

Learning to Love: From Your Mother's Arms To Your Lover's Arms

Theodore Waters

University of Toronto

When love really works it seems effortless. Both partners give and both receive. They support and receive support. The relationship doesn't tie them down. Instead it allows them to explore the world with great confidence, knowing that their partner is right behind them. Of course rules of relationships differ in different cultures but all cultures know about falling in love.

Anybody who has been in love knows love is easy, loving is not. Being a good partner is difficult and for most doesn't come naturally. If you want a relationship to last it takes a lot of work. But often times no matter how badly we want things to work out they don't. Sometimes we are too needy. Sometimes we want to be loved so badly we cling, or neglect our partner. There is no back and forth, no give and take.

Early Ideas About Relationships

Over 100 years ago, Sigmund Freud, discoverer of the unconscious mind and inventor of psychoanalysis, suggested that the roots of love are not in the trial and error or even in successes and failures of adolescence. He theorized that the roots of love are in infancy. The roots of love are in our early experiences. The roots of love are in our mothers arms. In his last book, over 60 years ago, he said the infant's tie to its mother is the first and longest lasting relationship, as well the prototype for all later affairs of the heart.

This was an astonishing and improbable idea. Astonishing because in Freud's time early experience was thought to be irrelevant. Psychologist and

physicians assumed that the social and emotional life of infants and children was empty or immediately forgotten. How could experiences so early in life have such long lasting affects? Could early experience really affect adulthood?

Modern Understandings Applied To Freud's Ideas

Even today, with all we know about infant development, the idea of infant experience affecting adulthood seems astonishing. Infants and children are much more sophisticated than we once believed. Until recently psychologists thought children were just merely smaller or half-finished versions of adults. In fact, some very clever experiments have shown that infants are not less than adults, they are different. Infants and young children perceive the world very differently than we do. They move, look, reach, grasp, speak, think, and even experience emotion according to infant rules, not adult rules.

The change from infancy to toddlerhood is not a matter of getting bigger or better. It is a matter of doing things differently. The same can be said about the transitions from childhood to adolescence and adolescence to adulthood. Our perception and understanding of the world is always changing. Psychologically, we are like caterpillars that literally turn into something different at every stage of development. So how could Freud be right? How could things that affect us in one stage of life effect us later when we have become something very different? It doesn't seem likely. And yet, the best evidence shows that in some ways Freud was right.

Patterns of Attachment In Infancy

In order to test Freud's hypothesis psychologists have had to define attachment and figure out how to measure it. For Freud, attachment meant clinginess and dependency. But Freud didn't actually work with or observe children. When British psychoanalyst John Bowlby and Canadian psychologist Mary Ainsworth took a more systematic look, they saw something very different. In the most common and most satisfying infant-mother relationships, the infants were not helpless, dependent little clingers. They were active, competent explorers who used their mothers as a secure base from which to explore all around their environment and try out all their new skills.

Of course, some were better at this kind of relationship. They seemed more confident in the mother's availability and thus more confident to explore away. And more sure that she would always be there for them if needed. Bowlby and Ainsworth called these infants securely (confidently) attached. Others who lacked this confidence they called insecurely attached.

It isn't immediately obvious why some babies would be insecurely attached. But if you ask the question this way, "Why would some babies lack confidence in mother's availability and responsiveness?", the answer seems obvious. Confidence comes from experience. If you are always there for me, I expect you'll be there the next time. And if you let me down when I need you, I don't know what to expect the next time. Just what you'd expect and just what Ainsworth found in her research.

These were important steps toward testing Freud's ideas about the power of early experience. The next big step was to develop an alternative to following mothers and babies around for weeks to assess secure and insecure attachment. The solution was a simple 20 minute laboratory test called the Strange Situation. It works like this. A baby and its mother are videotaped playing together in a small research room with a chair for the mother and toys on the floor for the baby. At two key points the mother is signaled to leave the baby in the room for three minutes (once with a female research assistant and once alone).

Many psychologists expected that the critical information would be in the baby's response to mother's departure. But Ainsworth didn't prejudge the issue. She carefully and patiently collected data on almost thirty infants she had carefully observed at home over a period of twelve months. Surprisingly, infants who seemed secure or insecure at home didn't differ at all in whether they cried when mother left

the Strange Situation room. In both groups, half cried and half didn't. What really distinguished the secure and insecure infants was how they responded when mother returned.

