, 1992), but this is the first review to focus on topics central to both theories.

Our goal is to consider the convergence between attachment theorists and family systems theorists with regard to two main

topics: (a) adaptive vs. dysfunctional early mother-child relationships, which builds on the family systems notion of enmeshed/undifferentiated families (Minuchin, 1974) and the attachment theory notion of separation disorder; and (b) adaptive vs. dysfunctional marital relationships and their role in mother-child relationships, which builds on the family systems notion of pursuer-distance relationships (Fogarty, 1976; Minuchin & Nichols, 1993; Scarf, 1995) and the attachment theory notion of insecure mate relationships. Our goal is to point to some opportunities and pitfalls involved in a cross-fertilization around these attachment theory and family systems theory notions. The particular issues we address are not intended to represent all of attachment theory nor all of family systems theory, but rather convergences between the theories that also help illuminate cultural variation.

In the first section, case examples from the family systems perspective illustrate similarities between the theories. In the next two sections—on the parent-child dyad and the marital dyad—we review evidence from Western research on attachment that sheds light on dynamics highlighted by both theories. We focus on attachment theory because it is relatively less familiar to the readership of this journal. We also review evidence from studies comparing Japan and the US. We attempt to show that the similarities between attachment theory and family systems theory are due, in part, to the fact that both theories are grounded in Western assumptions about relationships. At the end of the article, we summarize the evidence, point to qualifications involving intracultural differences and intercultural similarities, and examine implications of the findings for culturally sensitive approaches to family therapy.

POINTS OF CONVERGENCE: CASE EXAMPLES

In this section we summarize points of convergence between attachment theory and family systems theory that we later review in greater detail, and we provide anecdotal evidence, largely from the family systems theory perspective, regarding these points. In the next two sections we provide evidence from attachment theory bearing on these points, and we consider cultural evidence suggesting that the links between the theories reflect Western ideas and practices.

We highlight two main points of convergence between the theories:

First, they both highlight the adaptive risks involved in too-close mother-child relationships. Among the pejorative labels assigned to this kind of relationship are overinvolved, enmeshed, undifferentiated, overly dependent, and symbiotic.

Second, both theories consider the quality of the marital relationship to be key to overall family functioning. According to Marvin & Stewart, "Family therapists tend to view the spouse dyad as the 'core' of the family" (1990, p. 81), and attachment theorists' consideration of family relations is largely focused on the marital dyad. What determines marital quality in these theories is multifaceted, but centers on romantic characteristics (e.g., Byng-Hall, 1999; Cassidy & Shaver, 1999; Christensen & Jacobson, 2000; Gottman, 1999; Marvin & Stewart, 1990). The quality of the marital relationship is seen as a major determinant of the caregiving provided to the child, and thus of child functioning. Attachment theorists provide abundant evidence to support this connection (Belsky, 1999b; Goldberg & Eastbrooks, 1984; Isabella, 1994).

Family systems theorists often rely on case histories to illustrate these dynamics. For example, Jay Haley (1976) describes a phobic boy who was suffering

because of unresolved and unexpressed conflicts between his parents. The parents' failure to preserve the boundary around the marital dyad is depicted as a contributor to the boy's fear. Haley (1976, p. 227) states: "The goal of treatment can be put simply. It is to shift the relationships in the family so that mother and father are more intimately involved with each other and the boy is disengaged from them . . ."

Similarly, Byng-Hall (1999), an attachment-oriented family systems theorist, highlights ways in which unresolved marital problems disrupt attachment relationships. He describes a case in which a mother's pursuing leads to a father's distancing, and vice versa, causing their son to become entrapped in their maladaptive interaction. Specifically, the son's attachment behavior is encouraged by the mother because of her own unresolved attachment needs. As the son seeks to use the mother as a secure base from which to explore, he is thwarted by her dependency needs.

Family systems theorists believe that the "enmeshed mother/disengaged father syndrome" is common in dysfunctional families (Nichols & Schwartz, 1998, p. 249). Minuchin and Nichols (1993, p. 121) are explicit about the centrality of this syndrome: "The signature arrangement of the troubled middle class family [is when] a mother's closeness to her children substitut[es] for closeness in the marriage." In the next two sections we elaborate on these dynamics and argue that important elements of the preceding analysis are grounded in Western thought. First, we review theory and evidence regarding "overinvolved" mother-child attachment relationships in the West, as well as evidence that such relationships are more common, and are less likely to be seen as dysfunctional, in Japan. Next, we review theory and evidence regarding marital attachments in the West and describe cul-

tural differences in what is considered normative and desirable with regard to these relationships. The evidence suggests that patterns involving extremely high levels of caregiving by wives, distancing by husbands, and lack of intimacy in the marital relationship are more common, and are less likely to be seen as maladaptive, in Japan than in the West.

"OVERINVOLVED" MOTHER-CHILD RELATIONSHIPS

Evidence from Attachment Theory

In the following quote, Marvin and Stewart (1990) describe "one of the most common maladapted family structures" that have been identified by family systems theorists:

. . . mother and (at least one) child are overinvolved, or enmeshed (Minuchin, 1974). This enmeshed relationship is usually characterized by a number of the following: reciprocally intrusive, controlling behavior on the part of mother *and* child; much insecurity and distress on the part of both over real or threatened separation; treatment of the child as if he or she were younger than is actually the case; a strong tendency for one or both to speak for the other and assume knowledge of what the other is thinking and feeling without "checking it out" (a really palpable lack of psychological boundaries); role reversals in attachment and caregiving behaviors; an inability to resolve conflict . . . (and a) degree of intimacy with one another inappropriate to their relative ages and positions in the family. [p. 79].

