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## ATTACHMENT AND SEXUALITY

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The purpose of this paper is to discuss certain aspects of the relation between attachment and sexuality, two central motivational–instinctual systems that play a central role in human behavior and human relationships. In particular, I will address a number of issues dealing with the integration of the attachment and sexual systems in long-term intimate relationships. As Bowlby (1969) noted, attachment and sexuality “impinge on each other ... and influence each other. This occurs in other species as well as man” (p. 233). Despite the obviously strong links between attachment and sexuality, until recently there has been a paucity of literature on their relationship.

From the psychoanalytic side, neglect of the relation between attachment and sexuality was largely based on the assumption made by Freudian theory that the infant’s attachment to mother is secondary to the role she plays in drive reduction (primarily of the hunger drive) and to her role in providing the pleasures associated with stimulation of the infant’s erogenous (early on, oral) zones. According to this view, the infant’s attachment to mother is based largely on infantile sexuality, that is, on the drives she reduces and the erogenous pleasures she provides. Hence, there is no separate attachment system to relate to sexuality insofar as attachment was thought to be based on sexuality, that is, infantile sexuality. In short, there are no separable systems to be related to each other.<sup>1</sup>

From the side of attachment theory, Bowlby’s focus (and that of his early coworkers and followers) was on presenting a systematic and compelling case for the existence of an autonomous instinctual attachment system selected in the course of evolution that is not secondary to or derived from hunger reduction and pleasure from erogenous zones, and in elaborating his attachment theory. The explosion of research and theory that followed Bowlby’s work focused on the complexities and details of the attachment system and had virtually nothing to say about sexuality or the relation between attachment and sexuality. With the autonomy of the attachment system established, one

could then begin to explore the relation between that system and sexuality. Such an exploration is also facilitated by the additional factor of the extension of attachment research to *adult attachment* in which it is one's romantic or sexual partner who is most frequently defined as one's attachment figure.

A central thesis of this paper is that attachment and sexuality are functionally separable systems and, in certain respects, operate in mutually antagonistic ways. I further propose that the integration of attachment and sexuality is a developmental challenge that is met by different people with varying degrees of success depending, in part, upon their individual attachment pattern. I propose an alternative to Freud's (1912) oedipally based account of the unsuccessful integration of attachment and sexuality, what he refers to as the split between love and desire, as well as Mitchell's (2002) recent views on the same issue. With regard to the former, I argue that whereas an incest taboo is relevant to understanding the split between love and desire, there is little evidence that universal incestuous wishes play a central role in accounting for that phenomenon. And finally, I consider the relationship between attachment and sexuality from the perspective of findings on mate selection.

Before I continue, let me make some disclaimers and qualifying remarks. My formulations in this paper are more applicable to males than to females. A separate paper would be required to address female sexuality and the relationship between attachment and sexuality in females. I am aware that I am omitting mention or discussion of a wide range of factors—aggression, fantasy, narcissism, for example—that we know play an important role in human sexuality. My intention in this paper, however, is a limited one, namely, to describe the, so to speak, “default” general relationship that obtains between attachment and sexuality. In individual cases, this relationship will undoubtedly be complicated by the other factors I have mentioned.

I do not discuss the often murky topic of infantile sexuality in this paper; that material will be presented in a separate paper in progress. Finally, this paper does not deal specifically with the phenomenon of romantic love, including the role of idealization in romantic love. It should be noted here that when Freud uses the term love in his 1912 paper, it is clear from the context that he is not referring to romantic love, but something closer to long-term attachment or what he describes as the “affectionate current”; and when he uses the term desire, he is referring to sexual desire or what he refers to as the “sensual current.”

Let me begin my detailed discussion of attachment and sexuality by briefly describing Freud's (1912) and Mitchell's (2002) views regarding the split between love and desire. I will then contrast their views with my formulation of the relationship between attachment and sexuality and will try to show that the split between love and desire is best understood in terms of the vicissitudes of that general relationship.

Not surprisingly, given his theory of infantile sexuality and of the oedipus complex, Freud (1912) attributed the split between love and desire in men—an extreme expression of which he referred to as “psychical impotence”—to “an incestuous fixation on mother or sister which has never been surmounted” (p. 180). As Freud (1912) also stated, men suffering from “psychical impotence ... seek objects which do not lead to love in order to keep their sensuality away from objects they love” (p. 183). The result is that “where they love they do not desire and where they desire they cannot love” (p. 183). Freud also noted that even if the result is not actual impotence, the split between love and desire was far more widespread than may be commonly believed. In short, for Freud the split between love and desire, between the “affectionate and sensual currents,” so characteristic of unresolved oedipal conflicts, is mainly due to the persistence of incestuous wishes and to the need to keep such wishes diverted from objects that one loves.

