

1 *Review*

2 **A critical exploration of child-parent attachment** 3 **as a contextual construct**

4
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9

10 **Abstract:** Bowlby's [1] attachment theory has been employed as a broad and integrative framework
11 to explore human wellness across a range of disciplines. Attachment theory has even been labelled
12 one of the last surviving "grand theories" not to have been completely dismissed, replaced, or
13 extensively reworked (e.g., [2,3]). However, despite the ubiquitous nature of some of the theory's
14 fundamental tenets, there are always possibilities for new conceptual development, extension, and
15 revision. In this paper, we critically explore the idea of "context-specific" attachment within parent-
16 child relationships. We briefly outline critical assumptions and key areas of attachment and articulate
17 potential rationale, conceptualization, and relevance of contextual attachment.

18 **Keywords:** Attachment, parent-child relationship, parenting, contextual (context-specific), sport,
19 academic, hierarchical model

20

21 **1. Basic tenets of attachment theory**

22 Bowlby [1] drew upon the notion of behavioral systems (based upon the idea of biologically
23 evolved neural programs) to describe the processes by which human beings organize behavior in
24 response to inevitable environmental changes and demands to maximize chances of survival and
25 reproduction. According to Bowlby's [1] propositions, the biological function of the attachment
26 system ensures that infants seek out a stronger, wiser, and protective attachment figure for proximity
27 maintenance and protection, support, and care, especially during dangerous or difficult situations
28 (also see [4]). Normally, when individuals encounter environmental threats or stressors the
29 attachment system is activated to secure care or protection from selected caregivers. When these
30 systems are deactivated or when dangers/threats are not present, the attachment system is quietened,
31 and psychological energy can be devoted to exploration or other activities [1]. Specifically, obtaining
32 a sense of security is the goal of such attachment behavior (especially when encountering actual or
33 symbolic threat and/or where a reliable caregiver is not available or responsive) and the attainment
34 of "felt-security" deactivates further attachment-related efforts (see [5]). The process of experiencing
35 a sense of security can, over time, help to develop a prototypical "secure base script" around key
36 issues such as the possibility of coping with threat, obtaining care and support, and managing
37 negative emotion in future interpersonal relationships [6].

38 When a selected caregiver fails to meet needs for comfort and care during times of distress, then
39 the primary attachment strategy is unable to accomplish the goal of felt-security. In such cases, the
40 attachment system can be adjusted and certain secondary attachment strategies (e.g., hyper-
41 activation and deactivation) are likely to be activated in accordance with situational demands [7,8].

42 For instance, a person may adopt hyper-activation strategies, such as intensifying proximity seeking
43 efforts to secure love, care, and attention from caregivers and to deal with frustrated attachment
44 needs. Deactivation strategies (labelled “compulsory self-reliance” by Bowlby), on the other hand,
45 tend to involve the suppression of attachment needs. Normally, an individual learns to use
46 deactivation strategies to deal with threat and distress and to avoid the disappointment, frustration,
47 and pain that comes from lack of caregiver availability [1].

48 Ainsworth [9] initially conceptualized a child’s interactions with the primary caregiver into three
49 major attachment styles — secure, insecure-anxious, and insecure-avoidant. Such prototype-like
50 attachment styles reflect the most chronically accessible working model. Children with a secure
51 attachment relationship with the primary caregiver usually hold advantageous working models of
52 successful proximity-seeking and attainment of security because of predominantly attentive,
53 empathic, and supportive responses to emotional needs, especially during vulnerable moments.
54 Children who receive such secure responses from parents may consider themselves worthy of being
55 loved by others and feel confident and able to seek support and emotional relief from parents when
56 they feel upset, threatened, or stressed [10]. In contrast, a child classified as insecure-anxious tends
57 to access working models of attachment characterized by hyper-activation to acquire the goal of felt-
58 security. Typically, anxious children’s maladaptive attachment behaviors are the reflection of
59 inconsistent and lacking responses to seeking emotional support [10]. Children with insecure-
60 avoidant attachment models tend to deactivate security-seeking behavior and have typically
61 experienced significant neglect, rejection, and unresponsiveness in relation to proximity-seeking
62 attempts [10].