Marvin and Stewart suggest that this pattern of interaction—a primary concern of family systems theorists—is related to the insecure-resistant (also known as ambivalent)¹ classification identified by attachment theorists. Marvin and Stewart (1990, p. 80) speculate that "these two traditions (i.e., family systems and attachment theory) are speaking of the

'same' child." We agree with their speculation and we point to several strands of attachment research that dovetail neatly with family systems theorists description of mother-child overinvolved/enmeshed relationships.

According to attachment theory, ambivalent children are unable to use their caregivers as a secure base to explore the environment, are distressed upon separation from their caregivers, and, when reunited, are likely to seek proximity or contact but cannot be calmed by their caregivers. (These behaviors are assessed with the Strange Situation paradigm—an unfamiliar situation in which the child is repeatedly separated from and reunited with the caregiver.) The corresponding behavior in adulthood, referred to as preoccupied, is assessed via the Adult Attachment Interview, which asks about past and present relationships with parents. Preoccupied adults display excessive and confused preoccupation with past attachment relationships or experiences, wander from topic to topic, or become embroiled in excessively lengthy descriptions of relational problems. The interviewee appears angry, passive, or fearful. The memories aroused by the interview, rather than the questions themselves, appear to guide the interviewee's attention and speech (Hesse, 1999).

There is substantial evidence in the West of the consistency of these attachment styles over time and circumstances, and of the relationship of the child and adult attachment styles to one another. Meta-analytic findings indicate that preoccupied adults are likely to have a child with an ambivalent attachment (van IJzendoorn, 1995; van IJzendoorn & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 1997). The child in these relationships is prone ". . . to reverse roles and provide the parent with care, thus becoming indispensable [so as to] assure the continuing presence of the attachment figure. These strategies are

likely to maintain constant contact" (Byng-Hall, 1999, p. 628). Below we review evidence—regarding mothers of ambivalent children, mothers rated as preoccupied (on the Adult Attachment Interview) or ambivalent (based on self reports),² and ambivalent children—that further supports Marvin and Stewart's speculation that these attachment styles relate to overinvolved/enmeshed patterns identified by family systems therapists.

When interviewed about their caregiving, mothers of ambivalently attached babies mentioned several behaviors that were seen as contributing to their children's insecurity. These mothers "described strategies to keep their children close, . . . promoted dependency, . . . tended to overemphasize caregiving and to overinterpret their children's attachment cues" (George & Solomon, 1999, pp. 661–662). They emphasized their children's needs over their own to an extent that was seen as unhealthy for both mother and child.

Preoccupied mothers of toddlers have difficulty separating from their toddlers and separate in ways that are likely to foster child anxiety while discouraging independence (evidence reviewed in Belsky, 1999a). Preoccupied mothers of adolescents about to leave home convey doubts about their children's ability to function autonomously (Kobak, Ferenz-Gilles, Everhart, & Seabrook, 1994). Belsky (1999a) speculates that, in addition to undermining autonomy, such behavior makes the child susceptible to parental manipulations. Preoccupied mothers are inappropriately responsive and overly attentive to their children (Goldberg, Blokland, Cayetano, & Benoit, 1998; Haft & Slade, 1989), are especially responsive to expressions of fear (Belsky, 1999a; Haft & Slade, 1989), and in other ". . . ways interfere with their children's autonomy or exploration" (Cassidy and Berlin, 1994, p. 981).

Several qualities of ambivalent children contribute to their enmeshed relationships with their caregivers. These children are especially demanding and/or preoccupied about gaining and sustaining attention from their caregivers (Belsky & Cassidy, 1994; Kunce & Shaver, 1994); they have trouble maintaining a boundary between someone else's distress and their own (Weinfield, Sroufe, Egeland, & Carlson, 1999); and they do everything possible to prevent separation (Fraley & Shaver, 1999). It is easy to understand how caregivers become enmeshed with these children. Even in infancy ambivalent children are very fearful and their fearfulness increases as they enter early childhood—in contrast to other children whose fearfulness wanes (Kochanska, 2001).

These findings regarding ambivalent-preoccupied attachment dynamics have important implications for family functioning. We emphasize that these findings have been obtained primarily in Western cultures. Below we provide evidence suggesting that behaviors Western investigators typically associate with ambivalent and preoccupied attachment are more common and have different *meanings* (i.e., there are differences in the evaluation of overt behavior as well as in the interpretation of its underlying affect and motivation) in Japan than in the US.

Cultural Differences

Here we summarize research on parent-child relations in Japan and the US that points to differences in the types of caregiving likely to foster security, and in the consequences of security.

Sensitive caregiving: What constitutes sensitive, responsive caregiving is likely to reflect indigenous values and goals (Carlson & Harwood, in press). In the West, important criteria of sensitive caregiving are that it is responsive to the child's signals and that it communicate

the adult's availability while not interfering with the child's growing autonomy or jeopardizing individuation from the mother. By contrast, in Japan, an important criterion of sensitive caregiving is that it foster a symbiotic relationship between mother and child in which the boundary between them is blurred. Japanese mothers may appear overinvolved and intrusive by US standards because they are much more likely than US mothers to anticipate infants' needs and to take proactive measures to minimize infants' distress rather than to delay their response until the child gives a signal (Clancy, 1986; Doi, 1973; Rothbaum, Weisz, et al., 2000; Vogel, 1991).