In 2002, in Mitchell's book titled *Can Love Last?*, he observed that the split between love and desire is as prevalent today as it was in Freud's day, and he presented an account of that phenomenon

that rests on the central idea that people are motivated to “degrade romance” because of their need to render it secure, predictable, and safe—characteristics that he maintains are inimical to the experience of desire. Anyone doing clinical work would, I think, agree with Mitchell that the split between love and desire is quite common, certainly common among people who come for treatment. That it is not, however, limited to patients in treatment, but is more widespread, is suggested, for example, by observations in popular magazines that many long-term marriages are characterized by infrequent sex and, sometimes, no sex at all.

I want to demonstrate in this paper that the split between love and desire is best understood not in terms of universal incestuous wishes or in terms of a motivation to degrade desire, but in terms of certain aspects of the inherent relation between the attachment and sexual systems. Indeed, I think the split between love and desire can be restated as a split between attachment and sexuality.

Although there is much evidence for a universal or near universal incest taboo, there is little good direct evidence for the existence of universal incestuous wishes. The usual reasoning has been that, to quote Lindzey (1967), the

mere universal existence of the incest taboo ... constitutes convincing evidence for the existence of a set of general tendencies that are being denied. It seems unlikely that there would have been universal selection in favor of such a taboo if there were not widespread impulses toward expression of the prohibition. (p. 1055)

Essentially the same argument was made earlier by Freud (1917/1915–1916): “if living together dampens sexual desire toward those with whom one grows up, “an avoidance of incest would be secured automatically, and it would not be clear why such severe prohibitions were called for, which would point rather to the presence of a strong desire for it” (p. 210). He also writes:

It has been said that sexual inclination is diverted from members of the same family who are of the opposite sex by the fact of having been together from childhood. ... In all of this the fact is entirely overlooked that such an inexorable, prohibition of it in law and custom would not be needed if there were any reliable natural barriers against the temptation to incest. The truth is just the opposite. A human being’s first choice of an object is regularly an incestuous one, aimed in the case of the male, at his mother and sister. (1917/1916–1917, pp. 334–335)

But this is like arguing that the universal or near universal taboo against suicide constitutes adequate evidence for universal suicidal wishes and urges. Also, as Fox (1980) states, “we need not assume that we have laws against murder because we all have murderous natures, but only because *some* murder occurs and we don’t like that” (p. 8, ).

My main claims are: (a) attachment and sexuality are functionally separable systems, and (b) not only are they functionally separable, but in certain respects, they operate in antagonistic ways. I argue further that it is this mutual partial antagonism between the attachment and sexual systems, rather than forbidden incestuous wishes, that constitutes the foundation for the commonly observed split between love and desire. I will also show that over and above this general state of affairs, individual attachment patterns contribute to either minimizing or amplifying the split between love and desire. More specifically, compared to secure attachment, insecure attachment will be associated with a reduced likelihood of integrating attachment and sexuality.

## **FUNCTIONAL SEPARABILITY BETWEEN ATTACHMENT AND SEXUAL SYSTEMS**

Consider first the functional separability of the attachment and sexual systems. There is both psychological and physiological evidence supporting this idea. On the psychological side, as Holmes

(2001) noted, it is not uncommon to observe that partners can be intensely attached to each other with a relative absence of sexual interest and conversely, that people can be intensely sexually involved without either serving as an attachment figure for the other. These kinds of observations have led Fonagy (2001) to remark that “the facts that sex can undoubtedly occur without attachment and that marriages without sex perhaps represent the majority of such partnerships, prove beyond doubt that these systems are separate and at most loosely coupled” (p. 10). There is a good deal of evidence supporting this conclusion. For example, in a recent study (Farrugia & Hogans, 1998) on factors that contribute to the experience of intimacy in romantic relationships, attachment to a partner made the greatest contribution, followed by sensitivity of care giving. The authors note that “a surprising finding was that measures of sexual behavior ... did not make a unique contribution to intimacy in romantic relationships” (p. 11). This finding is especially noteworthy given the young age of the sample. It should be noted, however, that the sample was preponderantly female and that the authors did not report results for males and females separately. Nevertheless, the results tend to support the conclusion of Waring et al. (1980) “that sexuality is considered part of intimacy by most people, although it is not considered to be the primary component” (p. 4).

A reasonable hypothesis is, as Diamond (2003) stated, that “desire is governed by the sexual mating system” (p. 174), the goal of which is reproduction, whereas love—and it is clear that what Diamond means by love here is enduring attachment—“is governed by the attachment or pair-bonding system ... the goal of which is the maintenance of an enduring association” (p. 174) for the purpose of survival of dependent offspring. Diamond presents the intriguing and, I believe, likely to be correct, idea that adult pair-bonding or attachment originally evolved, not in the context of sexual mating but instead “exploited” the already existing infant–caregiver attachment system “for the purpose of maintaining enduring associations between adult reproductive partners” (p. 174). In other words, it is primarily attachment, not sex, that keeps adult partners together for a long period of time.