63 The research on attachment has diverged into two distinct research “traditions” [2]. These lines
64 of research are both derived from the assumptions at the heart of Bowlby’s theory [11], yet have
65 evolved according to underlying assumptions and measurement techniques of contrasting
66 subcultures [12]. Many of the distinctions between these two lines of enquiry are reflected in how
67 researchers have approached the measurement of attachment constructs. On one hand, are
68 researchers who “...tend to think psycho-dynamically, be interested in clinical problems, prefer
69 interview measures and behavioral observations over questionnaires, study relatively small groups
70 of subjects...” [12] (p. 27). On the other hand, are personality and social psychologists “...who tend
71 to think in terms of personality traits and social interactions, be interested in normal subject
72 populations, prefer simple questionnaire measures, study relatively large samples...” [12] (p. 27). Not
73 surprisingly, these different lines of research give rise to significant distinctions in terms of how
74 attachment research is conceptually underpinned, how attachment is measured and how results are
75 interpreted. We conceptualize contextual attachment characteristics in a social psychological sense
76 (self-report paradigm) as the basis for this article.

77

78 **2. Continuity, stability, and fluctuation of attachment styles**

79 The stability and change of internal working models of attachment have been broadly explored
80 and discussed in the literature (e.g., [13–17]). Understanding and exploring fluctuation in attachment
81 styles across the lifespan is conceptually challenging and highly complex. Initially, [18] argued that
82 attachment representations can be spontaneously operated by both processes of “assimilation” and
83 “accommodation,” where individuals not only integrate new experiences into existing mental

84 representations but also revise previous working models to accommodate current attachment
85 associative experiences.

86 For example, some attachment theorists (e.g., [14,19]) have proposed a “prototype perspective,”
87 suggesting that there are two separate working models (“prototype-like” and “current” working
88 models) that concurrently function to shape a person’s “phase-specific” attachment characteristics.
89 From this perspective, a person’s “current working models” can be revised and updated throughout
90 the lifespan when “present experiences” of attachment deviate from prototypical attachment beliefs
91 and knowledge that have been formed in childhood (a “prototype working model” is thought to be
92 rooted in a person’s infancy). In other words, while a person’s “prototypical working model” plays
93 a fundamental and prevailing role in retaining early attachment trends, such models can still
94 incorporate incompatible attachment experiences from later developmental phases and present
95 experiences, resulting in structural/qualitative changes in phase-specific attachment schemata. For
96 instance, when securely attached adolescents (who may have developed secure working models
97 during infancy and childhood) frequently experience being rejected or neglected by attachment
98 figures, their existing security may be compounded by these continually conflicting experiences and
99 memories [20] (p.112).

100 Such a view tends to be favored in contemporary research and is sensible to explain both the
101 fluctuation of attachment throughout the lifespan and the inconsistent research in relation to
102 continuity of attachment characteristics [20,21]. According to Fraley’s [21] meta-analysis of
103 attachment stability from infancy to adulthood, there is a moderate level of association (.39) between
104 attachment orientations across different developmental stages (especially up to 19 years old). This
105 result seems to be in line with other research (e.g., [22–24]) that has found around a moderate
106 correlation between early attachment security with parents and attachment in later adult
107 relationships, suggesting that prototypical attachment styles do not completely set the tone for
108 attachment through the lifespan.

