

**Detachment Styles in Adult Relationships:  
A Metamotivational Blind Spot in Relationship Theory**

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“Three blind men approached an elephant for the first time..... “Everyone knows the metaphor. We are in danger of making a similar oversimplification if we interpret that the course of a relationship is primarily determined by someone’s attachment style. Since Bolby (1969) and Ainsworth et al. (1978) pioneered attachment theory, there have been over 15,000 publications about attachment and attachment styles. However, an internet search on the keywords “detachment style” reveals very few. The term is unknown in social psychology. One possible reason for this could be because of a behavioral bias in defining relationship interactions. Therapists and authors commonly refer to “setting boundaries” as an observable behavior. But what allows a partner to do so constructively? What allows a couple to have a conflict involving beneficial negotiation or productive confrontation. Some psychological process must occur to enable the partners to have a felt sense of security despite the emotional intensity of the conflict. The expression “setting boundaries” distracts from understanding the psychological action that shifts us from a shared perspective to an autonomous one. It would be more accurate to say that we behaviorally set limits and we intuitively feel boundaries. Adult boundaries are better defined as having an autonomous mental frame of meaning and purpose. The frame needs to be strong enough to protect the person from their partner’s conflicting expectations or disapproval.

We all make intuitive models of other people’s minds in our own minds. In childhood our sense of attachment is largely physical. In adulthood it is much more symbolic. “Feeling close” is a metaphor for something that occurs mostly in the unconscious. We can feel close when we intuitively sense that the model of our partner’s mind values our emotional experience. It is safe to let our partner’s mind reinforce our experience and values. When we sense that our partner’s mind devalues our experience then we can feel threatened by shame. Psychological detachment occurs when our internal attention shifts back to our separate mental

frame. The detached state may endure a few seconds up to a few hours. Couples who remain brooding and detached for days will usually have serious problems. Couples who quickly reattach after a brief respectful detachment will usually thrive. Brief respectful detachment can enhance a relationship in two ways. First, it can convince someone that they have a stable partner with substance. Autonomy is attractive.

A second way respectful detachment enhances relationships pertains to maintaining identity. Josselson (1992) considered recursive detachment as a valid human need in adult relationships. She viewed emotional detachment as necessary for maintaining a healthy sense of well-being. This makes sense if we consider that humans have many reversing states. Immediate early genes turn on and turn off. Our sympathetic nervous system speeds up our heart rate while the parasympathetic system slows it down. We need exercise and we need relaxation. We need air and we need water. We want to feel connected with a sense of belonging but we also want to feel freedom and independence. We have a need for a separate individual identity not just connection. This all seems paradoxical except that we fulfill opposing needs at different times. The concept is called "bistability." Bistability means that an organism can have two reversing states within a single dimension. Consistent with this concept, Reversal Theory (Apter, 2007) delineates opposing metamotivational states that alternately reverse along four dimensions. The present author proposes that the states of attachment versus autonomy should be a fifth dimension within the theory. The process of detaching to an autonomous state can be viewed as a manifestation of a normal human need instead of an aberration. How well it is performed is the question. More than half of all marriages will end in a divorce. Can we assume that the other half are in bliss? Many marriage partners stay together in a numbed state due to financial fears or for their children. Only a minority of marriages keep strong attraction and affection over decades. The current author proposes that most marriages fail because partners cannot adaptively detach to a stable autonomous state. It is proposed that dysfunctional detachment allows resulting shame to condition passive inhibition into the partner's unconscious. Rewarding communication is strangled by passive inhibition when the only thoughts rising to consciousness are defensive (e.g. "What's the right thing to say?" or "What should I say?" When the affirming communication dies then partners feel increasingly

devalued. The resulting shame will then turbocharge the intensity of conflicts. It's as if the unconscious is saying "If I'm not important to him/her then at least I'm going to make sure I'm not going to be on the bottom of this argument!" This syndrome may recursively tighten until partners either revert to dissociation and/or divorce. It may be the biggest factor killing romantic relationships in Western society.

