



Disorganized Attachment Style And The Moderating Effect of The Inner Loving Parent on Closeness Terror: An Internal Family Systems (IFS) Approach

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Abbreviations

IWM: Internal working model; ILP: Inner Loving Parent; IFS: Internal Family Systems

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Abstract

This article briefly discusses attachment theory, precisely one of the four styles: *the disorganized style* (fearful-avoidant, unresolved state of mind), and *Internal Family Systems Therapy* (IFS), as an intervention. The linchpin of this attachment style is a terror of closeness (physical, sexual, psychological, or emotional), intimacy as frightening and confusing, fear of one's partner, the need for escape via emotional distance, fear of being hurt, and high rejection sensitivity. Fear of one's partner and heightened generalized interpersonal rejection are central tenants of this style, which is externalized in various problematic behaviors, designed to help cope with underlying terrors. The core terror is an emotional trigger that fuels and engages the avoidance cycle. Over the years and across relationships, this avoidance cycle can pose deep suffering in the adult's life and to those around them. The externalized behaviors, coupled with internal negative self-appraisal and coping tools, can create enormous difficulty in the uninformed adult with this attachment style.

The moderating effect of changing one's inner working model (IWM) from a harsh, critical, frightening, or bizarre inner parent - to becoming one's loving parent has the power to shift internal negativity, the terror of closeness as an ongoing emotional trigger, and profound relational insecurity towards seeking safety, leading from "Self" and ultimately nurturing those wounded parts into self-worth and safe love. According to Bowlby, everyone develops and internalizes an inner, mental symbol of their primary parent, specifically that early relationship. The significance of this IWM is that it lays on the ocean floor of the unconscious and guides all future relationships. It does not end there: this inner mental symbol can fuel and power individuals' expectations, leading to a desire to control and manipulate one's environment.

Fear is a dominant, core emotion in either of the three insecure attachment styles. Each style has a unique way of managing this fear in the form of psychological defense mechanisms or "polarized parts." With disorganized (fearful-avoidant) attachment, fear triggers the need for avoidance, which can keep the disorganized attached adult isolated, afraid, and confused about how to achieve and maintain intimacy. The "Slave-Exile" trap is a psychodynamic term that brilliantly describes both anxious-ambivalent ("Slave") and anxious-avoidant ("Exile"). Since attachment style is a behavioral system, fear as a behavioral motivator is worthy of exploration. The main suggestion for addressing the avoidance cycle is becoming one's Inner Loving Parent (ILP).

Introduction: A Brief Overview of Attachment Theory

Background of the Problem: the quest for love, intimacy, and safe closeness

Attachment Theory [1-3] is a behavioral system comprised of relational patterns and traits that are direct consequences of early caregiver treatment toward the infant. A child's awareness of their primary caregiver bond controls which attachment style they will acquire, secure or insecure attachment. A securely attached child (autonomous: self-directing, regulated) lives in a safe, trusting

environment provided by their caregiver. They know they are loved and safe to explore; if their caregiver leaves, they will return. When the caregiver returns, they are eager and comfortable in seeking comfort from her. This results in a comfortable return to their surroundings or activities. Alternatively, a child with an insecure attachment style can fit into either of these three subcategories: 1) Anxious-Ambivalent (preoccupied), 2) Disorganized (fearful-avoidant- unresolved), and 3) Anxious-Avoidant (dismissive). For the interested reader on the genesis of attachment theory, the starting place would be the work of child psychoanalyst Dr. John Bowlby [3],

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who, in 1949, studied small children and their reactions to separation and reunion with their mother / primary caregiver. His primary collaborator was developmental psychologist Mary Ainsworth and her colleagues [1,2]. Her initial study, the ‘*Strange Situation*,’ followed by years of studying the same phenomenon, culminated in the theory that the mother/child relationship affected their child’s bond, determining which attachment patterns the child would form.