109

110 2.1. Multiple working models in relational networks

111 With age, the expansion and extension of social and relational life can (but is not always) be
112 conducive to the formation of a wider variety of attachment bonds with multiple figures (such as
113 grandparents, older siblings, neighbors, relatives, close friends, teachers/coaches, coworkers,
114 romantic partners, and spouses) as subsidiaries for closeness and sources of security [13,25–28]. These
115 “attachment figures” tend to be relationship referents who serve some or all of the functions of
116 proximity maintenance, safe haven and secure base provision. However, in adolescence, compared
117 to other relational figures, parents remain important, chronic, and influential figures in the
118 attachment hierarchy [29–32].

119 Previous studies have suggested that the role of “principal” attachment figure can change
120 according to developmental level. For example, parents are the most likely primary attachment
121 figures until late childhood, whereas close friends and romantic partners can become the preferred
122 and prevailing attachment figures for many adolescents and adults [30,33–35]. This does not
123 necessarily mean that parents no longer serve as attachment figures per se, simply that individuals’
124 attachment hierarchies expand and develop, often meaning that different roles and attachment
125 functions (i.e., proximity, safe-haven, and secure-base functions) are served by different attachment
126 figures [29,30,36–38]. Furthermore, research (e.g., [37,39–41]) has suggested that individuals’

127 attachment-related needs may vary dramatically between relationships or relational domains (e.g.,
128 familial, friendship, romantic).

129 La Guardia et al. [42] explored within-person variation in attachment security across a range of
130 relationship referents (e.g., mother, father, romantic partner, best friend). Through a self-
131 determination theory lens, they contended that the satisfaction of basic psychological needs for
132 relatedness, autonomy, and competence in a given relationship would determine the extent to which
133 that relationship would reflect a secure attachment bond. If such patterns of need satisfaction varied
134 between relationships (and within-person), then it was hypothesized that there would be variability
135 in felt attachment security between relationships. Results indicated that variability of need
136 satisfaction in different relationships at the within-person level accounted for approximately twice as
137 much variance in attachment variables than between-person variability. Hence, people seem to have
138 different attachment security and models of attachment for the different attachment figures in their
139 networks, and the greater the satisfaction of specific psychological needs in a given relationship then
140 the greater the felt attachment security within that relationship. Such research strongly suggests that
141 attachment security varies across the network of close relationships that individuals develop.

142 Research into the fluctuation and stability of people's attachment security seems to be in line
143 with Bowlby's initial proposition: the formation of attachment characteristics seems to involve
144 interactions with multiple attachment figures, which are assimilated into and help to amend
145 experiences (or mental representations) with parents during early developmental stages and which
146 may have some enduring influence across the lifespan but still be open to change. Attachment
147 experiences with new relational partners are likely to serve as crucial antecedents for change in
148 relation to a person's attachment security and may help to form a widening pool of mental
149 representations within specific close relationships.

150

151 2.2. *How does attachment to multiple figures work?*

152 The issue of how relationship-specific, domain-specific and global attachment representations
153 work together in a hierarchy of working models within a relational network has been explored by
154 many researchers (e.g., [30,39,41,43–45]). For example, [41] found that individuals with insecure (but
155 not secure) attachment at the global level exhibited variability (in the quality and intimacy of social
156 interactions) across different relationship-specific working models, suggesting that globally insecure
157 individuals were still able to "find" security in certain relational bonds despite their global insecurity.
158 [45] also revealed that individuals reporting higher attachment security at global level did not
159 necessarily experience the same perceptions of attachment security across specific close relationships.

160 Overall et al. [39] have suggested that people's attachment representations in relationship
161 "domains" (e.g., family, friends, romantic relationship domains) seem to be abstract reflections of the
162 interactions between their "global" and "relationship-specific" working models. They
163 conceptualized that relationship-specific life events (e.g., divorces, break-ups, or affairs) would be
164 likely to have a much greater and direct impact on the attachment representations pertaining to the
165 specific "domain" in which they occurred and a lesser effect on other relational domains (i.e., security
166 in romantic relationships would be affected by divorce or affairs but friendships would not). Building
167 on previous findings (e.g., [30,37,41]), [39] data indicated a "multilevel" network of attachment
168 representations, in which global, overarching attachment schema (at the uppermost level) serve to