Affective attunement in Japan, which is much higher than in the US (Behrens, 1999), takes the form of mothers engaging in simultaneous vocalizations with their children, completing their children's sentences for them, and otherwise communicating that they know what the child is thinking (Behrens, 1999; Clancy, 1986; Fernald & Morikawa, 1993). This behavior is likely to be regarded as intrusive and overly enmeshed in the US and, as noted earlier, is likely to lead to insecure (ambivalent) attachment. Other caregiving behaviors shown to foster ambivalent attachment in the West that are more accepted and practiced by Japanese mothers are prolonged skin-to-skin contact ("skinship"), co-sleeping, indulgence of dependency, arranging work to become fully devoted to the child, and encouraging the child to focus on themselves (the mothers) as opposed to the environment (Azuma, Kashiwagi, & Hess, 1981; Lebra, 1994; Rothbaum, Pott, Azuma, et al., 2000).

Maternal sensitivity in the US is largely intended to provide a secure base that promotes the child's exploration, as well as encouraging the child's assertion of personal desires and autonomous efforts to satisfy one's own needs. By contrast, in Japan, sensitivity is largely in-

tended to avoid distress and to promote infants' interdependence and emotional closeness with their mothers (Keller, Voelker, & Zach, 1997; Rothbaum, Pott, et al., 2000; Rothbaum, Weisz, et al., 2000; Vogel, 1991).

The consequences of security: The dissimilarity between Western and Japanese ideas about consequences of security is clearest with regard to independence. According to Weinfield et al. (1999, p. 77): "Children with secure histories seem to believe that, as was true in infancy, they can get their needs met through their own efforts and bids. In contrast, children with anxious histories seem to believe that . . . they must rely extensively on others who may or may not meet their needs." There is substantial evidence in the West that insecure as compared to secure adults tend to be more needy of others, as evidenced by greater clinginess and dependence, anxiety about gaining acceptance from others, preference for unqualified closeness, and experience of love as involving union (Bartholomew & Shaver, 1998; Feeney, 1999; Hazan & Shaver, 1994).

Japanese theorists take a different view. In Japan, dependence (i.e., interdependence and *amae*), seeking of acceptance and commitment, and desire for union are more common and more likely to be associated with competence (Fiske, Kitayama, Markus, & Nisbett, 1998). The path of relying on others, so often devalued in the West, is more often favored and is even prescribed in Japan (Azuma et al., 1981; Lebra, 1994; Rothbaum, Pott, et al., 2000). Dependence on others as a way of meeting one's needs, and coordinating one's needs with the needs of others, are seen as essential to the goal of social harmony that is highly valued in Japan (Kitayama, Markus, Masumoto, & Norasakkunkit, 1997; Roland, 1989; Weisz, Rothbaum, & Blackburn, 1984a,b). Independence in the Western sense is deval-

ued: "From [an East Asian] perspective, an assertive, autonomous . . . person is immature and uncultivated" (Fiske et al., 1998, p. 923).

Other qualities associated with security of attachment in US children are emotional openness and direct communication, especially in times of conflict (Bowlby, 1979; Bretherton, 1995; Cassidy, 1988; Main, Kaplan & Cassidy, 1985). Explicit, verbal sharing of emotions is less likely to be seen as a desirable quality in Japan, where parents preserve social harmony by keeping hostile feelings to themselves, by expressing those feelings indirectly, and by encouraging their children to do likewise (Lebra, 1994; Miyake & Yamazaki, 1995; Rothbaum, Pott, et al., 2000; Vogel, 1991). In Japan, people are expected to respectfully and empathetically preserve harmony by avoiding any expression of discord or direct expression of wants (Rothbaum, Weisz, et al., 2000).

The notion that ambivalent attachment functions similarly in Japan as in the US is perhaps most challenged by differences in the evaluation and interpretation of behavior associated with children's ambivalent attachment. There are many similarities between Western investigators' descriptions of children's ambivalent behaviors and child behaviors widely regarded as adaptive in Japan. These include: exaggerated cute and babyish behaviors (Main & Cassidy, 1988), extreme expressions of need for care and attention, extensive clinging and proximity seeking, helpless dependency (Cassidy & Berlin, 1994), extreme passivity, blurring of boundaries between self and other (Weinfield et al., 1999) and failure to engage in exploration (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978). These features of ambivalent attachment would not be seen as abnormal or maladaptive in Japan, nor as deriving from insensitive maternal behavior, nor as leading to later social incompetence (Doi, 1973; Kondo-Ikemura &

Matsuoka, 1999; Lebra, 1994; Mizuta, Zahn-Waxler, Cole, & Hiruma, 1996).³

In summary, the antecedents (sensitivity) and consequences (social competence) of secure attachment and insecure-ambivalent attachment are viewed and are manifested very differently in Japan than in the West. Security in Japan arises from extremely close and interdependent mother-child interactions that, according to Western theorists, promote insecure attachment; moreover, behaviors associated with ambivalent attachment, such as extreme dependency, are more adaptive in Japan than in the US. Mother-child enmeshment, which is viewed as pathological by both attachment and family systems theorists in the US, is viewed much more positively by Japanese theorists.

MARITAL AND FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS: TOO CLOSE, TOO FAR

In the last section we focused on the mother-child attachment relationship; in this section we focus on the marital attachment relationship and the mother-father-child triad. According to Marvin & Stewart (1990), family therapists explain the enmeshed family system as follows:

It is likely that the spouse dyad lacks an adequate degree of intimacy and/or conflict resolution strategies. The emotional distance between the spouses leads to resentment between them and makes it difficult as well to work together as parents. Mother begins to experience her intimacy within her relationship with the child rather than with her husband/parenting partner, and father focuses his energy on his job, hobbies, another child, etc. [p. 81]

Research on partner attachments in adulthood provides support for this portrait of marital relations. This research examines the frequency, stability and nature (e.g., intimacy, patterns of communication, and conflict) of pairings of part-

ners with various attachment classifications. We will focus on relationships involving a female preoccupied partner and a male dismissive partner because that is one of the most common patterns of insecure attachment. First, we briefly review the attachment evidence and how it meshes with family systems theory. Next we discuss cultural differences that lead us to believe that the attachment of couples functions differently and has a different meaning in Japan. We suggest that the larger family system, as well as the spousal and parent-child relationships, are likely to function somewhat differently in Japan, and that attachment and family systems theorists' interpretations are much more relevant to the Western experience.

