
ADDICTION TO "ALONE TIME" -- AVOIDANT ATTACHMENT,
NARCISSISM, AND A ONE-PERSON PSYCHOLOGY WITHIN A
TWO-PERSON PSYCHOLOGICAL SYSTEM

A PSYCHOBIOLOGICAL APPROACH TO COUPLES THERAPY[®]

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OVERVIEW

Comparisons have been made between severe avoidant attachment and disorders of the self such as antisocial personality, schizoid personality, and narcissistic personality. Each of these disorders, including avoidant attachment, can be grouped together as one-person psychological organizations. Individuals with these disorders operate outside of a truly interactive dyadic system and primarily rely upon themselves for stimulation and calming via autoregulation. The chronic need for “alone time” can take many surprising forms throughout the lifespan which directly impact romantic relationships.

Clinicians may well be aware of connections that have been made between attachment theory and personality theory. For instance, several articles have made the link between extreme angry/resistant internal working models and borderline personality organization (Agrawal, Gunderson, Holmes, & Lyons-Ruth, 2004; Barone, 2003; Bateman & Fonagy, 2003; Buchheim, Strauss, & Kachele, 2002; Downey, Feldman, & Ayduk; Dutton, Saunders, Starzomski, & Bartholomew; Fonagy, Target, & Gergely, 2000; Gold, 1996; Holmes, 2003; Holmes, 2004; Nickell, Waudby, & Trull, 2002; Rosenstein & Horowitz, 1996; Schmitt, Shackelford, Duntley, Tooke, & Buss; Stalker & Davies, 1995). Less has been written about avoidant attachment and narcissistic personality disorder despite the fact that connections are easy to make (Rosenstein & Horowitz, 1996; Schore, 2002a; Tatkin, 2005; Tweed & Dutton, 1998). Developmentally speaking, the borderline-angry/resistant group is often thought of as more relationship-oriented than the narcissist-schizoid-avoidant group. Object relations literature has described the former group as tending to cling and the latter tending to distance (Diepold, 1995; Gunderson, 1996; Masterson, 1976, 1981, 1985; Masterson, 1995; Masterson & Costello, 1980; Sigel & McGillicuddy-De Lisi; Silk, Lee, Hill, & Lohr, 1995; Solomon, 1989; Solomon & Siegel, 1997; van der Kolk, Hostetler, Herron, & Fidler, 1994). In terms of regulation of nervous system arousal, the first group tends to rely upon external regulation while the second group relies primarily on autoregulation. Viewed intersubjectively, both groups tend to operate within a one-person psychological paradigm.

Although there is much to say about the clinging group, this paper will focus on the group of individuals that distance. This group is acutely sensitive to significant others who are physically or emotionally advancing on them. The advance is automatically viewed as intrusive. This strong reaction to approach triggers a host of seen and unseen distancing defenses, all of which are psychobiologically reflexive and non-conscious by design. In other words, this exquisite reaction to being advanced upon is embedded in the nervous and musculoskeletal system and has its psychobiological roots in the earliest attachment relationship.

It is important to establish at this point that I am excluding from the distancing group pervasive developmental disorders, such as autism and Asperger's, as well as other "nature" related disorders such as schizophrenia and traumatic brain injury. Though there may be a diathesis (Burk & Burkhart, 2003; Schore, 2002b), or predisposing aspect to attachment and personality disorders, my intention is to focus on the "nurture" aspect to problems of chronic distancing.

One of the common characteristics of the distancing group is a natural gravitation toward "things" and a reflexive aversion toward a primary attachment figure, such as a spouse. The gravitation toward things – as viewed in the distancing group -- is an outcome of early parental neglect and dismissal of attachment values and behaviors. The avoidant's need to withdraw from primary attachment objects is euphemistically referred to as the need for "alone time." Alone time takes many different forms but almost always reflects a return to autoregulation. The metaphoric use of addiction may be appropriate as the avoidantly attached individual's adherence to autoregulation is ego-syntonic. The awareness of this as a disability is kept away through an aggrandized belief in his or her own autonomy. In actual fact, real autonomy never developed due to the considerable neglect that almost always pervades the history of this personality/attachment profile. He or she will not depend on a primary attachment figure for stimulation and soothing. Their credo is "no one can give me anything that I can't give myself, and better" or "I'd rather do it myself." Individuals in the distancing group primarily reside in a one-person psychological system that is, by definition, masturbatory.