169 orchestrate and shape generally low cognitively-accessible or ambiguous information across
 170 relational domains and integrates the most consistent experiences. Whereas, at the midlevel tier,
 171 nested underneath global representations, are “domain-specific” models (like familial, friendship, or
 172 romantic relationships), providing more accurate differentiation of attachment-related beliefs and
 173 expectations across domains. Nested underneath these “domain-specific” models, it is proposed that
 174 relationship-specific attachment representations with multiple, specific figures (e.g., one’s mother,
 175 father, brother, close friend, and specific romantic partners) exist.

176

177 3. The idea of hierarchical attachment representations “within” specific relationships: Global, 178 contextual, and situational levels

179 Existing literature has devoted significant attention to exploring the relationship between
 180 multiple attachment representations across global, domain-specific, and relationship-specific
 181 hierarchies. However, less conceptual attention has been devoted to variation in attachment patterns
 182 “within” a single attachment relationship. [46] proposed a revised hierarchical structure to add an
 183 additional level of specificity that would be nested underneath the “relationship-specific” attachment
 184 models described above. Specifically, they claimed that a person’s attachment representations might
 185 vary from moment to moment, although individual interpersonal “moments” or interactions that
 186 happen within a specific relationship and somehow share common associations would rise to
 187 relationship-specific models. Hence, we believe that even within specific relationships, a multilevel
 188 structure might be proposed that includes a generalized model of the given relationship, a model of
 189 the given relationship as it is experienced across different contexts, and a state-like fluctuation that
 190 functions episodically (see figure 1).

191

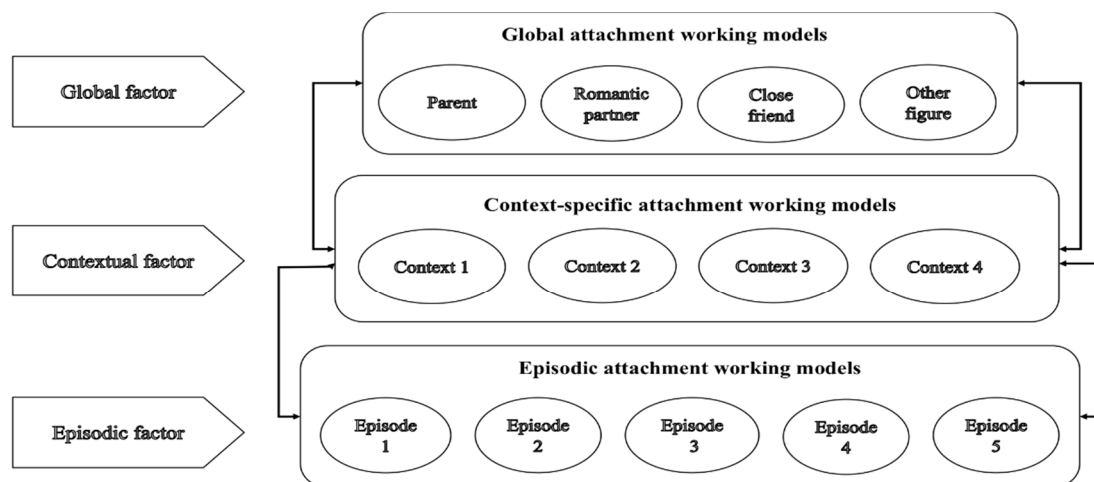


Figure 1 A schematic depiction of hierarchical structure of attachment representations within specific relationships

192

193 Based upon Gillath et al.’s research, transient attachment-relevant interactions or “moments”
 194 within a specific relationship, and at a given time, can form “episodic” representations at the lowest
 195 level of a relationship-specific hierarchy. Episodic factors may temporarily shape attachment
 196 representations (e.g., beliefs, goals, behavioral strategies) with a given relationship partner, thereby
 197 giving rise to episodic attachment representations. For example, being cheated on by a partner may
 198 cause a loss of trust for that partner, thereby momentarily enhancing attachment insecurity within
 199 the given relationship. At the next level, we suggest that it may be important to consider “contextual”

