

Commentary on Steele and Steele

Attachment and Object Relations Theories and the Concept of Independent Behavioral Systems

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If the scientific understanding of human relationships and personality development is to continue to progress, it is essential that a variety of perspectives be examined for their potential contributions. Attention to multiple perspectives can generate useful ideas which might not arise from working within a single paradigm. Continual updating across perspectives is useful; new developments in one area may both contribute to and be enriched by constructs not generally considered in relation to them. In their paper, 'Attachment and psychoanalysis: Time for a reunion,' Steele and Steele (this issue) have successfully tackled the daunting task of identifying similarities and differences between attachment theory and the object relations theories of Anna Freud, Melanie Klein, and Margaret Mahler. These authors have proven that this endeavor can yield important insights and can provide direction for growth.

As Steele and Steele note, three of the principle similarities between attachment and object relations theories are beliefs that (a) parents are powerful influences on children, (b) children develop mental models which are based on experiences with parents and which, in turn, influence children's later expectations, feelings, and behavior with others, and (c) experiences related to separation from and loss of an attachment figure play a key role in the formation and activation of these models. Additional similarities between the theories are noted in the paper. Both perspectives propose that confidence in the mother's availability facilitates the child's exploration (in terms of attachment theory, the mother provides a secure base from which the child can explore; in terms of object relations theories, internalization of the object promotes autonomous functioning). Relatedly, both perspectives describe the role of the mother as a source of comfort in times of trouble (the mother as a 'safe haven'). Furthermore, both perspectives describe the anxiety caused by the absence of the mother, and both assert that pathology arises from serious disturbances in early experiences with caregivers.

Consideration of these extensive similarities makes it evident that attachment theory is firmly rooted in psychoanalytic theory. As Sroufe (1986) observed, the research methodologies developed within the framework of attachment theory have, in fact, made testable the major hypotheses of psychoanalytic theory (see also Lieberman, 1993). Yet, as Steele and Steele observe throughout their paper, there

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are also important and fundamental differences between these theoretical perspectives. Indeed, as a developmental psychologist trained in attachment theory and research by Mary Ainsworth and Mary Main, I continue to find some components of object-relations theory troubling.

Of the three object-relations perspectives presented—those of A. Freud, Klein, and Mahler—I have the most consistent difficulty with that of Klein. This difficulty arises because two of Klein's core beliefs are at fundamental odds with those not only of Bowlby, but also of modern biologists, contemporary evolutionary theorists, and observational and experimental developmental psychologists. First, in Steele and Steele's words, Klein had 'an almost exclusive focus upon unconscious fantasies and intrapsychic conflicts' to the exclusion of attention to the child's actual experiences. Substantial convergent empirical evidence underscores the relevance of the child's experiences for the organization of attachment behavior and socio-emotional functioning (see Belsky & Cassidy, 1994, for a review). Second, Klein emphasized that the infant's early experiences of the mother are, as Steele and Steele noted, 'heavily tinged by frustration, anger, and suspicion following from the inevitable moments of having their passionate wishes for immediate and complete feeding satisfaction frustrated.' Further, representations of the parent were thought to be 'heavily invested with energies derived from the death instinct.' As Steele and Steele argue, not only is this perspective refuted by observational data (e.g., Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978), it also runs counter to the ideas of contemporary evolutionary theory, according to which such tendencies would be evolutionarily maladaptive. (Instead, infants are viewed as biologically predisposed to find ways to adapt to and cooperate with individual differences in parenting because such a predisposition enhances their reproductive fitness; Main, 1990.) Yet, as Steele and Steele note (and this is but one example of their useful harvesting and integration of ideas), Klein's interpretations may apply best to the subgroup of 'insecure/disorganized' infants (the infants at highest risk for later psychopathology) who are hypothesized to have experienced parental behavior that is frightened or frightening.

Perhaps the most fundamental disagreement between attachment theory and the object-relations theories described by Steele and Steele relates to the role of drives and the place of sex and aggression in human personality development. The object relations theorists were able to acknowledge the importance of early relationships with significant people while at the same time maintaining a place for Freud's drive theory. Bowlby, however, was unable to do this: As Steele and Steele state, 'Bowlby was perhaps free to make this break because he found a new alternative explanatory framework for the social urge to relate in the evolutionary literature.'