Evidence from Attachment Theory

The marital dyad: There is considerable evidence that adults with preoccupied attachment styles tend to form romantic relationships with partners who have dismissive attachment styles. (As noted earlier, avoidant and dismissive refer to the same category, as do preoccupied and ambivalent; see endnote 2). Findings indicate that adults with avoidant attachment tend to respond more favorably to, and to be more involved with, those with ambivalent attachment, and that relationships involving an ambivalent female and an avoidant male are quite stable although not very happy (Feeney, 1994; Kirkpatrick & Davis, 1994).

The central dynamic in pairings of preoccupied women and dismissive men is what has been termed "too close, too far" or pursuing-distancing. In general, preoccupied adults desire extremely close and intimate relations (Feeney, 1999) and seek near, constant contact (Byng-Hall, 1999, p. 628), whereas dismissing adults need to maintain distance (Feeney, 1999) as seen in their unwillingness to engage in romantic, affectionate, or other attach-

ment-related behaviors (Fraley, Davis, & Shaver, 1998). As the preoccupied partner escalates the appeal to have dependency needs met, the dismissing partner increases his defensive response of distancing, which leads to cycles of pursuer-distancer interaction (Fisher & Crandall, 1997). The more that the ambivalent partner focuses on the partner's lack of accessibility, the more that the avoidant partner restricts attention to the environment, and vice versa. In this way, the pursuer-distancer cycle becomes an ongoing feature of the relationship (Bartholomew & Horwitz, 1991; Pistole, 1994).

One of the most outstanding features of these couples is their propensity for conflict. The conflict often centers on the preoccupied partner's expression of discontent, deprivation, and abandonment, and the dismissing partner's tendency to attribute the relational problems to the partner's discontent (Byng-Hall, 1999; Feeney, 1999). Compared to secure adults, ambivalent and avoidant adults use less compromise and more defensive and destructive conflict resolution strategies (Gaines, Reis, Summers, et al., 1997; Pistole, 1989). Ambivalent adults report high levels of distress, hostility, and anxiety when discussing problems; and avoidant men engage in lower quality interaction (Simpson, Rholes, & Phillips, 1996). Interestingly, ambivalent adults had more negative perceptions of their partners after important discussions regardless of the quality of the discussion, suggesting that they enter the discussions with entrenched negative expectations (Feeney, 1998).

The mother-father-child triad: What are the effects of these marital conflicts on child functioning and larger family dynamics? In a meta-analysis, Davies & Cummings (1994) found that marital discord, more than marital distress or marital apathy, led to a variety of child adjustment problems, and that overt conflict

had the most damaging effects. Recent research indicates that parents' negative conflict strategies predict children's negative representations of the mother-father-child triad (Shamir, Du Rocher-Schudlich, & Cummings, 2001).

Most findings regarding the association between marital quality and parent-child relationships (Erel & Burman, 1995) report a direct relationship between the two (i.e., negative marital relations are associated with negative parent-child relations). A common interpretation of these findings is that spouses in negative marital dyads satisfy their needs for closeness via their children, and that the quality of the parent-child relationship is generally poor in such cases.

These findings are consistent with those suggested by family-oriented attachment theorists. According to Byng-Hall (1999, p. 633):

Following pursuer-distancer escalations between parents, one parent is likely to turn to a child . . . A child's mixed feelings about the parents' marriage—on the one hand, wanting one parent to himself or herself; on the other, wanting the parents to be together—means that the child will try to divide the parents when they get too close and unite them when they seem too far apart . . . A variation on this pattern is a child who 'captures' a parent and excludes all others, including the other parent; capturing is maintained if it resolves the parent's distance conflict.

Several studies (reviewed in Davies & Cummings, 1994) indicate that children of insecure marriages (the major form of which is the ambivalent-avoidant pairing) often take action in response to parental disputes. These children comfort, defend, or distract parents during conflicts, especially their mothers. Children's misbehavior, intended to distract the parents, is reinforced if the parents' interrupt their conflict with one another to attend to (e.g.,

discipline) the child, which may explain the association between marital conflict and child problems.

Research by family systems theorists indicates that children of conflicting partners may sometimes become ill or develop an emotional problem so as to stabilize the marital dyad by bringing the parents together to look after the child (e.g., Minuchin, Rosman, & Baker, 1978). Research by Marvin (1992) builds on these findings from family systems theory. Marvin found that, in a group of adolescents suffering from psychogenic pain, one or both of the parents were "preoccupied" by threatened or real loss, and that their attachment behavior was activated by the child's illness. Marvin developed an intervention for these parents, the final "most important" step of which was for them to go out on a date together once a week. This intervention was designed to disentangle the marriage from the parent-child relationship: i.e., to reverse the pattern set up by the child's symptom. At a 6-month followup, 90% of the children were symptom free. These findings highlight Western investigators' concerns about overinvolved parent-child ties and their emphasis on the therapeutic value of increased marital intimacy.

Cultural Differences

We believe that there are important cultural differences in the patterns of marital and family relationships described above.

Preoccupied-dismissing relationships: Instances in which the ". . . mother begins to experience her intimacy within her relationship with the child rather than with her husband, and the father turns his energy to his job . . ." are viewed as maladaptive if not pathological in the West (Marvin & Stewart, 1990, p. 80). The combination of "overinvolved" mother-child ties and distance between spouses is much more common in Japan, but it has a

different meaning and consequences because it is societally sanctioned. A common expression in Japan, "*Teishu tassha de rusu ga ii*," expresses mothers' wish that the father stay healthy and cheerful, but away from the home. Though Japanese mothers increasingly want husbands to share household and childrearing responsibilities, this phrase expresses mothers' adaptation to the demands of their husbands' work.