200 representations within a given relationship too, which might be referred to as a series of repeated
201 momentary episodes that cluster around a given context and seem to relate to meaningful contextual
202 variability within a given relationship. For instance, within a given parent-child relationship there
203 may be particular parenting behaviors attached to a given context (e.g., sport or school) that trigger
204 or shape individuals' attachment representations with the parent in that specific domain but not in
205 other contexts where interactions with the same parent occur. Furthermore, individuals' orientations
206 at a specific level within a given relationship may be shaped by the lower/higher order level (i.e., a
207 top-down and/or bottom-up effect) as postulated in previous hierarchical models (see [39,43,46–49]).

208

209 **4. Contextual “child-parent” attachment representations: Conceptualization and significance**

210 We believe that within a given relationship, individuals could develop “context-specific”
211 attachment schema in relation to a specific relationship partner. Context-specific schema could then
212 act as mediators to connect the global and episodic levels of specificity by means of top-down and
213 bottom-up operations. Research has indicated that throughout the lifespan individuals are capable
214 of developing various context-specific (e.g., school-specific, sport-specific, community-specific)
215 attachment bonds with a variety of relationship partners, including parents, close friends, teammates,
216 teachers, coaches, and romantic partners [13,25,50,51]. This is often because these significant others
217 are more accessible, attainable, and able to satisfy specific attachment functions (e.g., proximity, safe
218 haven, and secure base) in a given context and at a given developmental stage [29,36,38].

219 Context-specific representations of attachment might be referred to as schema in which one's
220 attachment representations with (for example) parents specifically vary by context (e.g., sport or
221 school) and are stored and experienced as such in a psychological and emotional sense. As mentioned
222 earlier, these contextual schemata could also involve interplay between contextual factors, global
223 structures (i.e., more prototypical schemas for parents) and episodic (i.e., episodic interactions from
224 moment to moment) representations. In other words, through extracting attachment-relevant
225 information related to a given context, a person's context-specific representations with parents could
226 reflect a variety of cognitively accurate and accessible knowledge relating to that context and which
227 is distinct from other contexts.

228

229 *4.1 Why should child-parent attachment representations vary across contexts?*

230 What kinds of contexts might have the capacity to shape and sculpt a contextual-level child-
231 parent attachment representation that differs from that representation in other contexts? To some
232 extent the answer to this question depends heavily upon the individual-difference, family, and
233 cultural factors. It has also been suggested that various significant others (e.g., parents, coaches,
234 teachers, colleagues) and their involvement with individuals in specific contexts (e.g., school, sport,
235 work) may vary by developmental level and gender (e.g., [52–55]). However, one might crudely
236 sketch out plausible “contexts” or “domains” that meaningfully connect to children's lives. For
237 example, many Western children's lives revolve around contexts such as school and/or
238 extracurricular activities like sport, art, or music [34,56–58] and previous research has shown a great
239 deal of interest in the mechanisms behind parental influence on wellbeing in specific contexts like
240 school and sport [52,59–62].

241 For instance, in the specific contexts of school and sport research (e.g., [63,64]) has strongly
242 suggested that parental belief systems in relation to a child's ability and their subject evaluation of
243 children's successes and failures serve as influential "contextual cues" that shape children's beliefs,
244 affective patterns, and behavioral responses in a given context. Environmental characteristics (e.g.,
245 highly public, competitive arenas, evaluation/reward systems, interpersonal complexity)
246 emphasized in contexts such as school or sport are likely to induce parental focus on specific goals
247 and expectations for their children and this has been shown to influence psychological outcomes (e.g.,
248 enjoyment, cognitive anxiety, attention, needs satisfaction) [65–67]. In short, there are reasons to
249 believe specific contexts have the capacity to fundamentally alter the quality of parent-child
250 interactions to the extent that they may constitute dramatic shifts in the nature of the child-parent
251 attachment relationship.