Therapists commonly refer to whether a person is "individuated." This term harkens back to the old trait school of psychology where behavior is viewed as determined by static traits. A Reversal Theory interpretation would be that an individuated person has the capacity to adaptively shift from attachment to autonomy. This shift can stabilize a person and keep their relationship safe from shame. It does so by adaptively shifting one person's psychological context away from depending on their partner's mind. This autonomy shift allows the person to feel supported by their own implicit meanings instead of being tortured by their partner's disapproval. These internalized meanings may involve fundamental principles that protect the future welfare of the relationship (e.g. inviolacy of boundaries, truth, fidelity to responsibilities, accountability or equity). When a person can shift to this kind of mental frame then defensive rage is unnecessary.

We all live in our own subjective virtual worlds. We make implicit models of the world as we go about our day. In our unconscious we model anticipated futures and dangers, models of other people's minds, themes of meaning and values. Psychological context is constantly being updated. For decades, psychologists have studied the updating of context with the P300 event related potential. It predicts whether we will learn from our mistakes (Duncan-Johnson & Donchin, 1977). When we are in an intimate relationship, the model we hold of our partner's mind ideally strengthens meanings in our own virtual world. When we intuitively perceive that we are loved in our partner's mind then our self-esteem is supported. When we sense that our partner appreciates what we value then our meanings are reinforced. However, when our partner disapproves or disagrees then we may feel shame. How much shame we feel depends on several factors.

People vary in how well they can autonomously create their own psychological context. Consequently, different people have different styles of

detachment. The present author has observed four common patterns from observing thousands of couples. Three patterns involve actual detachment and one is a kind of pseudo-detachment.

## **Secure Autonomous Detachment**

When facing disapproval, the partner can shift to a psychological context that enables a constructive perspective. He can reattach attention to meanings and values that are prioritized over his partner's mind. For example, the partner may want to avoid passively cooperating with some violation that could damage the future relationship. He may want to avoid setting a precedent. His felt sense of meaningful responsibility motivates and protects him from shame. His partner's possible disapproval is deprioritized. "Future sight" is intact.

## **Negative Enmeshment**

This pattern is really a form of pseudo-detachment. It has the outward appearance of detachment because the partner expresses a vehemently opposing perspective. However, on a deeper level the partner remains attached to the other person's perspective but in a combative way. They are driven by a narcissistic need to dominate and not be subjugated. Women often don't want to perceive themselves as being a footnote on a man's agenda. Men often don't want to perceive themselves as being weak in the exchange. In negative enmeshment, narcissistic fears dominate over transcendent values such as responsibility for future welfare. The partner may counteract these fears with rage which momentarily knocks back the fear. This style accounts for many of the vicious fights in deteriorating relationships. It can also be observed in many adolescents as they struggle to create a separate identity from their parents.

## **Dissociative Detachment**

A partner with a dissociative detachment style will tend to minimize or hide their differences from their partner. When facing disapproval, the partner may lie or discount their own authentic truth. This strategy can be highly adaptive when being raised by an abusive parent but it is deadly to a long-term romantic relationship. Over time, the partner will often depersonalize. It is often common

to hear: “I don’t know what I want.” “I feel like I’m suffocating. It’s like I’m drowning.” And finally: “I don’t know who I am anymore.” The accumulation of passive inhibition from dissociative detachment can produce what this authors calls “relationship depersonalization.”

## **Bimodal Detachment**

When facing disapproval or disagreement, a partner with a bimodal detachment style will alternate between dissociative and negatively enmeshed states. This can be described as “suck in, suck in, suck in, suck in, suck in....**blow !**” It is a common pattern. Many of these partners are trying to avoid being like an abusive parent who they experienced in childhood. They may counteract their own anger by dissociating it via subjugation until their accumulated shame explodes in rage. Their regressive rage may further convince them that they must redouble their efforts to avoid all conflict. The pattern is recursively reinforced.

