

**Anger, Conflict & Intimacy:
Attachment and Neurobiological
Perspectives**

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Presuppositions

- During the first two years of life the brain of the newborn is not fully developed.
- The prefrontal cortex still in development (which is involved in capacities such as emotion regulation, autoeotic consciousness, social cognition, body maps, self-reflection, etc.).
- Experience-based development helps to complete the neural maturation process.
- Implicit, but not explicit memory is operational during these first two years.
- These early experiences may be either reinforced over later development or not.

Presuppositions

- All children become attached, what differs is the quality of attachment.
- Each child will have a different attachment quality with each parent.
- Not all close relationships are attachment relationships
- Attachment is but one behavioral system, and therefore not all behavior can be reduced to attachment patterns
- Attachment patterns are persistent, but can change.

Behavioral Systems

- Bowlby borrowed concept from ethology. He wanted to replace Freud's drive theory
- Believed that real experiences were critical to development, not fantasies.
- Species-universal neural programming that results in certain behaviors that optimize reproductive fitness and survival.
- Built into the system and handed down over evolution to promote reproductive fitness and species survival
- Attachment, caregiving and exploration
- Aggression is a part of the attachment system - protection

Goals and Behaviors

- Each system has a particular aim or goal.
 - Attachment: felt security
 - Exploration: Learning about the environment
 - Caregiving: Promoting others safety and welfare.
- Each has primary behaviors or strategies to achieve those goals.
 - Attachment: Seeking proximity
 - Exploration: Venturing out in the world
 - Caregiving: Expressing concern and support towards others

Felt Security

- The goal is "felt security" which terminates the behavioral system (anxiety, proximity-seeking).
- Psychologically:
 - Security can allow a person to resume exploration, experience being cared for, appreciate feeling loved and valued.
- Physiologically:
 - Reduce cortisol, adrenaline and other stress hormones
 - Increase neuropeptides such as oxytocin and vasopressin
 - From a sympathetic to parasympathetic state

Achieving Felt-Security

- How ones goes about achieving “felt security” is based on experience
- People learn to alter strategies based on the demands of the environment
- And in doing so form generalized beliefs or expectations about achieving those goals (or not) in the future
- Bowlby called these expectations internal working models.
- Part of behavioral system’s neural wiring
- Observed in the way a person thinks about self and others, their emotional reactions to situations, and how they manage emotions behaviorally.

Primary and Secondary Strategies

- Strategies for approximately felt-security can be conceptualized on a continuum from hyper-activating to deactivating strategies
- Primary strategy is to seek proximity to attachment figure (activation of ABS). When the goal is met, ABS deactivates
- What if the primary strategy doesn’t work? The child develops **secondary strategies**
- **Hyper-activating** strategies develop to get an inconsistently sensitive caregiver to pay attention and provide protection and soothing.
- **Deactivating** strategies develop to self-soothe because a consistently insensitive caregiver is unable or refuses to provide protection and soothing.

Why are Secondary Strategies Problematic?

- Secondary strategies sometimes work and sometimes they don’t.
- Environmental reinforcement primes the brain to respond in a particular way due to experiences.
- Secure attachment is characterized by flexibility, whereas insecure attachment results in less cognitive flexibility. They have trouble changing response sets.
- **Hyper-activating** strategies often lead to more subjective stress and alienating others. The best defense is a good offense.
- **Deactivating** strategies reduce the conscious experience of felt-anxiety, but also reduces the possibility that others may notice distress and respond in a caring and protective manner. If you don’t notice it, it’s not there.

Cognitive Aspects of Attachment

- Based on experiences with attachment figures children develop beliefs about value of self and availability and responsiveness of others.
- Bowlby referred to this as Internal Working Models of Self and Others.
- Cognitive monitoring of self-other experience.
- Is the attachment figure sufficiently present, attentive and responsive?
- If yes, the child develops a benign stance towards close relationships.
- If no, the development secondary strategies for achieving felt security (hyper-activation or deactivating) often leads to disappointment in relationships, which reinforce the belief.
- Even if the belief is not conscious, the behavior is indicative of the belief system (AAI: Demonstrated via narratives)

Maintenance and Change

- What Maintains Internal Working Models?
 - Selection of environments that fit the models (interacting with others who confirm models).
 - Information processing bias (If you think it's that way, it is).
 - Behavioral patterns that become self-fulfilling.
- What Can Change Working Models?
 - Getting into secure relationship (intimate, friendship or therapeutic)
 - Develop a new understanding of past experiences and intend to change these patterns.
 - Regulate emotions differently