Each of the four attachment styles, 1) Secure (autonomous, self-directing, regulated), 2) Anxious (preoccupied), 3) Disorganized (fearful-avoidant, unresolved), and 4) Avoidant (dismissive) is a channel toward a feeling, thinking, and behaving model that powerfully tells the story of one belonging to their family, society, and within themselves. A very brief summary of the genesis of the four attachment styles is that the “responsive” mother creates a receptive child that forms into a securely attached adult. The “ambivalent” mother makes a “coercive” child that develops into an anxious-preoccupied, attached adult. The “rejecting” mother creates a defensive child that becomes an avoidant-dismissive adult. The “frightening” mother makes a chaotic child that forms into a disorganized adult.

If one’s attachment style is disorganized (fearful-avoidant, unresolved), learning about their style of relatedness is a valuable opportunity to lean into one’s unconscious and intuition, a stimulus that supports a quest for answers, inspiration, and resolution. With the proper synthesis of exercises, questions for introspection, and principles of psychology, early childhood caregiver trauma is treated with curiosity, respect, and compassion. At the same time, addressing it through evidenced-based means is a practical approach to taking complete accountability for one’s adult life and choices. No one has to live their life according to a set attachment style. Instead, it leads the struggling person to a valuable solution not previously considered.

Statement of the Problem: Fearful-Avoidant Attachment Style and the Slave-Exile Trap (Terror of Closeness)

Approaching disorganized (fearful-avoidant, unresolved) insecure attachment from the perspective that fear is an emotional trigger introduces the core, original emotional issue with this category of insecure attachment style. The birthplace of this attachment style is a fearful, chaotic, or bizarre caregiver that creates deep terror and confusion in the child. Lack of safety, protection, and a haven from such a hostile, unpredictable early childhood environment, causes parts of the child’s self, not yet developed, to disperse. These parts scatter and form into different, extreme parts that take on intense roles. The persistent deep terror of approaching or being close to the caregiver, unaided, creates an avoidance cycle that can dominate lifelong relationships. In such a living environment, core relational needs are unmet and hijacked (taken over) by parts. Without an early, accurate intervention, these parts hijack the developing child’s system, reinforcing their attachment style over the lifespan. Therefore, the solution begins with learning about attachment theory, personal assessment of one’s attachment style, and the Internal Family Systems (IFS) approach [4-12] to attachment organization. A general overview of IFS is valuable because it explains how “parts” of the person are attached to their caregiver, their roles, symptoms, and extreme measures, and how those same parts similarly connect to others. Healing directly with those parts can create a more centered, balanced, securely attached, non-fragmented inner world for the adult.

Disorganized attachment means “*the breakdown of an otherwise consistent and organized emotion regulation strategy*” [13,14]. When a small, vulnerable, helpless, defenseless child is utterly dependent on a frightening, cruel, or otherwise dangerous caregiver, the terror of being hurt and abandoned threatens life and limb. This deep, intense fear of a parent, one who is supposed to be a haven but instead a source of profound, prolonged terror, becomes oxygen to the fire of fear to anything that awakens it. It can be a debilitating cycle of approach-avoidance (“*slave-exile*” trap) in existence orientation and attempts to socialize with others. In a childhood home with chaos, parental maltreatment, or dangerous parents, the child is imprisoned and at the mercy of its primary caregiver. It is an enslaved person trapped in the bizarre world of frightening, hurtful caregivers. The child’s torment is that their primary caregiver, what should be their secure source of love, safety, security, and met needs (trust), causes them to fear. It is primitive, chronic survival terror.

With these conditions, and where the parent is unpredictable, rejecting, and absent (physically, mentally, emotionally), a haven does not exist. What forms is the distrust in human contact, where the dilemma of being a “*slave*” versus “*exile*” is born. It is a process of classic conditioning, which is the effect of one’s early childhood treatment. The “*slave-exile*” dilemma [15-18] is originally a term from psychodynamic therapy and an excellent description of disorganized attachment. The “*slave*” refers to the high anxiety and desperation of the ambivalent attached. The *exile* refers to the dismissive, who is highly independent and fearful of being the “*slave*.”