A number of other commentators have made a similar point. For example, in a book titled *The Chemistry of Love*, Liebowitz (1983) observes:

Biologically, it appears that we have evolved two distinct chemical systems for romance; one basically serves to bring people together and the other to keep them together. The first is [sexual] attraction. ... The second, which helps keep people together, is attachment. Attachment has more to do with feelings of security than of excitement. (p. 90)

There is intriguing evidence suggesting that the attachment and sexual systems are mediated by different biological processes. For example, the sexual attraction phase of a relationship is accompanied by a higher level of amphetamine-like substances, especially phenylethylamine, which is associated with heightened arousal and activity, whereas the attachment phase is accompanied by endorphin release, which is also associated with the formation of infant–mother affectional bonds.

There is much evidence that oxytocin and vasopressin play an important role in both maternal behavior and mother–infant bonding. Oxytocin facilitates the onset of maternal behavior in rats and facilitates the acceptance of an alien lamb in a nonpregnant ewe. With regard to the latter, prairie voles, who are monogamous, have different distributions of oxytocin receptors in the brain from montane voles, who are nonmonogamous. As Insel and Young (2001) note, “vasopressin receptors in the ventral pallidum are present not only in prairie voles but also in monogamous mice and primates, whereas they are absent in this region in related rodent and primate species that do not form pair bonds” (p. 133). They also note, “all the major aspects of monogamy can be facilitated in the prairie vole by central injections of either oxytocin or vasopressin, even in voles that do not have the opportunity to mate” (pp. 132–133). Furthermore, when an oxytocin receptor antagonist

is injected into the female prairie vole, the usual monogamous preference for a partner is blocked. All this and other evidence tend to support Diamond's (2003) reasoning that "If the biobehavioral process underlying romantic love [Diamond is clearly referring to an attachment bond here] originally evolved in the context of infant-caregiver attachment ... then the oxytocinergic mechanisms reviewed above should also underlie adult pair-bonding" (p. 181). To sum up, the above evidence suggests not only the functional independence of the attachment and sexual systems, but also specifically suggests basic links between adult pair-bonding or attachment and the infant-mother attachment system.

## **PARTIAL ANTAGONISM BETWEEN ATTACHMENT AND SEXUAL SYSTEMS: PSYCHOLOGICAL EVIDENCE**

The discussion above deals with the functional separability between attachment and sexuality. But what about claims regarding the partial mutual antagonism between the two systems? What is the nature of the antagonism and what is the evidence for it? Again, there is both psychological and physiological evidence. On the psychological side, in order for someone to serve as an attachment figure, he or she must be familiar and predictable. Characteristics such as novelty, unfamiliarity, and unpredictability are incompatible with the development of attachment to a figure with these characteristics. It is virtually an oxymoron to say that one's attachment figure is novel or unfamiliar. On the other hand, the intensity of sexual excitement seems to be reduced by familiarity and predictability and increased by novelty, unfamiliarity, and diversity—in the poet Byron's words, by "fresh features"—and even by forbiddenness and illicitness (Kernberg, 1995). Yet, despite this seemingly inherent antagonism between attachment and sexuality, one's adult attachment figure is most frequently also one's sexual partner. Thus, the individual in a long-term monogamous relationship is challenged with the need to integrate the contradictory "pulls" of the attachment and sexual motivational systems.

One needs one's spouse or romantic partner, as one's attachment figure, to be familiar, predictable, and available. Yet there is a good deal of evidence that predictability, familiarity, and availability frequently dampen the intensity of sexual interest and excitement. Thus, I am suggesting that, apart from any consideration of incest wishes, the antagonism between the attachment and sexual systems goes some way toward accounting for the split between love and desire, which, I propose, is essentially a split between attachment and sexuality.

There is a good deal of evidence in both animals and humans that diversity and unfamiliarity increase the intensity of sexual interest and that familiarity, propinquity, and availability dampen the intensity of sexual interest and excitement. A particularly interesting expression of the latter phenomenon, known as the "Westermarck effect" (Westermarck 1926/1894), is seen in the finding of a powerful reduction of sexual interest among people who have been reared together. There is much evidence supporting the Westermarck hypothesis. Talmon (1964) looked at 125 marriages in three well-established kibbutzim and found not a single case where two people reared in the same peer group had married. In a much larger study, Shepherd (1971) obtained the records of 2,769 marriages of people raised in kibbutzim. He found only 16 cases where people reared together in the same group married. Furthermore, in all 16 of these apparent exceptions, the children had been reared together only after age 6. In other words, of 2,769 marriages, not a single marriage occurred between people who had been reared together before age 6. In accord with the Westermarck hypothesis, Shepherd concludes that a "negative imprinting" with regard to incest is established during the first 6 years of life.

Thus, according to the Westermarck hypothesis and the supporting evidence, siblings reared together generally show markedly decreased rather than intense incestuous sexual interest in each

other. This is not to say that incestuous wishes may not develop under certain circumstances. It is rather to say that the evidence supports the Westermarck hypotheses that prolonged propinquity within the family generally dampens rather than intensifies sexual interest, at least among siblings and peers reared together. Incidentally, Freud was aware of the Westermarck hypothesis, but dismissed it in one sentence with the already noted familiar argument that a powerful incest taboo would not be necessary were it not for equally powerful incest wishes that are held in check by the taboo.