Bowlby and Anger

- Anger is a normal response to separation
- An attempt to gain the attachment figure's attention
- Not intended to destroy or damage the relationship
- Anger of hope - Looking toward a better future
- Anger of despair - Anger so intense that it alienates or injures a partner

Anger of Hope

- Expressed in moderation
- Restoration of positive mood afterwards
- A sense of optimism that one will be understood and other will reform (change)
- Change is possible without aggression
- Forgiveness is likely regardless
- Expression results in "felt security"

Anger of Despair

- Correlated to insecure attachment
- So intense that it alienates or injures a partner
- Becomes destructive to a relationship
- Reduces relationship satisfaction
- Difficult to change
- Can even lead to violence or death

Dismissing Attachment

- Tend to ignore problems that may contribute to anger.
- Suppress anger either consciously or unconsciously
- Express hostility and anger indirectly (either consciously or unconsciously)
- Can become angry and aggressive as a means to push away others wanting greater intimacy
- Have difficulty identifying emotions in self and others (emotional vs. cognitive empathy)
- Controlling of others
- Bullying of others

Preoccupied Attachment

- Use anger to get attachment needs met.
- Often ruminate about angry situations
- Can experience long periods of anger
- Can be intrusive and controlling to reduce internal anxiety
- Expresses anger directly, but can be hostile and aggressive in response to actual or perceived abandonment
- Have difficulty differentiating anger from other emotions
- Sensitive to anger in others
- Vulnerable to interpreting other's emotions as anger
- Can be highly emotional, ambivalent and unstable

Disorganized Attachment

- Can be the most disregulated form of attachment
- Collapse of emotional and cognitive strategies that can lead to dissociation
- High correlation to extreme anger expression and violence
- Correlated to diagnoses of anxiety, depression and PTSD
- Related to childhood abuse and unresolved abuse in caregivers

Anger and the Brain

- Primary emotion
- Likely evolved as result of the need to protect off-spring, community, property, etc. from aggressors or other threatening behaviors.
- Like all emotions, it affects cognition and perceptions of others.
- It's contagious – mirroring
- Predictable facial expression, body language and physiological responses.
- Withdraw-biased vs. Approach Biased Brains

Anger: The Serotonin Connection

- Depression has been associated with aggression in young people, as well as adults.
- Low serotonin results in weak communication between the limbic system (amygdala) and the frontal lobes (lateral orbital prefrontal cortex).
- It's the prefrontal cortex that is primarily responsible for regulating impulses generated by the limbic system. Having a good behavioral inhibition system is very helpful.
- All children are born with aggression, but the caretaking environment helps to manage those impulses a productive way.

Anger: The GABA Connection

- GABA (Gamma-aminobutyric acid) is the main inhibitory neurotransmitter.
- Low GABA has been associated with high anxiety, low sociability and aggression in animals and humans.
- Inverse relationship between levels of GABA in the brain and aggression
- Study by Radtke, et. al. (2011): *Transgenerational impact of intimate partner violence on methylation in the promoter of the glucocorticoid receptor.*

Pre-Birth Stress and the Brain

- Found that domestic violence during pregnancy resulted in changes in the glucocorticoid receptor gene (GR) in the offspring of victims.
- Ten to nineteen years after birth, they found the offspring genes to be methylated: as a result, their synapses couldn't bind as much GABA as those with non-methylated genes.
- Their brains were different from those whose mother's didn't experience domestic violence.

Working against Biology

- The bad news: Anger and aggression are the most stable personality characteristics.
- The good news: Neuroplasticity research indicates that the brain is able to change through out the lifespan.
- The key to change is repetition, repetition and repetition.
- Telling clients the truth about anger and aggression.

Anger and Couples/Families

- Anger is contagious, especially when it's acted-out versus talked-out.
- Important to discuss this with couples, because it's not always clear what is the environmental stimulus to anger.
- Complication: Implicit emotional memories.
- Anger can arise via numerous pathways: mirroring, reacting, explicit and implicit memory, etc.
- Anger in the therapy session.

Intervention: Key Points

- Talking versus showing
- Productive expression of anger
- Connecting with body
- Taking stock of emotionally competent stimuli
- Self-soothing and dyadic-soothing
- Breathing
- Mental scripts (thoughts)
- Body awareness (frowning)
- Listening versus talking
- Regulating versus Problem-Solving
- Trauma resolution

Long Term Strategies

- Medication
- Daily practice
- Mindfulness and meditation practices
- Diet and exercise
- Balance
- Relationships
- Do supplements help?