Babies who were good secure base users at home were happy to see the mom return. They approached and reached to be picked up, or at least greeted her happily with a smile or gesture across a distance. Anything to reestablish psychological contact. If they were crying, they held her tightly. And being held worked – it calmed them down and they were soon back at play. These infants were not more strongly attached to their mothers, just more confident in her and in their relationship. Ainsworth called these babies *secure*.

Babies who had difficulty trusting mother and using her as a secure base at home behaved very differently in the Strange Situation. Their reunions were very difficult. They turned away from their mothers and refused to look as mother chided "Oh, don't be mad. I'm back". Some began to approach only to turn aside and sulk or become fascinated with a piece of lint on the carpet or slap vacantly on a toy. Ainsworth called the infants *insecure – avoidant*.

Other insecure infants cried desperately even after mother returned but couldn't muster an approach or even a reach toward her. And if mother picked them up they would push away. If they settled down a bit, mothers quite naturally put them down with the toys. But they weren't really settled and would cry long and hard at mother's feet – without as much as reaching for her or trying to be picked up. Ainsworth called these infants *insecure – ambivalent*.

So the Strange Situation proved a valuable tool for assessing infant attachment. Indeed, child psychologists around the world voted her work among the five most revolutionary studies in the history of child psychology. Of course they weren't thinking just of her work with babies. In a series of studies over two decades, students trained by Ainsworth have shown that the patterns of secure, avoidant, and ambivalent attachment in the Strange Situation are also evident in adult relationships. This was very surprising. It is also the key to testing Freud's ideas about the infant-mother relationship and relationships in adulthood.

Patterns of Attachment in Adulthood

After Ainsworth solved the problem of assessing infant attachment, the problem of assessing adult attachment went unresolved for almost 20 years. Adult's relationships are just too inaccessible. They take place over a much wider space and time and

they are much more private than infant-mother interactions. Also, much more of what goes on in adult relationships is in their minds. They don't have to be interacting at all to be thinking about their partner and about things that they have done in the past or might want to do in the future. That is, a lot of their relationship is invisible to an observer.

Fortunately, Ainsworth's student, Mary Main, realized that we might not have to observe couples together. Early experience doesn't just shape later behavior. It might have powerful effects by shaping a person's beliefs and expectations. So she developed a carefully structured Adult Attachment Interview to examine adults' ideas about their view of their relationship to each parent. After collecting thousands of pages of such interviews she sat down to organize her results. To her, and everyone else's, surprise, the interviews showed the same kinds of differences Ainsworth had seen in the Strange Situation. Most of the participants in her study told coherent and believable stories about relationships to their parents. They seemed to value these relationships and had good recall of early experience to back up their descriptions of their parents as kind, funny, warm, and so on. She called these people *secure – coherent* with respect to attachment.

More surprisingly, a significant number of the participants sounded like the adult version of an insecure – avoidant baby. They had difficulty describing their relationships to their parents. That is, they would just draw a blank. And when they come up with a description like happy or warm they had trouble remembering events from their childhood to justify the description. The memories are there – they recognize them if a parent talks about them. But their understanding of their childhood is so incoherent that they can't retrieve the memories; cognitive psychologists would say they have the memory but lack an effective retrieval cue. These same people tend to minimize the importance of early relationships. They say, "I am the way I am; I don't think my past has anything to do with it". Sometimes, rather than thinking real thoughts about their parents, they idealize them – everything is fine; they were the best; couldn't have been better. To a psychologist this seems out of touch and avoidant of real experiences and feelings. Indeed the term avoidant seems to fit these people very well. But Mary Main did not want to assume that these expressions were necessarily related to the Strange Situation. That is best addressed by data. So she termed this pattern *insecure – dismissing* rather than insecure-avoidant.