As for the relationship between diversity and unfamiliarity and sexual interest, one is reminded here of a phenomenon found in the animal kingdom that is referred to as the “Coolidge effect,” based on the following story:

One day the President and Mrs. Coolidge were visiting a government farm. Soon after their arrival, they were taken off on separate tours. When Mrs. Coolidge passed the chicken pens she paused to ask the man in charge if the rooster copulates more than once each day. “Dozens of times” was the reply. “Please tell that to the President,” Mrs. Coolidge requested. When the President passed the pens and was told about the rooster, he asked “Same hen every time?” “Oh no, Mr. President, a different one each time.” The President nodded slowly, then said “Tell that to Mrs. Coolidge.” (Bermant, 1976, pp. 76–77)

In many mammalian species, after copulating with a female and ejaculating several times, the male’s sexual activity wanes and then eventually ceases. However, if a new estrous female is introduced, the male immediately begins to copulate again. Symons (1979) writes that “while males of many species are indiscriminate in that they will copulate with any estrous female of their species, they are extremely discriminating in that they recognize females individually, and they are partial to variety and prejudiced against familiarity” (p. 210).

In citing studies with animals, I run the risk of being accused of equating animal with human behavior, reducing the latter to the former, and overlooking the influences of culture and learning. The fact is, however, that one need not be reductionistic or be guilty of a facile equation of animal and human behavior in order to recognize that we are part of the animal kingdom and that many of our general tendencies and behaviors are influenced by evolutionary natural selection. We do not seem to have much difficulty recognizing the aspects of the attachment system (e.g., proximity-seeking; the relation between a secure base and exploratory behavior) that cut across a wide range of species. It would be surprising if that were not also true of the sexual system.

Furthermore, the phenomena I have been discussing, in particular, the role of novelty and variety versus familiarity in degree of sexual interest, have been widely and independently recognized in humans by observers from Freud to Kinsey to Mitchell. Thus, Freud (1912) notes that it seems to be the nature of sexuality that an obstacle is required in order for strong sexual excitement and satisfaction to be experienced. And Kinsey, Pomeroy, and Martin (1948) report that extramarital sex seems to result primarily from an interest in a variety of sexual partners. Perhaps the strongest expression between diversity and sexual interest is the widespread prevalence of extramarital sex (Fisher, 1998). The relative decline of romantic love and sexual passion over time apparently is not limited to Western society. Thus, Shostak (1983) reports the comment of a !Kung informant: “When two people are first together, their hearts are on fire and their passion is very great. After a while, the fire cools and that’s how it stays” (p. 268).

That sexual interest and attraction are heightened by newness and unfamiliarity and dampened by familiarity is, in certain respects, highly adaptive in the original family situation insofar as it encourages the mating choice of “extraneous objects” (Freud, 1912, p. 181) and discourages the “choice” of a family member. However, to the extent that these characteristics of sexuality, that is,

intensification by newness and dampening by familiarity, continue to operate, they constitute potential threats to the stability and longevity of established long-term relationships. In such relationships, the originally “extraneous object” becomes a familiar one and others outside the relationship are now extraneous objects toward whom sexual interest is often directed.

Virtually all studies show that sex is more important at the beginning of a relationship, and later in the relationship, emotional support and other similar factors become increasingly important. There is also evidence that it takes about 2 years for all the major components of attachment (i.e., proximity-seeking, separation protest, safe haven, and secure base) to be operative in the relationship. These findings support Hazan and Zeifman’s (1994) and others’ claims that sexual attraction brings and holds the two adults together—Hazan and Zeifman refer to this as the “psychological tether”—long enough to provide an opportunity for an enduring attachment bond to form. However, the longevity of the relationship will, in large part, be determined by the couple’s ability to maintain that emotional bond in the face of the relatively decreased role of sexual attraction. A good deal of evidence suggests that sensitive and responsive care, not sexual attraction, is the most accurate predictor of relationship longevity (Kotler, 1985).

Another source of the partial antagonism between attachment and sexuality lies in the fact that insofar as one’s romantic partner becomes one’s attachment figure, *the woman takes on a role that is, in important respects, similar to the role played by mother*. This may trigger or intensify the incest taboo, which then makes it more difficult to experience the partner as a sexual object—she becomes too identified with mother. Just as Freud (1912) observed, the affectionate–attachment current may then be split off from the sensual-sexual current, which is safer and easier to experience with an “extraneous object” outside the home who is not one’s attachment figure. It is important to note here that while the incest *taboo* plays a central role in the above account, one need not invoke incest *wishes*.

To summarize, I am suggesting that independent of the positing of universal incestuous wishes, the “default” condition of a partial antagonism between attachment and sexuality goes some way toward accounting for the split between love and desire.