The cornerstone of this alternative framework is the notion, borrowed from the ethologists, of a 'behavioral system.' A behavioral system is a species-specific system of behaviors that leads to certain predictable outcomes, at least one of which contributes to the individual's reproductive fitness. The concept of the behavioral system involves inherent motivation; there is no need to view the component behaviors as the by-product of any more fundamental processes or 'drive.' In volume one of his classic trilogy, *Attachment and Loss*, Bowlby (1969/82) devoted most of the book to proposing a meta-theory of instinctive human behavior which drew on the ethological and evolutionary thinking of the time. In the remainder of the volume, Bowlby drew on this meta-theory to delineate the behavioral system most central to his task: the attachment behavioral system. (It was, after all, 'the nature of the child's tie to his mother' that Bowlby set out to understand.¹)

As part of understanding the attachment behavioral system, Bowlby also examined, to a lesser extent, other behavioral systems: the exploratory, wariness, affiliative, and parental caregiving behavioral systems. He wrote about sexual behavior in terms of the 'reproductive behavioral system,' particularly when setting forth his meta-theory of instinctive behavior. Bowlby wrote strikingly little about aggression; Ainsworth (1990) noted that 'presumably, he would also have to include aggression . . . as [a] behavioral system' (p. 471). Other theorists have built on Bowlby's work and have provided more extensive consideration of these additional behavioral systems. Ainsworth, in particular, described the exploratory behavioral system, introduced the notion that the sensitively responsive parent provides the child with 'a secure base from which to explore,' and provided the first observational data of the interplay between the attachment and exploratory systems (Ainsworth et al., 1978). Bretherton and Ainsworth (1974) examined the sociable system (see also Cassidy & Berlin, in press); Solomon and George elaborated on the parental caregiving system (1996, George & Solomon, in press; see also Berlin & Cassidy, in press); Ainsworth (1989), in her writings about attachment across the lifespan, discussed the sexual component of adult attachment relationships, as have Hazan and Zeifman (1994) and Shaver, Hazan, and Bradshaw (1988).

It is to his credit, and to the benefit of scientists and clinicians studying attachment, that Bowlby maintained his own focus on the attachment behavioral system while delineating a theoretical framework within which other behavioral systems could be understood—both in relation to the attachment behavioral system and in their own right. In fact, one of Bowlby's most important contributions may have been this *separation* of behavioral systems, and his unwavering emphasis that each carries within it its own motivation, with no need for one system to motivate another. Most salient, of course, is Bowlby's insistence that the attachment behavioral system is 'a fundamental form of behavior with its own internal motivation distinct from feeding and sex, and of no less importance for survival' (1988, p. 27). Yet Bowlby maintained this thinking in relation to other behavioral systems as well. Thus, in a similar vein, he stated: 'Exploratory behavior is . . . no appendage of feeding behavior or of sexual behavior. Instead, it is a class of behavior in its own right' (1969/82, p. 238). Furthermore, he found Piaget's (1954) claim that the child's exploration is internally motivated to be completely compatible with his own position on the internal motivation of behavioral systems.

Steele and Steele echo the concerns of previous theorists when they note that there has been little theoretical or empirical work examining attachment and aggression or sexuality, and that understanding their interrelations is essential for fully understanding human personality development. Ainsworth, for instance, stated that ' . . . it will become increasingly important to consider other behavioral systems and how they interact with the attachment system. Such considerations should help to avoid confusions of one system with another' (1990, p. 473). Similarly, Stern noted:

While there is no question that we need a concept of motivation, it clearly will have to be reconceptualized in terms of many discrete, but interrelated motivational systems such as attachment, competence-mastery, curiosity and others. It is of no help to imagine that all of these are derivatives of a single unitary motivational system. In fact, what is now most needed is to understand how these motivational systems emerge and interrelate and which ones have higher or lower hierarchical standing during what conditions at what ages. *The pursuit of such questions will be hampered if*

these motivational systems are assumed a priori to be derivatives of one or two basic, less definable instincts rather than more definable separate phenomena. (1985, p. 238; italics added)

In a similar vein, Lieberman (1993) urged researchers to 'explore the relationships between attachment and other biologically based motivational systems, including aggression and sexuality.'

If Bowlby was correct in his belief that sex and aggression are best considered outside of the attachment behavioral system, how might the role of these two important aspects of human behavior be understood in ways compatible with his thinking?

In the remainder of this commentary, answering Steele and Steele's call 'to conceptualize and study the inter-relations among attachment, aggression, and sexuality,' I provide a brief sketch of the sexual behavior system within the framework of Bowlby's meta-theory of instinctive behavior and contemporary evolutionary theory, with particular emphasis on its separation from and interactions with the attachment behavioral system. (For more extensive discussion of these ideas and a similar approach to the aggression behavioral system, see Cassidy, 1997.)

For Bowlby, the sexual (or reproductive) behavioral system (which includes both courting and mating behavior), like all behavioral systems, involves inherent motivation. Individuals are biologically predisposed to engage in sexual behavior because such a predisposition generally enhances their reproductive fitness. According to the control systems approach that Bowlby outlined, the sexual behavioral system is activated in the presence of some sufficient combination of activating stimuli and is terminated in the presence of some sufficient combination of terminating stimuli; these stimuli vary as a function of a number of factors, including state of the individual and state of the environment. Typical activators in humans are likely to include presence of an attractive potential mate, conducive sensory stimuli (sight, touch, smell, taste, hearing), appropriate hormonal levels, suitable neural responses, and thoughts and feelings based on social and psychological factors. Typical terminating stimuli are likely to include changes in activating stimuli, activation of competing behavioral systems (e.g., feeding, caregiving, wariness), or orgasm, which is the principle predictable outcome of the sexual behavioral system. According to Bowlby, the 'biological function' of the sexual behavioral system (that is, the predictable outcome of activation of the behavioral system that gave initial evolutionary advantage) is reproduction. In humans, a child shares the maximum possible number of genes with the parent. Creation of offspring, therefore, can be a highly successful strategy for enhancing one's reproductive fitness.