Many Japanese fathers continue to spend long hours away from home. A study of middle- to upper-middle-class fathers indicated they spent 54 hours a week at work *not including many evening and weekend hours*, as contrasted with 42 hours in the US (Ishii-Kuntz, 1993). In addition, more than twice as many Japanese (37.4%) as U.S. (14.7%) fathers claim they "never" engage in father-child interaction during weekdays—the corresponding figures on weekends are 17.1% and 5.1% (reported in Ishii-Kuntz, 1993). The Japanese fathers' lack of guilt about their limited interaction could be seen as further indication of their dismissiveness; yet, "they seem to think that their hard work is appreciated by their family, and therefore worth their absences from home" (Ishii-Kuntz, 1993, p. 55). Paternal distance is also a vehicle for maintaining one's role as an authority figure (Ishii-Kuntz, 1993). Thus, fathers' distance has a very different and less negative meaning in Japan than in the US.

There are several features of preoccupied/ambivalent attachment that are likely to have more aversive consequences in the West than in Japan. Ambivalent women are most likely to endorse items such as "I can't seem to stop from mothering my partner too much" that are viewed as compulsive caregiving and as intrusive in the West (Kunce & Shaver, 1994). These women prefer unqualified closeness, commitment, and affection, and tend to idealize their partners (Feeney,

1999). No doubt this is why conflicts with their romantic partners are so intense and why they need to transfer their compulsive caregiving and unqualified closeness to the infant. In Japan, where romance is expected to abate after marriage and children (evidence reviewed below), and where extremely close relationships with infants are sanctioned, women with behavior labeled preoccupied in the West are likely to be better prepared for the diminished closeness with their romantic partners, and to find a socially sanctioned outlet for their need for emotional and physical closeness. These findings suggest that behaviors labeled preoccupied and dismissing in the West may be more common and less maladaptive in Japan.

Based on a review of Western studies, Davies and Cummings (1994) propose that child wellbeing is fostered when children have a secure model of the parents' relationship. That is, children's security may depend in part on parents' attachment to one another. Since distance between spouses is more accepted in Japan than the US, Japanese children may view such relationships as more secure, highlighting the complexity of the link between perceived security of parents' relationship and child functioning. What counts as a secure model of the parents' relationship is likely to vary across culture. Moreover, in Japan, a secure model of the parents' relationship may be relatively less important than a secure model of the *family relationship*, which may involve grandparents and even ancestors (Klass, 2001), as well as the nuclear family (cf. Marvin & Stewart's, 1990, discussion of the secure family base).

There are other reasons why Japanese spouses who engage in behaviors labeled preoccupied and dismissing in the West may fare better than their Western counterparts. First, in all cultures, preoccupied and dismissing parents are unlikely to experience verbally intimate, romantic

relationships, but the Japanese place less value on such relationships. Second, when behaviors associated with the preoccupied-dismissing spousal relationship occur in Japan, they are less likely to be accompanied by open conflict. Open conflict has very negative effects on the marital relationship (Gottman, 1991), and highly deleterious effects on children (Davies & Cummings, 1994). These points are elaborated upon, below.

Romantic relationships: Here we review evidence that secure adult relationships in the West are based on very different characteristics than are secure adult relationships in Japan.

In the West, marital relationships are seen as secure when they are based on romance, verbal intimacy, and sexuality. Attachment theorists provide abundant evidence linking security with romance in adulthood. There is much more research on attachment between sexual mates than between any other adult partners (e.g., same-sex friends or blood relatives). The reason for this emphasis is clear: "Bowlby claim[ed] . . . that sexual partners assume the role of attachment figures in adult life," and, in subsequent research by other investigators, "the common practice [has been to use] romantic relationships as the context for investigating adult attachment phenomena" (Hazan & Zeifman, 1999, p. 340).

In Japan, there is greater valuing of close relationships that are based on harmony (i.e., mutual accommodation, absence of conflict, and enduring loyalty) than on relationships based on romance, verbal intimacy, and sexuality (Yamagishi & Yamagishi, 1994). Since romance is difficult to sustain overtime (beyond a few years), it is not particularly conducive to enduring, committed, and guaranteed relationships. While romantic relationships before marriage are highly valued in Japan as well as the US (Bando, 1992), it is only in the US that romantic love

continues to bind mates even after marriage and children (DeVos, 1985; Dion & Dion, 1993; Iwao, 1993). In Japan, there is less emphasis on romance after marriage and children and more emphasis on loyalty and commitment⁴ (Rothbaum, Pott, et al., 2000). Whereas U.S. marital partners continue to emphasize physical attraction and eros, in Japanese marriages romance is diluted by pragmatic and dependency needs (reviewed in Rothbaum, Pott, et al., 2000).

In Japan, mutual attraction, and other needs of the dyad (e.g., for intimacy), are not viewed as the most important criteria for preserving a marriage. When asked about a couple that wanted to get divorced, 93% of Japanese, but only 39% of Americans, said that the couple should stay married just for the sake of the children (Soumouchou, 1987). Even if they are estranged, Japanese couples tend to stay together in the same home for the sake of the children (*katei nai rikon* refers to divorce within the family home). In Japan, stability of marital relations relates more to complementarity in roles, successful rearing of children, and participation in wider kin ties and less to refueling passion (Imamura, 1987; Iwao, 1993; Vogel, 1996). According to Jing Hsu: "the core relationship in the . . . Japanese family is not that of the husband and wife, as in the Caucasian families, but that between the parent and the child" (Hsu, Tseng, Ashton, et al., 1987, p. 357). The greater emphasis on the mother-child dyad and lesser emphasis on the marital relationship in Japan than in the US makes behaviors associated with the preoccupied-dismissing partnership less problematic in Japan.