## PHYSIOLOGICAL EVIDENCE

As for the physiological evidence for the partial antagonism between the attachment and sexual systems, it has been found that high levels of testosterone not only increase sexual interest and activity, but, more directly pertinent to the claim of an antagonism between attachment and sexuality, that it also reduces attachment. Thus, men with higher baseline levels of testosterone marry less frequently, have more extramarital affairs when they do marry, and divorce more often (Fisher, 2000). Fisher (2000) observes that the negative relation between testosterone and attachment (and the concomitant inverse relationship between levels of testosterone and vasopressin and oxytocin) may help explain why individuals in long-term relationships express less sexual interest in each other. As another example of physiological contributions to the disjunction between attachment and sexuality, middle-aged men and women who were administered testosterone to increase sexual desire reported experiencing increased sexual thoughts and elevated levels of sexual activity, but did not report feeling increased romantic passion or increased attachment to their partners (Fisher, 2000, p. 415; Sherwin & Gelfand, 1987; Sherwin, Gelfand, & Brender, 1985).

In the animal kingdom, male birds, such as cardinals and blue jays, that are nonmonogamous and do not remain to parent their young have higher levels of testosterone, in contrast to monogamous male birds who have much lower levels of testosterone during the parenting phase. Further, when testosterone is surgically pumped into male sparrows, which are ordinarily monogamous and engage in parenting, they abandon their young and their female partners and court other females (Sullivan,

2000; Wingfield, 1990).

## **INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES IN INTEGRATION OF ATTACHMENT AND SEXUALITY**

Thus far I have described a general state of affairs, what I have referred to as the “default” condition, with regard to the relation between attachment and sexuality. However, we know that there are individual differences in the ability to integrate love and desire or attachment and sexuality. And, of course, these individual differences have a great deal to do with the idiosyncratic history of the individual and the unconscious meanings, defenses, fantasies, and so on associated with that history. Are there, however, general factors that help account for individual differences in degree of success in the integration of attachment and sexuality?

I propose that one central factor that contributes to these differences is the degree to which the individual is able to shift from early parental figure to current partner as his or her primary attachment figure. A relative inability to make that shift results in the greater likelihood that the individual will unconsciously equate the current partner with early parental figure—an equation that activates or intensifies the incest taboo and that, therefore, makes it more difficult to experience sexual feelings toward the current partner.

I propose the hypothesis that the more unresolved one’s early attachment relationship, which is characteristic of insecure attachment, the more one will react to a current partner as a stand-in for mother, and therefore, the less able the individual will be to experience one’s current partner as a sexual figure. And conversely, the more one has been able to resolve the early attachment relationship, the less “contaminated” by earlier reactions and patterns will be one’s current relationship. Let me elaborate and present some evidence.

There is little doubt that in the course of normal development, we progressively shift from parents to one’s romantic partner as one’s primary attachment figure. There is evidence that this shift takes place gradually over a period of time and that there is a lawful sequence of the attachment factors involved in this shift. As noted earlier, there is some evidence that it generally takes about 2 years for all four major components of the attachment proximity-seeking, separation protest, safe haven, and secure base to come into play fully in a romantic relationship (Hazan & Zeifman, 1994).

Although, according to attachment theory, it is generally the case that, to some degree, early attachment patterns are transferred to the current partner, I suggest that the transfer occurs in a more unresolved way in individuals with insecure patterns of attachment. Because securely attached individuals are more likely to have resolved attachment issues with parents and to have successfully negotiated the developmental shift from parent to current partner as primary attachment figure, they are less likely unconsciously to equate the current partner with parental figure and, therefore, are less likely to respond sexually to the current partner as a forbidden incestuous object. Contrastingly, almost by definition, avoidant and enmeshed or preoccupied individuals react to the current partner as if he or she were the parental figure.

Consider first the avoidant pattern. That one continues to be avoidant toward the current partner strongly suggests that one is continuing to react defensively, as if one were experiencing the current partner as rejecting or intrusive, similar to the way one experienced the early parental figure. One would expect that due to this unconscious equation of the current partner with early parental figure, the avoidantly attached individual will have greater difficulty integrating sexuality and attachment. Indeed there is a good deal of evidence suggesting that avoidantly attached individuals do tend to separate sexual from attachment feelings. For example, Feeney and Noller (1990) report that university students classified as avoidant are more likely to endorse acceptance of multiple relationships, limited involvement and commitment, and the use of sex for fun rather than as an



expression of emotional depth. They are also more likely to express jealousy of sexual infidelity rather than emotional infidelity (Levy & Kelley, 2005). Thus, avoidant individuals seem to be characterized by difficulty in establishing and maintaining an attachment bond as well as by a relative disjunction between sex and attachment.

