Culture, Attachment, and Spirituality: Indigenous, Ideological, and International Perspectives

Al Dueck and Xu Honghong*

Abstract

Research on attachment has exploded in the West and, we submit, it is reflective of the indigenous value of independence, and in turn, it mirrors a spirituality that is highly subjective and personal. Since the early work of Bowlby (1969/1982; 1973, 1979) and Ainsworth and Bowlby (1991), thousands of studies have been conducted on the styles of attachment of the infant to her caregiver: secure, insecure, avoidant, or disorganized. Moreover, a strong connection has been made between secure attachment styles and healthy peer relationships, parenting approaches, adolescent self-confidence (Sroufe, 2005), adult romantic attachment, and adult spirituality (Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2013). Those with secure attachment styles reported more positive relationships with a personal God. However, the attachment research has been severely criticized as ideological for its Western biases (Rothbaum & Morelli, 2005; Rothbaum, Morelli, & Rusk, 2011). Might attachment be viewed differently in more relationally dense communities and societies? Consistent with the ideology of more individualistic cultures, Ainsworth assumed a secure attachment was the foundation for independence (Takahashi, 1990). But from an international perspective, there are reports from non-Western mothers who encourage dependence for the sake of socializing the emerging child into a more interdependent way of relating in a communal culture (True, Pisani, & Oumar, 2001). From the perspective of a cultural psychology of religion we ask whether religion and spirituality might be construed in more social and communal terms in more relationally saturated cultures/communities.

Keywords

attachment – culture – indigenous psychology – interdependence – spirituality

* Author Note: Al Dueck, Fuller Theological Seminary, USA; Xu Honghong, Peking University, Beijing, China. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Professor Al Dueck, School of Psychology, Fuller Theological Seminary, 135 N. Oakland, Pasadena, CA 91101 USA. Tel: (626) 584-5337; Email: adueck@fuller.edu.
Although many of the parameter settings of the attachment behavioral system vary in understandable ways with context, the system itself is recognizably the same.

Cassidy & Shaver, 1999, p. xiii

Bowlby was both a reformer and a scientist.... As a reformer, Bowlby was an unabashed advocate of what he regarded as the humane treatment of children; as a scientist, he assumed a posture of empirical inquiry without recognizing the ways in which his ideological advocacy influenced its assumptions.

Levine, 2014, p. 50

If attachment research had its origins in cultures that prioritize interdependent selves, and if those cultures enjoyed the scientific dominance that the West currently enjoys, it is possible that current theories would hypothesize that qualities like proper demeanor and accommodation, rather than autonomy and exploration, are universal consequences of security.

Rothbaum, Morelli, & Rusk, 2011, p. 169

Research on the attachment of infants to their caregivers has exploded in the West since its beginnings in the work of John Bowlby (1969/1982, 1973) and Mary Ainsworth (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991). Now its influence is ubiquitous in the fields of human development, parenting, adult romantic relationships, pathology, psychotherapy, trauma, and spirituality. At the time of this writing there are over 22,000 articles on attachment referenced in APA PsychInfo (2016). And, the hegemony of attachment theory with its associated experimental paradigm is widespread within the non-Western psychological community as well (Erdman & Ng, 2010).