AVOIDANTLY ATTACHED INDIVIDUALS AND DISSOCIATION

"I WANT YOU IN THE HOUSE BUT NOT IN MY ROOM... UNLESS I INVITE YOU"

Attachment researchers and clinicians continue to provide better elaborations on the attachment spectrum with the articulation of more subtle and useful classifications and subclassifications. So as not to mislead the reader, the avoidantly attached individual imagined in this paper is of the subtype that somewhat sets aside attachment but in the end values it or is somewhat dismissing or restricting of feeling of attachment and unlike fully dismissing individuals, these people have more exploratory and interactive capacities (Hesse & Main, 2006; Lyons-Ruth, In Press; Main, 1999; Main & Hesse, 1990). I am suggesting a connection between avoidantly attached individuals and the dissociative nature of autoregulation. In the absence of attachment behaviors initiated and maintained by the parent or parents, children will rely on an autoregulatory modality instead of an interactive one. In order to maintain autoregulation, the internal over-focusing on self-stimulation and self-soothing itself becomes a dissociative process. The state shift necessary to go into interactive mode requires the broadening of sensory processing and motor output. The autoregulatory state is more conserving of energy in this regard. It is also a state that suspends time and space which is why it is so comforting to neglected and abused children.

The Avoidant child is offspring to the dismissive/derogating parent who is unconcerned with attachment behaviors and values (Slade, 2000; Sroufe, 1985). This gives rise to a deconditioning of

proximity seeking and contact maintaining behaviors within the child. The child turns away from interactive regulation and toward autoregulation, which is a strategy for self-soothing and self-stimulation. Margaret Mahler (1975) discovered that a normal child in the practicing subphase can tolerate physical distance from Mother by maintaining a fantasy of her omnipresence. This provides the child with a necessary, albeit false sense of security for extended play within the outside world. The adult Avoidant is able to maintain a dissociative but stable autoregulatory strategy that depends on a fantasy of a partner's omnipresence. This pseudosecure tactic can metaphorically envisioned with the phrase, "I want you in the house but not in my room unless I invite you." (Tatkin, 2009) This sentiment expresses the Avoidant's need for continual but implicit proximity to the primary attachment figure minus the problem of explicit proximity which is experienced as intrusive and disruptive to the autoregulatory strategy.

For the Avoidant, external disruptions of the autoregulatory state are experienced -- to a greater or lesser degree -- as a shock to the nervous system. First there is the sensory intrusion aurally, visually, or tactically by an approaching person which may be experienced as startling, followed by a social demand to state shift from an autoregulatory-timeless (dissociative) mode to an interactive-realtime mode. One is more energy-conserving and the other more energy-expending. For the distancing group, both are experientially non-reciprocal, meaning neither state involves expected rewards from another person. In autoregulation, no other person is required or wanted. However, during the initial shift to interactive-realtime mode the other person is viewed as demanding with no expected reward or reciprocity.

To make this clearer, picture a mother-baby relationship that is dismissive-avoidant (mother-baby, respectively). The avoidant baby has reoriented away from interactive play with the mother to solitary play with toys. Mother's departures are less upsetting and her returns are less exciting. Her approach, however, is also less appreciated due to a chronic lack of attuned, reciprocal play. The mother's approach may be met with anger because it is not experienced so much as a reunion as it is an unwanted invasion of his time and space. If the baby could talk he might say, "I'm busy here, what do you want?" In contrast, expectations and capacities to shift states differ in mother-baby relationships that are preoccupied-ambivalent (respectively) and autonomous-secure (respectively). The ambivalent baby is fussier when mother is around, more upset when she leaves, and harder to calm when she returns. This baby expects more interaction, more proximity, and more contact maintenance with mother and has more difficulty shifting *out* of interactive-realtime mode and into autoregulation. Autoregulation is also more difficult to maintain over time. Mother's approach may be met with anger because it is experienced as a reunion with both a sustained memory *and* expectation of being left. The secure baby effortlessly shifts between solitary and interactive play with mother when she is present, becomes mildly to moderately upset when she leaves, and is quickly calmed if upset when she returns. If the baby is not upset, he is excited and happy when she appears and seeks proximity, physical contact and interaction with her.

While state-shifting comes easy to a securely attached child, it is significantly more difficult for children on either side of the attachment spectrum. For the ambivalent child (aka angry/resistant), *the shift out of interactive-realtime mode* is more difficult and may take more time to achieve. For the avoidant child, *the shift out of autoregulatory-timeless mode* is more difficult and takes longer to achieve.

CHILDHOOD EXAMPLE:

A little girl is playing in her room with toys. She is in a timeless and spaceless state of mind. This is a very enjoyable play state but one that is autoregulatory and one-person oriented. She is self stimulating via her imagination and interaction with her internal and external objects. Suddenly mother calls her to dinner. The call is a shock to her system as it is experienced as interference to her dissociative process. It requires a state shift whereby she must move out of a low-demand autoregulatory mode and into a high-demand interactive mode with others.