Although they show a different pattern than the avoidantly attached, enmeshed preoccupied individuals also tend to react more to the current partner as if he or she were the parental figure. That is, they expect inconsistency in the availability of the current attachment figure and are preoccupied with fears of abandonment—just as they were in relation to the early parental figure. Thus, in common with the avoidantly attached, to the extent that they also unconsciously equate the current partner with parental figure, they are also more likely to have greater difficulty integrating sexuality and attachment. Evidence supporting this inference includes findings that, more than the securely or avoidantly attached, enmeshed preoccupied individuals report seeking support from someone other than their partners; they report frequent and intense love experiences; rapid physical and emotional involvement; fall in love more often; and report more “love at first sight” experiences (Feeney & Noller, 1990). If one can say that the avoidantly attached emphasize sexuality at, so to speak, the expense of attachment, one can correspondingly say that the enmeshed preoccupied emphasize attachment at the expense of sexuality. That is, their sexual behavior and experience seem to be largely in the service of repeatedly attempting to gain reassurance that they will not be abandoned.

There is a good deal of evidence supporting this hypothesis. For example, Davis, Shaner, and Vernon (2004) found that an attachment style characterized by attachment anxiety “was positively related to reports of interest in sex being higher when feeling insecure about the relationship” (p. 1083). They also found that attachment anxiety was significantly associated with different motives for sex (e.g., manipulation, stress reduction), but that “the largest of these associations were between attachment anxiety and the motives of reassurance ... and emotional closeness” (p. 1084). There is also evidence that women’s agreement to unwanted sex is often motivated by the fear of rejection and abandonment associated with anxious attachment (Davis, Follette, & Vernon, 2001).

In addition to the studies I have described, there is much clinical material that points in the same direction. Indeed, the original impetus for exploring these ideas as well as some of the formulations I have presented came from two or three patients with whom I have worked during the past few years. One patient reported that he chose a wife because she was everything his mother was not: reliable, supportive, and accepting—that is, unlike his mother, a good attachment figure (although, of course, he did not use that term). However, the very fact that she served as his attachment figure entailed an unconscious equation of wife and mother and led to an inhibition of all sexual feelings toward his wife.

## **MATE SELECTION: THE ROLES OF ATTACHMENT AND SEXUALITY**

I turn now to the issue of mate selection as another important arena for observing the relation between attachment and sexuality. Freud (1912) argued that although the “barrier against incest” forces one to turn to “extraneous objects with which a real sexual life may be carried on,” even extraneous objects “will still be chosen on the model (imago) of the infantile ones” (p. 181). In other words, the choice of a mate is determined by infantile sexuality, or more specifically, is modeled after the object of one’s incestuous wishes, which although formed early in life, persists into adulthood.

In a recent paper in the *Psychoanalytic Quarterly*, Moorhead (1999) argued that a template of the opposite sex parent plays a critical role in influencing the choice of a mate, which, if true, would “demonstrate the presence of sexual elements in early attachments” (p. 368) and preserve at least some version of the oedipus complex. Moorhead’s reasoning here is that if men are attracted to

women who are similar to their mothers, then there must have been “conscious or unconscious elements of sexuality in [their] early attachments” (p. 368). This would, in turn, tend to support, Moorhead argues, at least a revised version of the theory of the oedipal complex.

What are the mate selection phenomena to which Moorhead refers? There is evidence that both animals and humans tend to choose a mate who is similar but not too similar to those with whom they were reared. For example, in one study, quail preferred members of the opposite sex who were third cousins over siblings and unrelated quail (Bateson, 1982). And mice, too, show greatest sexual interest in mates of intermediate relatedness, often second cousins (Barnard & Aldhous, 1991; Barnard & Fitzsimmons, 1988). There is also evidence from bird and rodent species that these animals avoid mating with close kin but tend to choose mates who are similar in appearance. A similar pattern, referred to as positive assortative mating, is found in humans. That is, people tend to select mates who are similar to themselves (and therefore, presumably similar to family members) in physical, social, and psychological characteristics (e.g., Susanne & Lepage, 1988).

In a recent *New York Times* article on Iraqi marriages, reporter John Tierney (2003) notes that nearly half of the marriages in Iraq are to first or second cousins. He states that “cousin marriages were once the norm throughout the world” (p. 12) and reports in an interview with an Iraqi woman who responded to her uncle’s proposal that she marry his son by stating, “I was a little surprised, but I knew right away it was a wise choice. It is *safer* [my italics] to marry a cousin than a stranger” (p. 1). Tierney cites the work of an Iraqi sociologist, Ihsan M. al-Hassan, from the University of Baghdad, who reports that there is a 2% divorce rate among married cousins compared to a 30% divorce rate among other Iraqi couples. So, it is not just quail or mice, but also humans, who seem to prefer kin as mates. What is also striking—if the findings reported in the *New York Times* article can be taken as reliable—is the greater longevity of the kin as compared to the nonkin marriages. Finally, I was struck by the Iraqi woman’s comment that marriage to her cousin was “safer.” That is, her judgment that marriage to her cousin was a “wise choice” was very likely not based on sexual attraction to him, but feelings of safety that are associated with the familiarity of kin. In the present context, one can say that such feelings represent a solid basis for an enduring attachment bond.

