

Attachment Theory: John Dollard and Neal Miller

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John Dollard and Neal Miller collaborated to develop the learning theory of attachment that connects theories from Sigmund Freud and Clark Hull to reconcile psychoanalysis and behaviorism. Their combined interests helped with the efforts to develop a unified theory incorporating psychodynamic theory, learning theory, and influence of sociocultural factors.

Dollard and Miller suggested that attachment becomes a learned behavior acquired through classical and operant conditioning. Dollard and Miller's learning theory of attachment stated that the cause for attachment between the child and the mother was because the mother fed the infant and not due to a profound and enduring emotional connection, as described by Bowlby and Robertson. Dollard and Miller suggested that infants are born without rules for processing information, and that information is added and rules for processing are formed by sensory experiences. Therefore, for attachment to occur, behaviors are learned rather than innate.

The learning theory of attachment consists of four processes: drive, cue, response and reinforcement. Drives are innate, biologically determined urges to attain goals or satisfy needs. They produce discomfort that impels humans to act when encountering a cue. A cue is anything that serves as a signal, triggering a behavioral response to reduce the drive. The more a child becomes successful at reducing the drive, the more likely the response to the cue is expected to occur.

According to Dollard and Miller, the basis for the learning of attachments is the provision of food. Before attachment is learned, classical and operant conditioning occur. In classical conditioning an infant gains pleasure by being fed. The unconditioned stimulus is food and the unconditioned response is pleasure, which refers to a learned response to the previously neutral stimuli. When the infant is being fed, it begins to associate the person providing the food with the food itself. The primary caregiver providing food is initially the neutral stimulus. Progressively, the primary caregiver becomes the unconditioned stimulus as the infant associates him/her with food. Attachment is learned when the infant gains pleasure in the presence of the primary caregiver, at which point, the primary caregiver becomes the conditioned stimulus and pleasure becomes the conditioned response. The infant therefore is regarded to form an attachment with whomever feeds it.

During operant conditioning, a behavior must be reinforced in order to be maintained. This requires multiple responses to find the one that is best suited to satisfy the drives. Infants cry when they are hungry, causing their mother to provide food, an example of a primary reinforcement. At the same time, they may feel the comfort and connection with their mother, causing a secondary reinforcement. When the infant perceives an uncomfortable state, the caregiver will act upon comforting it. Food will comfort the infant and, as a result, crying will be learned through negative reinforcement which would result in drive reduction. Because there was initial disturbance to the child's level of homeostasis, a drive was developed to fulfill that specific need, such as being fed, and bring the child to a level of relaxation. As time progresses, the child associates the pleasure of feeling comfortable by being fed with the primary caregiver.

The infant has therefore learned to cry in order to receive attention from the primary caregiver and will feel pleasure when the caregiver is present. At this point attachment has been learned.

Secondary drive hypothesis was a term used by Dollard and Miller to describe how learning is achieved through operant and classical conditioning. The theory explains how primary drives, such as eating when one is hungry, becomes associated with secondary drives, such as emotional closeness. Infants are not born with a boundless range of primary drives, nevertheless, their primary drives develop into complex systems of secondary drives as they continue to grow and encounter experiences. The secondary drive hypothesis states that attachment is a two-way process in which both the child and caregiver must learn. Negative reinforcement is the reason behind the occurrence as the caregiver feels pressured to comfort the infant, with hopes of reducing his/her distress.

Habit, a link between the stimulus and the response, is another important factor in the theory by Dollard and Miller, in relation to the secondary drive hypothesis. A habit is not only able to be formed between external stimuli and overt responses, but also between internal stimuli. During a child's development, certain responses will be more likely to emerge than others, this being attributed to what the child has perceived to have worked best in the past. The secondary drive hypothesis puts great emphasis on specifying the conditions under which habits are acquired, eliminated, or replaced in attachment formation while ignoring mutuality, sensitive caregiving and interactional synchrony.

Dollard and Miller are well renowned researchers who have received world recognition for their extensive publications and contributions of books and articles within the field of

psychology. Their learning theory of attachment aimed to clarify attachment formation as they sought to combine various behavioral and psychoanalytic concepts.

Further Reading

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