Romance and parental roles: Clearly defined role relationships contribute to the loyalty and stability of mate relationships in Japan. Traditionally, the wife's sphere has been inside the home, especially when children are young. As soon as the first child is born, husbands and wives

refer to each other as *otoosan* (father) and *okaasan* (mother), reflecting the primacy of their parental roles. In Japan, wives' and husbands' roles and responsibilities center on the family, including grandparents and ancestors as well as the child, rather than centering on each other. Western partners' focus on their dyadic relationship may explain why they experience so much marital distress shortly after the birth of a child (reviewed in Belisky & Rovine, 1990).

A study of marital partners conducted by the Japanese Association of Sex Education (1987) indicates that Americans, more so than Japanese, attribute successful marriages to factors having to do with the dyad—i.e., partnership, intimacy, fidelity, sexual satisfaction, sharing of concerns and activities, and romance. This same study indicates a much greater percentage of American than Japanese partners who report couple-related activities, including recreation, going out together as a couple, and sexual intercourse. The difference between US and Japanese adults mentioning "enjoyment between the two" is a striking 70% (see Durrett, Richards, Otaki, et al., 1986, for similar findings). Taking the focus off the marital dyad is likely to reduce the negative consequences of a partnership that Western investigators label preoccupied-dismissive.

Family life in Japan has changed in profound ways over the last 50 years, and continues to undergo transformation. For example, the Japanese Government has become increasingly concerned with fathers' absence and has shown interest in increasing men's involvement with their children (reported in Ishii-Kuntz, 1993); and intimacy between marital partners is more common. Yet, we believe that underlying patterns remain intact. While fathers are more involved in care of children than previously, adolescents in Japan spend only a third as much time with

their fathers as American adolescents (Sengoku, 1994). And while intimacy (*sinmitsu*) is more emphasized in Japan today, the word is rarely used. A person who feels intimacy toward another would be unlikely to put the feeling into words; the Japanese believe that if feelings are deep, you do not need to put them into words.

Romance and its effect on the child: Because sexuality and romance are so central to the marital dyad and are so intertwined with spouses' attachment in the West, it is not surprising that issues of sexuality and romance tend to emerge in other family relationships. This is seen, for example, in child-parent attraction, (i.e., oedipal and electra phenomena), which appear to be relatively common in the US (Watson & Getz, 1990). In Japan, the family is less a locus of romantic relationships. Lebra (1994), a Japanese psychologist, notes that Western investigators are prone to mistakenly interpret commonly occurring, close bodily contact between Japanese parents and young children (e.g., co-sleeping and co-bathing) as having a sexual element to it. Similarly, Allison (2000) describes a Japanese TV show for children depicting maternal breasts, which she notes are likely to be viewed as sexual by American, but not by Japanese, audiences.

The Japanese find the association between sexuality and maternal care difficult to comprehend because, for them, the sexual and attachment systems are not closely linked; the link is weak in the marital dyad (i.e., after children are born), and it is irrelevant in other familial relationships. As a result, if children do become triangulated by their parents, and a too-close parent-child relationship develops, that relationship is unlikely to have sexual overtones.

Romance and the wider social network: The relatively lesser emphasis on the marital dyad in Japan may be associated with the relatively greater reliance on

same-gender friendships to obtain emotional intimacy. Japanese mothers are more likely to say they would consult with friends (42%) than with husbands (18%) when they have concerns about childrearing (Hokkaido Private Kindergarten Association, 1997). While corresponding figures are not available from the US, they are likely to differ because of the emphasis on maintaining the closeness of the marital dyad (e.g., Gottman, 1999). The wider network of supports available in Japan may reduce pressure on the marital partnership and may render the negative consequences of marital distance less severe than in the US (cf. McLoyd, Harper, & Copeland, 2001, for a similar point regarding ethnic minority families in the US). For these reasons, behaviors commonly associated with the preoccupied-dismissive pattern may have different implications for family dynamics and child functioning in the two cultures.

Parental conflict: A major cultural difference in marital relationships is that, in the West as compared to Japan, conflict is far more common. Marvin and Stewart (1990) assume that "there will be frequent conflict within the family regarding how proximity and contact will be organized" (p. 365), and Byng-Hall (1999) suggests that conflict among family members and expression of anger is "a functional part of family life" (p. 627). Attachment is seen as providing a safe base for family members to engage in conflict (Byng-Hall, 1999). While Western authors believe that high levels of conflict are dysfunctional, especially if the conflict is not resolved, moderate levels that are resolved are considered benign or even adaptive. The belief in the normality of conflict, which is widely accepted by family systems theorists (e.g., Nichols & Schwartz, 1998; Satir, Stachowiak, & Taschman, 1975), is supported by findings from Western studies—e.g., limited amounts of disagreement and angry exchanges are not harm-

ful to relationships (cf. Gottman, 1999) and, when conflicts are resolved, they are not harmful to children (reviewed in Davies & Cummings, 1994).

Open conflict in the family is much less common in Japan, and even low levels of conflict are less accepted. Ninety percent of Japanese report arguing with spouses less than once a month (Long, 1996). In Japan, direct communication is avoided because it leads to open conflict, which is seen as unhealthy, even when it is not extreme (Hsu et al., 1987; Rothbaum, Pott, et al., 2000). "Because one of the ways of maintaining group cohesiveness and harmony is to avoid open conflict, the clear and straightforward statement of one's own opinions and feelings may risk confrontation and possible conflict, therefore, less direct and perhaps even somewhat evasive communication are more adaptive in [East Asian] cultures" (Hsu et al., 1987, p. 357).