252 In the sporting literature, parents who create a "performance-oriented" motivational climate, in
253 which recognition, praise, evaluation, and value are attached to children's demonstration of ability
254 and superiority, are more likely to resort to controlling practices in their interactions with children.
255 Children exposed to this motivational atmosphere have been shown to experience thwarted needs
256 for autonomy, competence, relatedness, and associated negative emotions (e.g., anxiety, stress,
257 pressure), especially when they are not able to meet parental requirements [58]. These performance-
258 approach oriented motivational, cognitive, and affective cues could certainly activate and help to
259 foster sport-specific contextual child-parent attachment representations. However, these sport-
260 specific attachment representations need not necessarily be salient with the same parent in academic
261 or other contexts where secure attachment interactions may be found. This may be an example of
262 how motivational climates function as unique contextual cues to trigger context-specific attachment
263 schema within parent-child relationships.

264 Research in other performance contexts have identified that some types of parental involvement
265 in performance contexts can invade, interrupt, and be incompatible with fundamental aspects of a
266 caring bond. For example, [68] examined child-parent bonds in a sample of adults who had shown
267 early talent in the field of screen acting and had been considered "child celebrities" between the ages
268 of 6 months to 18 years. Of interest in this study was the nature of the self-reported parent-child
269 relationship in child celebrities whose parents had also served as their child's manager. Data
270 suggested that former child performers whose parents (it was almost exclusively mothers who had
271 fulfilled this role in the investigated sample) had served as their professional manager viewed the
272 parental figure as less caring and more controlling than did performers whose caregivers were not
273 their managers. The researchers argued that their data hint that the inherent role of managing a child
274 celebrity may conflict with many of the fundamental aspects of caregiving typically associated with
275 the parent-child relationship. For example, "managing" a child performer may require parents to
276 adopt a more emotionally distant and objective perception of the child (e.g., in the managerial role
277 perhaps the child is viewed as a "source of income" or as "the means to an end") that is incompatible
278 with features of a caring and secure parental bond. Some of these conflicts related to parental roles
279 have also been identified in parent-coach/child-athlete dyads in the context of sport (e.g., [69]). Hence,
280 there is reason to believe that certain contexts have the capacity to encourage and foster specific
281 representations of attachment in child-parent bonds that may or may not be carried over into other
282 contexts.

283 The concepts of parental conditional regard (PCR) and achievement by proxy distortion (ABPD)
284 have also been considered as maladaptive parenting practices, especially in the context of sport and
285 school [61,62,70–73]. These achievement domains seem to be potential platforms for the
286 demonstration of PCR and ABPD as context-specific socializing practices. Specifically, “parental
287 conditional positive regard (PCPR)” is thought to exist when parents are perceived to offer more
288 affection, recognition and attention than usual when the child meets their expectations and desired
289 aims. In contrast, “parental conditional negative regard (PCNR)” is when parents are perceived to
290 withhold or give less affection, love and esteem than they usual do when the child does not meet
291 their expectations. PCPR/PCNR have been identified as disruptive parenting practices linked to
292 significant psychological costs (e.g., introjected regulation, unstable self-esteem, negative emotions,
293 poor relationships and well-being) [62,74,75]. It may be that, as [75] have claimed, children
294 introjecting the desired behaviors and goals of their parents is a way of preventing the loss of parental
295 appreciation or increasing the attention and love they receive from parents. However, the desire or
296 pressure to avoid feeling unworthy or to obtain self-regard may also result in a dampened sense of
297 autonomy [76]. Given the fact of that PCR has been considered as a “domain-specific” socializing
298 strategy for bolstering contingent introjection [75,77,78], it is plausible that context-specific PCR
299 might serve as a contextual cue that elicits predominantly insecure child-parent attachment schema
300 in a given context.