Fear is a human emotion that various disciplines have extensively studied. Science can confidently point to the brain structures, chemistry, and processes of this powerful, intense, and sometimes mysterious emotion. Included in its many uses, such as keeping humans alive, safe, and alert to dangers, it can also be a very effective inner alarm system. When not overactive or distorted, a mutually trusting relationship develops when a person learns how to tame their fear and build an intimate relationship with it. However, when fear is unexamined, conditioned by severe trauma, and disconnected from oneself, fear can be a powerful emotional trigger that fuels the avoidance cycle in disorganized attachment. Through the attachment lens, the adult with disorganized attachment has a profound fear of getting close to others yet is perhaps equally terrified of being left alone. Disorganized (fearful avoidance) starts with a frightening parent, creating a confused/chaotic child, forming a disorganized-attached adult [14,19-30]. Humans have emotions and need to understand, express, and address them, especially any emotional conflicts. The value of emotional intelligence and resolving internal disputes is knowledge of self, improved relationships, more meaning in life, less risky behaviors [31], wisdom in engaging in vulnerable situations, and reasonable, stable expectations in relationships. Disorganized attachment creates a challenge for these tasks.

Disorganized Attachment: Empirical Evidence

Disorganized children seem awkward and inconsistent. Main and Weston (1981) discovered that several infants in the Strange Situation [1,2] displayed incredibly conflicted, complicated, and bizarre behaviors that did not fit the established attachment classifications [32]. When reunited with their parents, these unclassified infants demonstrated different disoriented, odd, or disorganized behaviors [25]. For instance, disorganized infants exhibit unusual behaviors, such as crying while coming close

to their mother's lap, not moving for some time, and falling silent [25,33]. The disoriented behaviors appeared related to the reunion with the mothers and the infant's conflicting feelings and fears when interacting with them [13,14,34]. Disorganized children exhibit these behaviors because their caregivers are "the source of fright as well as the only potential haven of safety" [14].

Disorganized or fearful attachment is a risk factor for psychological disorders and problematic behaviors [35] and appears connected to numerous mental health difficulties. Examples include attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) [22,36]; Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD) [37-40]; Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID) [24]; children's disruptive behavior problems [41]; domestic violence [42,43]; prolonged grief [44]; PTSD [27]; and anxiety [45]. The internal motivational system of the four adult attachment patterns fuels close, emotional parental bonds with one's children and is the same motivational system accountable for emotionally intimate bonds that develop in adulthood. Each attachment style exemplifies specific characteristics of the parent-child relationship, centering on the ability to articulate empathy and emotion regulation. Overall, the literature illustrates a robust correlation between childhood attachment and adulthood attachment relationships.

Internal Family Systems as Internal Attachment Therapy

Dr. Richard C. Schwartz, a family therapist, developed *IFS Therapy* (IFS) in the 1980s. He discovered, and verified through many years of clinical practice, that people could communicate with their subpersonalities ("different parts") through internal conversations. Through the open-minded exploration and encouragement of relating to these parts, similar to how family members communicate, he learned that in partnership, the client and therapist could influence the "Self" to mentally separate from the parts' perspective. Coupled with the client approaching its' parts with curiosity, nonjudgmental, and kindness, it creates a human relationship that heals. The internal healing relationship between the Self and parts is the core of IFS therapy, which has developed into an evidence-based treatment [4-12].

The Inner Loving Parent (ILP)

When we lead our inner family from the Self or as our Inner Loving Parent, we listen to injured internal parts, allowing them to unburden. When parts can unburden, the person can experience life guided by compassion, empathy, curiosity, and confidence. Becoming one's own inner loving parent creates a safe space for one's parts, without needing to get rid of those parts of themselves they wish were not there. The internal chat is modified to reflect a loving parent, and the adult starts to feel less extreme, more centered, playful, open, and confident. The voice, tone, attitude, and perspective of the Inner Loving Parent are in direct contrast to the voice of the Inner Critic and can be learned, applied, and practiced throughout the lifespan. A disorganized attachment style results from enduring years of relentless early childhood abuse and neglect, which is developmental trauma. This emotional disorganization (closeness vs. distance) creates acute inner turmoil that can remain unresolved for a lifetime. At the core of every person is the enduring essence, the Self, that has profound healing powers. Access to our most authentic part is achievable when parts have become unburdened (heard, valued, respected) and

feel a part of the family due to our befriending them. When parts unburden, it is because they experience more self-acceptance, emotional stability, and insight, which leads to personal growth [4-12].