CONCLUSION

Summary and Elaboration

There are important points of convergence between attachment theory and family systems theory, but some of the dynamics about which they agree may operate differently in non-Western cultures. Attachment investigators' description of preoccupied mothers and ambivalent children contribute in important ways to our understanding of enmeshed mother-child dyads—a major concern in the family systems literature. Attachment investigators' research on partners with preoccupied and dismissive styles provides evidence of the kinds of pursuer-distancer cycles and spousal conflicts that family systems theorists have long considered important elements in enmeshed relationships. Attachment theory has much to tell us about the antecedents, stability, and consequences of these attachment styles, and about the underlying needs for

protection and care that characterize mothers and children, and marital partners, who are engaged in these patterns.

However, the evidence comparing Japan and the US indicates that many of the behaviors associated with these insecure attachment styles have different meanings (i.e., evaluations and interpretations) in the two countries. Japanese mothers are expected to form extremely close, even symbiotic relations with their children; they value behavior that, by US standards, is overinvolved, intrusive, and overindulgent of dependency needs, and that has been shown to foster insecure (ambivalent) attachment in Western children. Japanese children are expected to exhibit extreme expressions of need for care and attention, extensive clinging and proximity seeking, helpless dependency, passivity, blurring of boundaries between self and other, and other behaviors associated with ambivalent attachment in the West. Despite this manifest similarity in overt behavior, the underlying meaning of the behavior is very different.

Similarly, spousal patterns of behavior that are associated with insecure attachment in the West, particularly the wife who engages in compulsive, dependency-fostering caregiving, and the workaholic husband who spends little time at home, are more common and are viewed as more normative and healthy in Japan. Japanese couples with this profile are less likely to be dissatisfied with one another because they are less focused on the marital dyad and more focused on the child and family. Moreover, Japanese couples are less likely to exhibit the kind of overt conflict that is associated with these couples in the West; as a result, Japanese children are less likely to experience the problems common among children from high-conflict families.

The larger point is that principles of attachment and family systems that are based on research in the West do not nec-

essarily apply in cultures with different values and experiences. As noted above, behaviors that in the West comprise a maladaptive pattern known as enmeshment, are seen as more normative and more adaptive in Japan. The Japanese phenomenon of *ittaikan*, which refers to extremely close relationships characterized by an absence of boundary between self and other, is seen as a sign of maturity. The same phenomenon would be seen as a sign of regression and would be considered pathological in the West. Behaviors that are relatively rare and maladaptive in one culture may be prevalent and accepted in another culture, if those behaviors are serving very different functions in the two contexts. Behaviors are embedded within a larger network of relationships (extended family, community, ancestors) and social institutions (educational, religious, economic, political, etc.) that support a particular experience of closeness.

Some attachment and family systems theorists are sensitive to the cultural issues we are emphasizing here. Byng-Hall (1999) and Marvin and Stewart (1990) do not make claims of universality and they mention ways in which the phenomena they describe might manifest themselves differently in other cultures or subcultures. They note that dynamics which Western theorists typically attribute to the marital couple could instead involve a parent-grandparent dyad or the extended family. As eloquently stated by Marvin & Stewart (1990, pp. 63–64): “attachment caregiver relations exist within a network of ordered relations and cannot fully be understood except in that context.” Still, the history of Western science indicates that presumptions about universality are common when evidence is gathered within Western cultures, and when other cultures are not examined (Berscheid, 1995; Bruner, 1990; Gergen, Gulerce, Lock, & Misra, 1996; Markus and

Kitayama, 1991; Sampson, 1988; Spence, 1985; Weisz et al., 1984a,b).

This Western bias is evidenced by findings that Japanese-American families are evaluated as less competent and less healthy than Caucasian families, even when the evaluations are by Japanese-American as well as Caucasian raters. Hsu et al. (1987) found that Caucasians are rated more favorably than Japanese on a variety of measures including empathy, expressiveness, invasiveness, clarity, and closeness, as well as on overall health-pathology. We believe that reliance on Western-based assumptions about what is normative and healthy contributes to biased interpretations in which other cultures and ethnic groups are likely to be evaluated negatively. Even Japanese raters who are raised in the US are prone to these biases, especially if they rely on Western measures.

Qualifications

Throughout this article, we have emphasized cultural differences; yet, we are equally concerned about intra-cultural differences. Research comparing Chinese-American and European Americans in the US (Rothbaum, Morelli, Pott, & Liu-Constant, 2000) indicates within-culture differences that in important respects parallel the cultural differences we highlight here:

European-Americans' practices and beliefs related to family relationships were best organized by the theme of romance, and Chinese-American practices and beliefs were best organized by the theme of harmony. For example, European-Americans parents were much more likely than their Chinese-American counterparts to emphasize spousal exclusivity and intimacy and to be permissive regarding nudity and sexuality in their children. Intracultural differences in Japan also warrant examination: socioeconomic, rural-urban, gender and age-related differences

are likely to provide valuable contrasts (Azuma et al., 1981; Hendry, 1995; Iwao, 1993; White, 1993). For example, certain stereotypes about Japanese mothers, such as their unfailingly responsiveness and warmth, may mask important cultural variation in maternal acceptance vs. rejection (Behrens, 2001).