301 “ABPD” may be another mechanism by which parents execute “context-specific” maladaptive
302 socializing practices in children’s achievement domains (especially in sport) (e.g., [61,70]). As an
303 example, sport can be a competitive and reward/evaluation-focused context in which the
304 demonstration of ability is important and emphasized by significant others. The unique characteristic
305 and atmosphere of sport is an open door to aggressive and ambitious parents, vulnerable to ABPD
306 pressures, especially when parents place their self-worth on a child’s success and failure in sport.
307 Objectification of a child is one of the mechanisms of parental “achievement by proxy” in Tofler
308 al.’s proposed ABPD spectrum. That is, parents may come to regard their children as an object, rather
309 than a person, as a means to indirectly satisfy their own needs for achievement. This controlling
310 parental behavior may drive a child to succeed to please parents or feel valued. However, it may also
311 lead children to feel guilt or lose self-value if they cannot meet parents’ expectations and
312 requirements. This introjection of parental objectification, thwarting one’s psychological needs for
313 autonomy, competence and relatedness in sport, could serve as an influential contextual cue to
314 activate insecurely “sport-specific” attachment representations.

315

316 4.2 Why might “contextual” attachment within child-paren attachment relationships matter?

317 Recent research exploring child-parent attachment and children’s wellbeing-related outcomes
318 has brought attachment theory research into the domain of specific “contexts” (especially
319 achievement domains — like school and sport) in children’s lives. For example, a few researchers
320 have examined the influence of father-child/parent-adolescent attachment relationships on school-
321 related outcomes [79], sport involvement [25], sport friendship [51], psychological need satisfaction
322 and motivation in physical activity [80], and the frequency of physical activity and physical self-
323 concept [81]. However, no research to date has explored variation in attachment characteristics (and
324 associated outcomes) within parent-child relationships, across contexts, and in relation to “episodic”
325 and “global” hierarchical orientations too. Existing contextual research (e.g., [79,81–83]) has mostly

326 used child-parent attachment patterns on a global-level to predict “context-specific” psychological
327 outcomes. It is interesting to speculate whether attachment schema in relation to a specific attachment
328 figure might be different across contexts and what the potential consequences of this might be.

329 Context-specific attachment representations may offer an interesting way of exploring whether
330 and how children are able to separate out, filter, or process parental attachment behavior,
331 differentiating across various context-specific working models. We do not know, at present, whether
332 children do this, whether it is helpful, how it operates, and what the consequences might be. Also,
333 according to our earlier conceptualization of a multilevel model (see figure 1), a person’ contextual
334 attachment working models would presumably share variance with global, episodic, and even other
335 context-specific models and the nature of this variation remains to be unraveled. Contextual
336 attachment representations may be promising ways to expand our understanding of parent-child
337 relationships in specific contexts and in general.

338 Theoretically, context-specific variation in attachment patterns offer interesting possibilities for
339 exploring other aspects of attachment. Girme et al.’s recent [84] study indicated that individuals with
340 greater fluctuation (variation in attachment security) within relationship-specific figures showed
341 decreased levels of relationship satisfaction and increased levels of relationship distress over time,
342 especially for “securely” attached individuals who “expected” greater stability within a specific
343 relationship. It seems that future studies could transfer this idea to within-relationship fluctuation by
344 context, exploring whether fluctuation of child-parent attachment security across contexts has a
345 similar detrimental effect on children’s wellbeing. For example, compared to secure or “organized-
346 insecure” attachment (i.e., anxious/ambivalent, avoidant) models, children with
347 “disorganized/disoriented” attachment patterns have trouble gauging whether proximity-seeking
348 and emotional support is a viable or unviable option on any level [85]. Such children are likely to
349 suffer from a breakdown of organized attachment strategies (e.g., primary, hyper-activation,
350 deactivation) because of disorganized, unusual fluctuation between anxiety and avoidance (e.g., [86–
351 88]). It may be that some children experience greater variation in attachment security and caregiving
352 behavior from parents across contexts and are consequently more likely to develop globally
353 disorganized attachment representations. Understanding how this variation in context-specific
354 attachment representations within specific parental relationships contributes to inhibiting organized
355 attachment models (and disrupts wellbeing due to contextual variation) would be an interesting
356 development. In this sense, it would facilitate new ways of examining how context-specific levels of
357 attachment might impact higher-order global levels. That is, perhaps context-specific variation within
358 a parent makes it harder for individuals to crystalize established generalizations about the given
359 attachment figure. This would suggest that contextual fluctuation is an inhibitory factor in higher-
360 order generalizations of attachment. Investigation of such new hypotheses would be permitted by
361 exploring the idea of contextual attachment variation.