The child, once engaged interactively, may adjust and even enjoy the interactive process. However because autoregulation is the default position, she will soon move out of interaction and back into a dissociative autoregulatory mode once interaction is withdrawn. The shift back into interaction becomes a problem once again.

ADULT EXAMPLE:

Henry and Clare are on a drive for long vacation. Henry, who is driving the car, stares silently ahead while Clare becomes increasingly discomfited by the lack of interaction. Her bids for interaction fail. She begins to wonder why Henry isn't engaged with her. She is hard pressed to understand how he can manage to be so quiet for such a long drive while she struggles with the silence. Henry, on the other hand, is without discomfort because he is operating within a one-person psychological system wherein he autoregulates (dissociates). In other words, he is playing alone in his room with his toys and things and he is unaware that he is with another person. Claire on the other hand is painfully aware she is with another person and as such is feeling quite alone and quite possibly persecuted by the disengagement of her partner.¹

ANOTHER ADULT EXAMPLE:

Cindy and Bobby are upstairs getting ready for bed. Knowing that Cindy is interested in business ideas, Bobby reads her something he read in a magazine. A light bulb goes off in her head. Without saying a word, Cindy goes downstairs while Bobby is still reading to her. She grabs a pen and paper to write the idea down. She comes back upstairs to find Bobby who is now angry. She is surprised by his reaction and unaware of having done anything wrong. Bobby complains: she was rude for walking out of him while he was telling her something. He's angry because she seems to do this a lot in other instances. He feels

¹ It is important at this point to make a distinction between what is commonly thought of as disengagement and to what I am referring here. Ordinarily within the intersubjective field of a two-person psychological system, there exists a mutual, psychobiological "expectation" of moment-to-moment interaction. This interaction is primarily nonverbal. When nonverbal cues are missing, participants may mistakenly identify the problem as a lack of verbal interaction. This is especially so for more verbally oriented individuals. Research on the still face demonstrates a critical time period of nonresponsiveness by one member of the dyad and the negative effects of the nonresponsiveness on the other participant. The rhythmic beats of the exquisite interaction are dropped, so to speak, which creates a disturbance in the field such as a breach in the attachment system. Typically this breach is corrected and repaired quickly enough and often enough as to maintain a stable sense of attuned reciprocity.

dismissed and unimportant. Cindy, operating within a one-person psychological system, "forgot" that she was with another person. Never occurring to her to share her thoughts about the idea with her partner, she instead ran downstairs to protect the idea herself. Had she been oriented to a two-person psychological system, she would have used Bobby as her pen and paper by sharing her thoughts with him thereby recording them within his brain.

Cindy is alone all the time whether or not physically present with someone. This default position is ego-syntonic without awareness of its downside. She is not oriented toward to utilizing her partner as a brain into which her own brain can expand.

When Cindy realized what she had done she was shocked by her own behavior. She didn't understand why she would do such a thing even though it was quite natural to her. Though physically with Bobby while getting ready for bed, she was in a dissociative state, autoregulating and unaware that she was with another person at that moment. Bobby on the other hand was completely aware that he was with Cindy and so, for him, her walking away caused a momentary breach in the attachment system. The severity of the breach was moderated by her surprise at her own behavior.²

Attachment and personality organization involves biological substrates that alter neurophysiologic organization both on a structural and functional level. The predilection for autoregulation is not merely a preference, although it can be. Primarily it is hardwired into the nervous system.

SUMMARY

For the avoidantly attached individual the ball naturally rolls in the direction of autoregulation. This default position of autoregulation is mystifying to the more interactive partner. He or she cannot understand how the avoidant counterpart can forget him or her so quickly or suddenly seem so disconnected: engaged one minute and disengaged the next. The partner may feel as if they have been forgotten -- and in truth they have. The individual who has an avoidant history is in some ways better off than the more secure partner. The avoidant partner maintains a pseudosecure relationship that is internally based on a fantasy of his or her partner's omnipresence. The dissociative aspect of autoregulation screens out minor intrusions, such as bids for connection and interaction. In this sense the avoidant can maintain an unawareness of breaches in the attachment system. However, when partners approach them physically they inadvertently trigger a threat response within the avoidant partner that results in attempts to withdraw or attack. Once again, the avoidant has a very difficult time shifting states particularly from autoregulation to interaction.

² I should mention here that the autoregulatory mode is very similar to attention deficit disorder. Both situations involve ventromedial prefrontal inactivity which is necessary not only for regulation of subcortical processes but also in producing and maintaining a "witness" state of self-awareness. Without an observing self which is attributed to the ventral medial prefrontal cortex, there is a lack of awareness of time and space. The individual is literally unattended to and neglected and unaware of this impoverished albeit oceanic state.

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