There was even an Adult Attachment Interview pattern that seemed like the insecure-ambivalent pattern from the Strange Situation. These were people who lived with their relationship, indeed the whole history of their relationship to their parents, as if every uncertainty and unresolved issue were on the table and happening today. Ask them if they were ever left alone when they were children and you get a story about the parents going to the Bahamas. Seems ok. But then they become more and more intense. They were left. They were only five. They didn't know the babysitter; she could have been anybody. They never called; they didn't bring a gift. And on and on about something that was 20 years ago and seemingly entirely ordinary. In a word, they were preoccupied with relationship issues. Mary Main called them *insecure – preoccupied*.

Judith Crowell and Everett Waters (also an Ainsworth student) have recently adapted the Adult Attachment Interview for use with couples. They call this the Current Relationship Interview. In a very similar interview, adults are asked not about their relationship with parents but with their spouse. And as in Adult Attachment Interview participants seem to fall into patterns that are easily recognized as secure, insecure-dismissing, and insecure-preoccupied. The Strange Situation, the Adult Attachment Interview, and the Current Relationship Interview are the tools we have needed to test Freud's 100 year old hypothesis that the infant-mother relationship is the model for later adult relationships.

Testing Freud's Hypothesis

The Strange Situation, the Adult Attachment Interview, and the Current Relationship Interview assess a person's ability to use a partner as a secure base. In infancy the partner is usually the mother and the secure base behavior is out there for all to see. The question is not whether infant attachment behavior predicts adult attachment behavior. Instead, it is whether an infant's confidence in it's first relationships sets up beliefs and expectations that can guide later relationships.

Waters and Crowell recently published two important studies that lend considerable support to the idea that early experience can influence adult relationships. In the first they measured the attachment security of 50 one-year-olds in the Strange Situation and then saw the same subjects 20 years later in the Adult Attachment Interview. Psychologists were amazed that 85% of the babies who were secure in the Strange Situation were secure – coherent in the

Adult Attachment Interview 20 years later. In addition, the babies who were insecure at 12 months had only a 25% chance of becoming secure – coherent in their adult relationships with their parents. Even IQ is not this stable from infancy to adulthood. Clearly, early behavior patterns with parents set up patterns of beliefs about family relationships in adulthood.

But is there a link to relationships outside the family? Crowell & Waters examined this by testing a sample of several hundred engaged couples in both the Adult Attachment Interview and the Current Relationship Interview. They found that people who were secure – coherent with respect to their parents were much more likely than others to be secure – coherent with their fiancées. And there were links to behavior as well. For both males and females, having secure – coherent beliefs about the romantic partner was significantly related to secure base behavior in the videotaped marriage discussions. People who with secure – coherent beliefs about their partner were significantly more able to use their partner as a secure base, to ask for help, explain what they needed, and accept help and support in the difficult problem discussions. They were also more able to recognize when their partner was asking for help and more able to see and offer what was needed. Both insecure – dismissing and insecure – preoccupied were less effective at using and at serving their partner as a secure base. They didn't see what was needed, or thought that offering help meant admitting they were to blame, or were so consumed with their own problems that they couldn't think about what their partner needed.

Taken together these studies show that infant attachment affects relationship beliefs and attitudes in adulthood and these reach outside the family to affect behavior between romantic partners. Preliminary results suggest that these beliefs and expectations are also related to becoming a good parent and instilling security in your children.

Seventy-five years ago, Freud was thinking that early experience would affect drives and motivation in adulthood. We don't think so much in terms of drives and motives any more. But today's research suggests there is something to the idea that early experience is important. Early attachment experience is clearly related to beliefs and behavior in later relationships.

Freud suggested that we all grow up looking to reestablish the relationship with our parents that we had in our early years. Things don't seem to work

that way. But our understanding of what it means to have a secure base does have very early roots. So there seems to be a seed of truth in Freud's improbable hypothesis. Of course, relationships to parents are not the only influence on your ability to love well as an adult. Even if you were an insecure infant, there is a chance that you could get back on the road to good relationships. Over time, good friendships or a secure romantic partner might show you a different way and help you get you back on the road to happy, generous, fulfilling relationships. It wouldn't be easy, but nothing is set in stone. With the help of a secure partner, anyone can learn to give their partner and children the kind of love they themselves never received. Still, these results are strong support for his idea that there is a thread connecting life in your mother's arms to life in your lover's arms.