Two questions arise with regard to the above findings: (a) How does one understand the seeming incompatibility between the claim (and supporting evidence) that a familial bond inhibits sexual attraction and the evidence that both animals and humans tend to select mates who are similar to family members?; and (b) Do the above findings support Moorhead’s claim that a template of the opposite sex parent plays a critical role in mate selection—which, in Moorhead’s view, “saves” a contemporary version of the oedipus complex?

Consider the first question. If a mechanism for incest avoidance is the inhibition or diminution of sexual desire that is associated with familial attachment, then why would one tend to select a mate who is similar to family members? Why not select as dissimilar a mate as possible? There are a number of answers to these questions that have been offered. For example, Bateson (1983) proposed a theory of “optimal outbreeding,” which predicts that animals are likely to select a mate with an intermediate degree of [genetic] relatedness so that the costs of inbreeding and outbreeding are balanced and minimized” (Moorhead, 1999, p. 360).

## **OPTIMAL SIMILARITY**

Bateson’s theory of “optimal outbreeding” constitutes a “distal” explanation of the phenomena in question. That is, it focuses on the ultimate evolutionary functions of the behavior. It does not, however, tell us what the “proximal” personal mechanisms and factors are likely to be. When we prefer as a mate someone who is similar to oneself (and therefore, to kin) along physical, psychological, and social dimensions, we are certainly not responding on the basis of distal selective

advantages, but rather in terms of proximal personal factors. What might these personal factors be? I would suggest that paralleling the distal factor of balancing of inbreeding and outbreeding costs is the proximal factor of balancing of sexual attraction and feelings of comfort, safety, and familiarity, the latter being especially important in increasing the likelihood for the eventual formation of an attachment bond. The choice of mate on the basis of optimal similarity to family members makes sense insofar as it permits *both* sexual feelings *and* attachment feelings.

Optimal similarity would be just what one would expect if choice of mate were made on the basis of an unconscious “best fit compromise” between sexual interest and potential for an enduring attachment bond. The choice of a mate who is very dissimilar to family members might maximize sexual interest, but render the formation of an attachment bond more difficult. Conversely, the choice of a mate who is too similar to family members might maximize the formation of an attachment bond but, in accord with the Westermarck hypothesis, make sexual interest and excitement more difficult. So, a choice made on the basis of optimal similarity seems to represent the optimal compromise between the somewhat conflicting “demands” of the sexual and attachment systems.

Does the evidence support Freud’s and Moorhead’s claims that a template of the opposite sex parent plays a critical role in mate selection? The findings cited by Moorhead that I have reviewed here indicate that mate selection in both animals and humans is influenced by general kin similarity and similarity to oneself rather than specific similarity to the opposite sex parent. If anything, the latter suggests more a narcissistic object choice than a choice based on a parental template. However, even if it could be shown that the opposite sex parent constitutes a template for mate selection, it would not necessarily follow that “sexual elements” represent the primary factor in the formation of that template. As I have argued, other factors, such as a sense of familiarity and comfort, common background, and a preexisting attachment bond, could well serve as critical components of that template. To assume that “sexual elements” represent the primary focus for the formation of the template begs the very question that one is weighing in considering the tenability of the hypothesis of the oedipus complex (including the contemporary version of it proposed by Moorhead).

I suggest the hypothesis that choices made on the basis of optimal similarity are more likely to be associated with greater relationship longevity and satisfaction. Although the relation between optimal similarity and relationship longevity has not been systematically investigated, Thiessen and Gregg (1980) cite evidence that similar mates show increased levels of fertility and longer, more stable relationships. I also suggest that securely attached individuals are more likely to make optimally similar mate choices than those who are insecurely attached. The latter, I predict, are more likely to choose mates who are either very similar or very different from family members. One can speculate that enmeshed preoccupied individuals will be more likely to choose mates who are very similar to family members and avoidant dismissive individuals are more likely to choose mates who are very different from family members. Or, perhaps, the issue is not only the actual degree of similarity between mate and family members, but also how similar or different the mate is *experienced* by the individual. One might expect that, in accord with their respective attachment patterns and strategies, the enmeshed preoccupied individual will experience his or her partner as very similar to early family members (particularly, the early attachment figure), and that the avoidant dismissive individual will experience his or her partner as very different from early attachment figures. All these predictions and speculations can be empirically and systematically investigated.

From a quite different perspective, there is still another reason that optimal similarity may constitute the best basis for mate selection. When the new object is very similar to parental figures, there is an increased likelihood that the relationship will be characterized by rigid repetition of early

maladaptive patterns with parent. However, when the new object is sufficiently similar, but not too similar, to parental figures, there is an increased probability that although old patterns and responses will be triggered, the new object will be sufficiently different from parental figures to permit mastery, reworking of old patterns, and the development of new patterns and a more gratifying relationship. So, from a somewhat different perspective, optimal similarity also emerges as the most adaptive basis for the choice of a mate.