Healing disorganized attachment through IFS includes accessing the part(s) that is fearful, avoidant, or protecting another vulnerable part(s). From the centered position of "Self" and using mindfulness tools to focus on that part, the person connects to their concerns, burdens, and needs. Achieving inner calm and centered awareness through an inner journey allows for the vital connection between one's Inner Loving Parent (ILP) and subpersonalities (parts). Stepping into this role, the adult starts with identifying the fear and function of the avoidance symptom. While focusing on this part's fear, exploring the actual story behind the symptom can be a way from vague sensing of the problem to actionable clarity. The stories can very well include preverbal trauma. An open, genuine, believing approach to that part nurtures the part of the self that dominates the disorganized attachment style part. To heal the relational wounds of childhood that birthed these parts, the ILP, the adult's "Self," becomes the corrective object. This Self (loving inner parent) provides the best possible relationship to teach those young parts about affect regulation, communication skills, and seeking safety. In altering the internal working model to become one's own loving 'parent,' the adult has a chance at a new beginning (a unique perspective and approach to attachment behaviors).

Conclusion

This brief commentary on attachment style, specifically disorganized (fearful-avoidant/unresolved), generated essential concepts for the interested reader. The various empirical findings emphasized the weight of childhood parental attachment on internal working models and the development of parts who take on extreme roles to cope. The discourse highlights how essential it is for all parents to consider their emotional bond with their children so they may cultivate an affirmative opinion of self and safe others. Recognizing unsafe, toxic, or dangerous people is equally vital and reduces emotional magnetism to such bonds. By default, early childhood is a highly vulnerable period for a child, and it is this crucial process (identity formation) that the child sees themselves only through the attitude, perspective, and regard of their parents. Parental attachment relationships hold considerable sway [31,46].

This article also encourages the adult with an identified disorganized attachment style to seek supportive counseling or nurturing support in learning to heal one's wounded parts through loving, compassionate self-reparenting. IFS is the preferred approach, as it directly approaches the person's parts that are the primary source of coping with adverse experiences. Other treatment approaches to addressing the attachment relationship include, but are not limited to, the genogram in family therapy, the *Adult Attachment Interview* (AAI), *Attachment-Based Family Therapy* (ABFT), and *Attachment-Based Behavior Therapy*. Any evidence-based approach incorporating mind-body-soul trauma healing can help treat the disorganized attached adult.

The attachment assessment results allow the adult to be more equipped to help their inner child recognize their difficulties. This recognition can lead to developing suitable plans to better the internal parent-child attachment relationship. There is a plethora of empirical evidence connecting disorganized attachment style to one's coping and emotional regulation.

The adult with a disorganized attachment style has “parts” that grapple with emotional dysregulation, identity, and fluctuations in their development. The outcomes of such emotional dysregulation are often expressed as psychological distress and displayed in challenging behaviors. Conversely, study outcomes show that securely attached children are apt to exhibit positive coping strategies and high self-esteem. The conclusions denote the risks and rewards for addressing one’s identity: securely through the lens of their inner loving parent or through a frightening, critical, or bizarre parent, acquiring destructive false beliefs and low self-esteem.

How people cope may differ depending on their attachment styles and experiences. People who are securely attached are more likely to use available coping resources. In contrast, insecurely attached individuals are prone to have difficulty cultivating effective coping strategies. This difficulty is due to their negative reappraisal and IWMs. Hence, exploring an *IFS* approach in investigating the function of internal parts as a coping tool -and the association between severe developmental trauma and the development of parts in a disorganized insecure attachment - can lead to a spiritual and practical exit from the slave-exile trap.

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