Generational differences, especially in Japan which is undergoing dramatic Westernization, also warrant mention. We suspect that, in 21st century Japan, there are more negative feelings about dependence and interdependence than even 10 years ago, particularly in urban areas. The Japanese Ministry of Education now explicitly stresses the importance of children's individuality, autonomy, and expressivity, in an intentional effort to foster more Western ways of thinking and behaving (Holloway, 1997).⁵

Despite our emphasis on cultural differences, we acknowledge that impressive intercultural similarities have been documented by attachment investigators (van IJzendoorn & Sagi, 1999) and by researchers interested in parental conflict (Cummings & Davies, 2002). Beneath the cultural differences that we have emphasized lie important similarities between Japan and the West in both attachment and family systems dynamics. For example, there are clinical reports that Japanese children who suffer from school phobia have family patterns like those described in the West—extremely high levels of mother-child closeness and avoidance by fathers (Kameguchi & Murphy-Shigematsu, 2001). While we believe that this pattern is more common and more adaptive in Japan than in the West, the clinical reports suggest that, even in Japan, the most severe instances of this family pattern may be associated with problems that are similar to those it engenders in the West.

The dialectic of similarity and difference does not end there. Close examina-

tion of these similarities in family patterns associated with school phobia leads to the detection of yet other differences: Japanese clinicians maintain that school phobia is manifested by "good children who want to go to school," (Kameguchi & Murphy-Shigematsu, 2001, p. 66), they suggest that "mothers' overinvolvement in their children's lives may be a way of freeing the fathers to work," (p. 67), and they partially attribute the children's refusal to their natural desire to have their dependency needs indulged by their mothers—"a psychological concept referred to in Japanese as *amae*" (p. 67). Western experts are less likely to explain school refusal in these ways (indeed, there is no exact counterpart to *amae* in the West). This example highlights the complex interplay between cultural differences and commonalities: the search for differences highlights underlying commonalities and the examination of those commonalities highlights new differences.

Therapeutic Implications

The findings reviewed here suggest that, when working with Japanese families, therapists should: (a) not assume that extremely close and/or dependent mother-child relations are pathological or sexualized, nor that the marital couple's failure to find time alone together weakens the overall family, or is seen as a problem by either partner; (b) be especially respectful of role-prescribed behaviors endorsed in the wider culture; and (c) rely on nonverbal forms of communication rather than require family members to be verbally explicit.

To maximize his or her effectiveness, the therapist working with Japanese families should not maintain the distant, personally disengaged stance demanded by both Western science and Western psychotherapy (Bankart, Koshikawa, Nodate, & Haruki, 1992; Roland, 1989). Rather, the therapist should be willing to

forge a close relationship with family members and to allow clients to assume highly dependent and passive behavior that would be regarded as counter therapeutic in the U.S. (Bankart et al., 1992; Hsu et al., 1987; Roland, 1989). In addition, Japanese therapists may be most effective when they recruit respected members of the family members' social network to help resolve conflicts (cf. Hsu et al., 1987). These and other differences between best therapeutic practice with US and Japanese families will become more obvious as we further investigate attachment dynamics and family systems in Japan. We suspect, and other authors have speculated (e.g., Hsu et al., 1987; Rothbaum, Morelli, et al., 2000), that many of the differences to which we are alluding pertain to best practice with other East Asian families as well.

ENDNOTES

¹ Marvin and Stewart (1990) also link these behaviors to the insecure controlling category. However, they refer to "one" classificatory group and, as the evidence we review indicates, most of these behaviors pertain to the insecure ambivalent category.

² The terms ambivalent and preoccupied refer to fundamentally the same adult attachment category, as do the terms avoidant and dismissive. In past research on adults, the terms ambivalent and avoidant have typically been used when the attachment classification is based on self-report measures, and the terms preoccupied and dismissive have typically been used when the attachment classification is based on the Adult Attachment Interview. When discussing particular findings, our use of terms is consistent with these differences in methods. However, when referring to adult attachment categories more

generally, we use the terms preoccupied and dismissive.

³ We are *not* suggesting that most Japanese are insecurely attached. Two characteristics of insecure-ambivalent subjects that are not at all common among Japanese are uncertainty about caregivers' availability because of caregiver inconsistency, and difficulty regulating negative affect. Our point is that Japanese children and children classified as insecure-ambivalent in the US share several salient qualities. Perhaps this is why many Japanese are classified as ambivalently attached (Miyake, Chen, & Campos, 1985; Takahashi, 1990; but see Durrett, Otaki, & Richards, 1984, for findings more similar to those obtained in the US). For a detailed discussion of Japanese-US differences in the meaning and manifestation of attachment behaviors, see Rothbaum, Weisz, et al. (2000).

⁴ Interestingly, US dyadic relationships are depicted as empty when they include commitment but not passion or intimacy (Sternberg, 1986). By contrast, "Unconditional loyalty and compassion is central to Japanese morality just as love is central to US morality" (Miyana, 1991). Companionable forms of love are more common in Japan—close, long-lasting friendships characterized by enduring commitment (Rothbaum, Pott, et al., 2000). To the extent that romance is emphasized, it is more viewed as a mental and physical vacation than as an expression of libidinal impulses (Hendry, 1995; Lebra, 1994; Iwao, 1993). Saying that a marital relationship is "like air" (smooth, relaxed, and harmonious) is a compliment in Japan (Iwao, 1993, p. 95). It is the familiarity and ease of the relationship, not its novelty and passion, that sustains it (Iwao, 1993).

This is probably partly responsible for the much lower divorce rate in Japan.

⁵ Yet it is important not to overstate the generational differences. For example, self-expression in present day Japan may mean different things than in the US. Most Japanese parents and educators who advocate self-expression seem to regard it as something the child should be able to do when prompted by his teacher or other adults, or in the peer context. The Japanese view self-expression as more a matter of clearly answering a question rather than as spontaneously expressing a personal feeling; even in 21st century Japan, the latter form of self-expression is not often valued, especially in the presence of adults.

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