There is a dearth of research on the importance of detachment in romantic relationships. Detachment is viewed by many as an undesirable aberration instead of a valid process. Perhaps this is because so many couples detach destructively. Vicious fights damage a relationship yet disciplined nonviolent refusals correlate with relationship health. The present author has observed this correlation in over a thousand couples who completed a specially designed questionnaire. Each partner was asked to imagine speaking refusal statements to their other partner (e.g. “I refuse to do what you’re asking.”) The partner was then asked to scale the degree of discomfort they noticed in their body. Partners who felt relatively comfortable with their refusals tended to have better communication and better relations with their other partners. Partners who were less comfortable showed more signs of heightened vulnerability. Very high discomfort also correlated with deceit and infidelity.

One interpretation of this observed correlation can be that troubled relationships make refusals more dangerous. This is probably true because frequent toxic fights can classically condition anxiety to associate with refusal statements. However, another interpretation is probably also true. In the observed sample, partners were often not symmetrically vulnerable. One partner could be relatively comfortable refusing the other’s expectations. The other partner might be anxious with refusals and perceive them to be “mean.” Family of

origin, trauma history, ADHD, bipolar status and personality temperament factors all weigh in for determining vulnerability. In the observed sample, when vulnerability was highest then communication was most impaired. This observation contradicts the notion that being vulnerable is a desirable goal. It may be true that increased vulnerability is a necessary passage on the way to enjoying intimacy. However, it is not a virtue itself (Schnarch, 20007).

Each of the detachment styles is worthy of study. There are discernable long-term consequences for each in different situations. A negatively enmeshing style probably accelerates loss of affection in a partner with a dissociative style. A dissociative styled partner may lose the ability to communicate thoughts and feelings around a more dominant partner. These effects will accumulate over time as partners classically condition each other's emotions. It is also true that each partner conditions their own emotions with their own behavior. When a partner with a dissociative detachment style resorts to a lie, his behavior reinforces the devaluation of his internal experience. This is how someone can gradually depersonalize (e.g. "I don't know who I am anymore.") Conversely, over a million people have used their own behavior to strengthen internal boundaries against addictions. Twelve step programs use behavior to reciprocally consolidate stronger values against their respective compulsions. The term "reciprocal consolidation" can be used to describe a form of backwards conditioning. Whatever value we fight for we will begin to prioritize in our psychological world. If that prioritized value is truth instead of approval then we will grow stronger boundaries. But if the value of comfort is prioritized over responsibility then we will gradually weaken our boundaries. In romantic power-sharing relationships our behavior during detachment will classically condition the emotions in our partners and ourselves. We change each other's brains as well as our own. This perspective of gradual classical conditioning is missing in most literature about adult relationships.

It would be valid to question whether detachment styles are merely a derivative of attachment styles. There is probably a strong association but definite conclusions should not be drawn without a lot more study. Attachment styles pertain to behavioral patterns while detachment styles pertain to momentary state changes. It can even be hypothesized that an adult secure attachment style may be a partial derivative of a secure detachment style. In a psychoanalytic

interpretation, a well individuated person would naturally have both a secure autonomous detachment style as well as a secure attachment style. The person's unconscious would know that there is a strong safety back up mechanism if things go south when attached. The current author has had some success in hypnotically training patients to autonomously detach with subsequent relationship improvement.

It can also be hypothesized that there may be a relationship between dissociative detachment style and avoidant attachment. Perhaps negative enmeshment correlates with anxious attachment and bimodal detachment correlates with disorganized attachment. If there is such a correlation between detachment and attachment styles then the question could be raised as to whether there is any utility in birthing a new concept. This author proposes that there still would be a therapeutic utility. Therapists already try to train patients to set stronger external boundaries to improve their emotional safety. But focusing on external behavior may be like looking for the dropped car key under the well-lit corner of the parking lot where there is good visibility. The problem is that the key was dropped next to the car in the dark corner of the lot. Training patients to psychologically detach and shift to an internal autonomous state may get us closer to the key.

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