362

363 5. Conclusion

364 What is the nature of child-parent attachment models across different contexts? What might the
365 relationships between episodic, contextual (e.g., sport-specific, school-specific), and global
366 attachment representations with parents look like in a hierarchical sense? What other possible
367 contexts (apart from “sport” and “school”) might exist within parent-child relationships and how do
368 we identify what a context “is”? Could the conceptualization of contextual child-parent attachment

369 generalize to other relationship-specific partners (e.g., close friends, romantic partners, teachers,
370 coaches), and if it could, what would contextual attachment mean within these specific relationships?
371 These major conceptual questions are considerably complex and further research is needed to
372 validate and explore “context-specific” attachment characteristics on many levels.

373

374 This article attempts to shed light on a potentially unexplored area of attachment theory by
375 forwarding the idea of contextual attachment within parent-child relationships. It should be
376 acknowledged that our initial discussions of plausible attachment contexts have been based on a view
377 of Western children’s lives and family structure. It should be noted that cultural differences between
378 children from all sorts of backgrounds (e.g., Western working and middle-class, non-Western, rural
379 eco-social environments) also merit significant discussion in relation to the concept of contextual
380 attachment. Understanding the various cultural and sub-cultural differences that exist in relation to
381 within-person attachment contexts will be an important avenue of future research. Perhaps, for
382 example, in other cultures it is not expected that a single attachment figure would be “involved”
383 significantly in the different contexts that make up children’s lives. Perhaps omnipotent involvement
384 in multiple child life contexts is more relevant to certain cultures than others, making context-specific
385 attachment more relevant to these cultures than others. Furthermore, perhaps within-person
386 contextual attachment variation applies to multiple attachment figures too. It may be that all
387 attachment relationships are context-specific and that children engage in fluid relational interactions
388 between different attachment figures and within-different attachment figures from context to context.
389 This would make the organization of attachment-related life a highly complex and fluid dynamic to
390 understand.

391

392 Furthermore, future researchers will also need to pay particular attention to the issue of how to
393 “measure” one’s “context-specific” attachment orientations with a given relationship. We noted at
394 the beginning of this paper that the attachment research has diverged into two major schools of
395 thought: the psychodynamic, clinical school, and the personality and social psychology school. Much
396 of the research that we have connected our ideas to in this paper stems from assumptions made by
397 the personality and social psychology tradition. We have advocated and relied upon assumptions
398 that lend themselves easily to a self-report paradigm and it would seem logical and expedient to
399 investigate context-specific attachment through the development of self-report items designed to tap
400 into within-person variation between contexts. However, it is also important to think beyond this
401 and to explore the possibility of exploring within-person attachment variation using assessment tools
402 that move beyond self-report and focus upon issues such as (a) deeper qualitative exploration of the
403 meaning and experience of within-person contextual variation, (b) how subconscious processing and
404 characteristics are orchestrated contextually, and (c) whether attachment figures themselves are
405 aware of the contextual fluctuation detected by children. It is important to evolve this area of research
406 in a broader sense than self-report alone would permit.

407

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415

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