Additional factors that must be addressed when considering the sexual behavioral system within Bowlby's theory of instinctive human behavior include the developmental course across the lifespan, the roles of emotions and cognitions, and the nature of individual differences. Following Main's (1990) argument about the attachment behavioral system, it is likely that humans would have evolved the capacity to tailor the specific organization of the sexual behavioral system to fit the environment in which they find themselves. These adaptations would include behaviors and decisions related to mate selection, timing of onset of puberty, age of first intercourse, the nature of sexual activity (e.g., frequency, monogamy vs. promiscuity), and issues related to fertility, as well as relative sensitivity to activators and terminators.

Although the motivation of each behavioral system is thought to be inherent to that particular behavioral system, there are clearly links among behavioral systems

such that activation of one system may contribute to activation or termination of another. In relation to the attachment and sexual behavioral systems, Bowlby stated, 'distinct though the two systems are, there is good evidence also that they are apt to impinge on each other and to influence the development of each other. This occurs in other species as well as man' (1969/82, p. 233).

At least six pathways are central to understanding the connection between the attachment and sexual behavioral systems within a multi-generational perspective. Below is a list of these six pathways, each framed within a series of questions.

1. Do a parent's childhood (and adult) attachment experiences influence the developing child's sexual system? For example, it seems likely that a parent's secure attachment history would contribute to feelings of empathy that would preclude involving the child in any potentially frightening or harmful sexual activities. Furthermore, it seems likely that a secure attachment history would provide the parent with skills that would increase the likelihood of the child's being protected from assault.

2. Do a parent's childhood (and adult) sexual experiences influence the developing child's attachment system? For instance, would a parent's experience of childhood sexual abuse influence his/her child's attachment to him/her?

3. During childhood, what are the reciprocal influences between the attachment and sexual systems? For instance, are children who have experienced inappropriate sexual contact with a parent at increased risk for insecure-disorganized attachment to the abusing parent? Are children with disturbed attachments at greater risk for sexual abuse, both within and outside the family, than other children?

4. Does a child's attachment history influence his/her later (adolescent and adult) sexual behavioral system? (See Harlow and Harlow, 1962, for connections in primates; see Sroufe, Bennett, Englund, and Urban, 1993, for links between infant-mother attachment and preadolescent gender boundary maintenance, which is thought to be a precursor of later competent sexual behavior; see Belsky, Steinberg, and Draper, 1991, and Belsky, in press, for ways in which early attachment experiences may contribute to the nature and onset of later sexual activity.)

5. Do child and adolescent sexual experiences influence later (adolescent and adult) attachment? For instance, do experiences of childhood sexual abuse influence an adult's capacities to form later attachments? (See Alexander, 1992, for a review.)

6. During adulthood, what are the reciprocal influences between the attachment and sexual systems? For instance, do current romantic attachments influence organization of sexual behavior? (See Brennan & Shaver, 1995, and Feeney, Noller, & Patty, 1993.) Reciprocally, does sexual behavior influence the attachment system? Specifically, is there truth in the proposition that the sexual behavioral system is designed to keep a couple together long enough for each partner to become attached to the other? (See Hazan & Zeifman, 1994.) Does activation of the sexual behavioral system contribute to activation of the attachment system? When activation of the sexual behavioral system declines within a relationship, does attachment wane? Does the nature of the connection between these two systems change across the course of the relationship?

In relation to each pathway listed above, in addition to the fundamental question of whether the pathway does, in fact, exist, there are additional important questions: What is the nature of the pathway and through what process does it emerge? What are the key mediators and moderators? Why might these pathways have evolved?

In sum, it is clear that there is considerable room for continued exploration of the

nature of the links between the attachment and sexual behavioral systems, both theoretically and empirically. Similar needs exist in relation to the attachment and aggression behavior systems. Steele and Steele remind us how much is to be gained by being open to perspectives from a variety of fields. As they suggest, we will increase the likelihood of progress when we are willing (a) to surrender parts of theory that do not fit scientific observations of infant and child development and (b) to be open to insights from clinical experiences, particularly in relation to individuals suffering from pathology.

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Note

1. It was in 'The Nature of the Child's Tie to His Mother' (1958) that Bowlby first laid forth nearly all of the central formulations of attachment theory.