To summarize, there is not much convincing evidence that, as Moorhead maintains, we are attracted to those who resemble the opposite sex parent and that early sexual feelings to the opposite sex parent play a critical role in influencing mate selection later in life. Rather, the evidence suggests that we tend to prefer mates who are optimally similar to oneself and to family members. I have argued further that mate choice on the basis of optimal similarity represents a “best fit” compromise between the somewhat conflicting “demands” of the sexual and attachment systems. That is, choosing as a mate someone who is not too similar to family members deals with the incest taboo and permits sexual feelings; and choosing someone who is not too different generates feelings of comfort and safety and facilitates the formation of an attachment bond.

## SUMMARY

In coming to the end of this paper, let me summarize the main points I have made:

Not only are attachment and sexuality functionally separable systems, but, in certain respects, there is an inherent antagonism between them. That is, they make conflicting motivational demands on the individual.

These conflicting demands present an integrative challenge to the individual, which is met with greater or lesser degrees of success by different individuals.

The split between love and desire, noted by Freud and as Mitchell points out, as commonly observed today, can be best understood, not in terms of the persistence of universal incestuous wishes, but in terms of the relative failure of integration of attachment and sexuality.

The relative degree of success in achieving integration is likely to be influenced by the individual's attachment pattern, which, in turn, reflects his or her ability to adequately differentiate between early parental and current attachment figure.

Patterns of mate selection, in particular, selection based on optimal similarity, reflect best-fit compromise between the demands of the attachment and sexual motivational systems.

Primary among the issues that remain to be discussed regarding the relationship between attachment and sexuality is the nature of infantile sexuality and its role in establishing an early attachment bond.

1. One occasionally finds in Freud's writings expressions of a point of view that are different from and that even seem to contradict central aspects of a theoretical position that he has explicitly formulated. This appears to be the case in the following passage:

Two currents whose union is necessary to insure a completely normal attitude in love have, in the cases we are considering, failed to combine. These two may be distinguished as the affectionate and the sensual current.

The affectionate current is the older of the two. It springs from the earliest years of childhood; it is formed on the basis of the interests of the self-preservative instinct and is directed to the members of the family and those who look after the child. From the very beginning it carries along with it contributions from the sexual instinct—components of erotic interest—which can already be seen more or less clearly even in childhood and in any event are uncovered in

neurotics by psycho-analysis later on. It corresponds to the child's primary object choice. We learn in this way that the sexual instincts find their first objects by attaching themselves to the valuations made by the ego-instincts, precisely in the way in which the first sexual satisfactions are experienced in attachment to the bodily functions necessary for the preservation of life. (Freud, 1912, pp. 180–181)

Freud proposes in this passage that an “affectionate current,” which is “older” and predates the “sensual current,” that is, infantile sexuality, is the basis for the infant’s “primary object choice.” He suggests that the sexual instincts attach themselves to an object already “chosen” by the “affectionate current.” In this passage, Freud, in effect, is proposing that the infant’s attachment to the caregiver is based on a system that predates and that, therefore, is initially independent of infantile sexuality. That system, characterized by the predominance of the “affectionate current,” is “formed on the basis of the interests of the self-preservative instinct,” a perspective that is entirely compatible with Bowlby’s emphasis on the evolutionary survival function of the attachment system.

We know that Freud eventually relinquished the concept of ego instincts and replaced it with his dual instinct theory of sex and aggression. Were he not to take this path and were he to pursue and further elaborate the theoretical position inherent in the above passage, particularly, the idea that the “older” “affectionate current” is the basis for the infant’s “primary object choice,” he would likely not have formulated his secondary drive theory as the basis for infant–mother attachment and perhaps would have anticipated important aspects of attachment theory.

In a recent book titled *Attachment and Infantile Sexuality*, Widlocher (2002) proposes the idea that whereas the attachment system underlies the formation of early object relations, infantile sexuality is characterized by the predominance of autoerotic fantasies. In other words, according to Widlocher and contrary to the usual understanding of traditional psychoanalytic theory, the pleasures derived from infantile sexuality are *not* the basis for the infant’s “primary object-choice” and for object relations in general. In my view, given Freud’s emphasis on the autoerotic nature of infantile sexuality, Widlocher is being more consistent than Freud in separating infantile sexuality from early object relations. Freud pursues the idea of the autoerotic nature of infantile sexuality to its logical conclusion when he decouples it from object choice. Indeed, Widlocher goes further. He essentially argues that insofar as infantile sexuality (including its persistence into adult mental life) is dominated by autoerotism and associated fantasies, it is inimical to realistic object relations. It will be noted that from a perspective and pathway that are quite different from the ones taken in this paper, Widlocher also arrives at the conclusion of an antagonism between (infantile) sexuality and attachment. This issue will be pursued later in a separate paper on the nature of infantile sexuality.

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