Power, Assertion & Aggression

- Power in close relationships: All relationships experience power struggles. Everyone is trying to get their needs met. Differences in needs are inevitable.
- However, relationship satisfaction is also partly determined by how easy it is for both individuals to accommodate the other, even when it's not in their personal interest to do so.
- Assertion: There are many instances where we may need to restore sense of power by asserting our needs.

Power, Assertion & Aggression

- Aggression: Resort to aggression when assertion is either not in the repertoire (modulation, inhibition) or is ineffective.
- Can we have power without aggression?
- There are instances of aggression that result in damage or the destruction of someone or something.
- But there are also instances where aggression may be necessary.
- Is it possible to experience power and positive social relationships without damaging the attachment bond?

Caregiving System and Anger

- Anger can be a signal for a need for caretaking.
- How the partner responds affects the quality and stability of the relationship.
- How caring system develops within an individual based on their development, will determine whether or not its expressed as compassion, loving-kindness and generosity.
- The goal of the caregiving system is to reduce other people's suffering, protect them from harm, and foster their growth and development (Shaver and Mikulincer, 2007).
- Anger is one of the most difficult emotions for people to experience and not react.

Caregiving Components

- Sensitivity (awareness of signals)
- Responsiveness (appropriate response)
- Cooperation (setting aside own needs for other)
- Compassion (to suffer together): understanding the others perspective in order to help him or her effectively reduce suffering and distress or pursue growth and development.

Empathy

- Different types of empathy
 - Emotional: state matching; increases with familiarity, similarity and salience; self-other distinction
 - Cognitive: no state matching; self-other distinction; perspective-taking
 - Contagion: state-matching; no self-other distinction; AKA vicarious emotional transfer (vicarious trauma)
 - Sympathy: feeling sorry for other's situation, not necessarily emotional state; self-other distinction; no state matching

Mirror Neurons and Empathy

- Mirror Neurons are cells within inferior frontal cortex (inhibition and attention) and the superior parietal lobe (motor activity), mirror the intentions and emotions of others.
- They fire as they do when the subject is having the same intentions and/or emotions.
- Difficult to distinguish between subject and observer in imaging studies.

Mirror Neurons and Empathy

- It's hypothesized that the mirror neuron system is what allows us to feel the emotional states of others (empathy) and the intentions of others.
- It may also be the neurobiological basis of emotion contagion.
- This has profound implications for close relationships.
- That between couples and within families emotions and intentions are constantly being communicated between members without their knowledge.
- Michelle Rutterman: Family induction (Hypnosis and Family Therapy)
- It explains mutual escalation in conflict and many family dynamics.

The Emotional Life of Your Brain - Davidson

- **Emotional state:** the smallest, most fleeting unit of emotion
- **Emotional trait:** Persistent emotional state
- **Emotional style:** consistent way of responding
- **Personality:** more complex and not as easily identified neurologically speaking

- **Anger** - emotional state
- **Frequently or consistently angry** - angry trait
- **Aggressively angry** - emotional style
- **Personality** - personality styles that manifest anger

The Emotional Life of Your Brain - Davidson

- Narcissism - anger in response to not being on the same page; too much confrontation; unwilling to admire.
- Borderline - anger in response to abandonment or acting frightened or frightening
- Schizoid - anger in response to engulfment or ignoring.
- Depressive - irritable depression
- Anxiety - fearfully angry
- Dependent - anger in response to abandonment
- ***So any personality style can manifest angry states, traits and styles of responding***

The Emotional Life of Your Brain - Davidson

- Davidson talks about six continua that emotional style can be described:
 - Resilience: recovery (prefrontal cortex - amygdala - more white matter)
 - Outlook: positive outlook (left vs right pfc)
 - Social intuition: social cues (low/amygdala - high/fusiform gyrus)
 - Self awareness: body cues to emotion
 - Sensitivity to context: regulating emotions in light of context
 - Attention: focus

The Emotional Life of Your Brain - Davidson

- Thinking vs Doing
 - Thinking can change the brain as much as doing.
 - Having clients imagine and experience are equally important
- Old View: Emotion interrupts cognition
- New view: Emotion and Cognition work together. Too much or not enough of one is not always good.


