

Attachment – public and scientific discourse

In her rather scathing review of ‘The predictive power of attachment’ (January 2017) Elizabeth Meins takes aim at misguided opinions about attachment that circulate in the policy arena. Certainly, policy makers, in an attempt to secure public money that children, families, and schools badly need, tend to exaggerate claims about the critical importance of early experience. The public discourse however should be sharply differentiated from the scientific discourse. Here we focus on Meins’s critique of attachment research. We list some of her comments about the evidence and show that they are largely mistaken.

Statement 1: The fact is that there’s no strong evidence for parent–child attachment in infancy predicting anything much about children’s later development. We recently conducted three meta-analyses on this topic, two of which are mentioned by Meins. In these two meta-analyses we present robust, replicable evidence that secure attachment predicts fewer externalising problems ($d = 0.31$) and, to a lesser extent, fewer internalising problems ($d = 0.15$). These effect sizes are based on some 6000 children and they are not insubstantial in comparison to effect sizes in other domains of development (see Groh et al., 2016). The effect size for the most successful polygenic score from genome-wide association studies on behavioural traits is comparable in magnitude (educational attainment, Rietveld et al., 2014). Furthermore, Meins does not mention our meta-analysis on attachment and later social competence (including peer relationships), showing that early security is associated with greater social competence ($d = 0.39$). Importantly, across the age range of 1–14 years the strength of the associations between early attachment and later child outcomes remained equally strong, suggesting long-term prediction.

Statement 2: The results of these meta-analyses are interpreted as insecure attachment predicting higher levels of both internalising...and externalising...behaviours. But on closer inspection, the findings are much less clear cut. We do not think that close inspection of our papers is required to come to the conclusion that the insecure attachment categories have partially distinct associations with outcomes. Any reading of our meta-analyses makes clear that insecure-avoidant attachment is the only insecure pattern associated with internalising symptoms, and that externalising is primarily associated with insecure-disorganised attachment (although, to correct Meins’s reporting, avoidance is too, just more weakly). It should also be noted that our third meta-analysis shows that all insecure categories are related to lower peer competence and to a similar extent.

Statement 3: ...there were fascinating gender differences. For girls, being classified as insecure-disorganised actually predicted fewer externalising behaviours. This is a hasty conclusion. In a small subset of samples including only girls (four samples from three studies) the effect size for disorganised attachment was indeed reversed. But in the large set of studies with mixed gender composition (17 studies with roughly equal numbers of males and females) we found quite a strong association between disorganisation and externalising behaviours ($d = 0.39$); stronger than the average of the small sets of female-only and male-only samples. That would be impossible if girls showed opposite predictive patterns. A fair representation of the findings is that externalising problems are associated with insecurity in general and disorganisation in particular, and there may be a stronger

association for males than females. These are interesting results, but hardly a disaster for attachment theory.

Statement 4: ...48 per cent of children who were identified as having been maltreated were classified as insecure-disorganized, compared with 15 per cent of children from regular middle-class families. These findings are generally interpreted as abusive parenting causing children to form a disorganized attachment relationship...In fact, in regular middle-class families, insecure-disorganized attachment is just as common as insecure-avoidant attachment and more common than insecure-resistant attachment. It therefore shouldn't be treated as abnormal and a marker of parental maltreatment. Disorganised attachment is strongly associated with maltreatment. Nevertheless, it is not a disorder and not a 'marker' of parental maltreatment as children might become disorganised without being abused. For example, parents struggling to cope with a trauma or loss of a loved one have been shown to have children with disorganised attachments (Verhage et al., 2016).

At the same time, as Meins correctly points out, about half of the maltreated children seem not to show disorganisation. Some children may be less susceptible to the social environment, for better and for worse, for example because of their genetic make-up (Bakermans-Kranenburg & Van IJzendoorn, 2015). This might explain why some children remain relatively unruffled. It is however dangerous to suggest that 'the child's genetically specified characteristics may trigger maltreatment in the parent'. We would demand a very high standard of evidence for a claim like this, and indeed this interpretation, which is based on one study of adolescents, diverges from the cautious way in which the study's authors discussed the finding in the original report (Fisher et al., 2016).

Perhaps most importantly, we are surprised that Meins makes the unsubstantiated claim that placing emphasis on attachment is not helping anyone. Attachment theory and research has given rise not only to important findings concerning early parent-child relationships but also to a wide range of interventions, many of which appear to be helpful. If the target is policy makers' over-extending and misunderstanding research, we are of course fully supportive. But let's not throw the baby (decades of careful research) out with the bathwater. That won't help anyone.

Marinus van IJzendoorn
Leiden University, The Netherlands
Pasco Fearon, Marian Bakermans-Kranenburg

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