CONTINUING BONDS IN BEREAVEMENT: AN ATTACHMENT THEORY BASED PERSPECTIVE

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An attachment theory based perspective on the continuing bond to the deceased (CB) is proposed. The value of attachment theory in specifying the normative course of CB expression and in identifying adaptive versus maladaptive variants of CB expression based on their deviation from this normative course is outlined. The role of individual differences in attachment security on effective versus ineffective use of CB in coping with bereavement also is addressed. Finally, the moderating influence of type of loss (e.g., death of a spouse vs. child), culture, and religion on type of CB expression within an overarching attachment framework is discussed.

Much attention has focused on the role of the continuing bond to the deceased (CB) as an integral part of successful adjustment to bereavement (see Klass, Silverman, & Nickman, 1996). Recent empirical literature suggests that CB is not invariably adaptive, however (Field, Nichols, Holen, & Horowitz, 1999; Field, Gal-Oz, & Bonanno, 2003). In this article, we introduce an attachment theory based perspective on CB—highlighting how it provides an integrative framework in explicating the normative course of CB and for distinguishing adaptive and maladaptive variants of CB expression. In this context, we attempt to answer criticisms directed against attachment theory as not capable of accommodating CB as an important component of adaptation to bereavement (e.g., Klass, 1999; Stroebe, Gergen, Gergen, & Stroebe, 1992).
Defining an Attachment Relationship

Before attempting to answer what constitutes CB from an attachment theory perspective, it is first essential to clarify what defines an attachment bond. The attachment behavioral system is an organized set of biologically based behaviors that is activated at times of threat, leading the individual to maintain or re-establish proximity to an attachment figure (Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980). This proximity maintenance function of the attachment system is assumed to have enhanced survival and therefore evolved.

According to attachment theory, children develop an attachment bond with their primary caregivers, despite individual differences in the quality of the attachment (Cassidy, 1999). Although attachment bonds between adults are considered to differ in important ways from the child–parent bond, in that both partners can serve as an attachment figure to each other (Hazan & Zeifman, 1999; West & Sheldon-Keller, 1994), adult–adult attachment bonds nevertheless are believed to serve similar functions for the individuals involved. Such functions are assumed to distinguish attachment relationships from other types of relationships.

Physical distance regulation as the set goal of the attachment system was emphasized in the earlier attachment literature (Bowlby, 1969). It became evident, however, that a child’s sense of felt security was contingent not only on physical proximity to the attachment figure but also on the attachment figure’s responsiveness to his or her emotional needs, especially when under stress (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978). In fact, in the case of older children and adults, physical distance regulation was of less importance in maintaining felt security given their greater cognitive ability to anticipate that their attachment figure would be capable and ready to respond when needed even if not currently physically present (Ainsworth et al., 1978). Specifically, with the internalization of early attachment experiences into internal working models in the context of increasing social cognitive development, the appraised availability or “psychological proximity” of the attachment figure was the important factor determining whether the individual experienced a state of felt security or distress. Thus, in being able to mentally evoke a representation of a responsive attachment figure, physical proximity to an attachment figure was no longer a strict requirement in order for an
individual to experience felt security. This concept of appraised availability of the attachment figure will be discussed further as a means for understanding CB and as a basis for understanding individual differences in the ability to make effective use of CB following the death of a loved one.

It should be noted however that the capacity to evoke an image of the attachment figure does not negate the importance of gaining physical proximity to him or her from time to time in order to stabilize a sense of felt security. In other words, an individual’s belief in the possibility of becoming reunited with the attachment figure when needed is a central aspect of availability (see Ainsworth, 1990; Kobak, 1999). In fact, as we elaborate below, death is psychologically disorganizing simply because it nullifies this possibility.

Attachment theorists have identified a number of functional criteria that define an attachment bond and that serve as a basis for distinguishing such relationships from non-attachment affiliative relationships (Fraley & Davis, 1997). Firstly, attachment figures are targets of proximity maintenance such that their perceived availability is more likely to elicit positive emotions whereas their perceived unavailability incites distress. Related to this, attachment figures also serve safe haven and secure base functions. Safe haven refers to the motive to seek out the attachment figure for contact, reassurance, and safety when under stress or threat. Perceived stress or threat activates a person’s attachment system and motivates him or her to establish physical or psychological proximity to the attachment figure and thereby regain felt security. The individual is said to have a secure base to the extent that he or she feels free to seek out novelty and face the unknown in knowing that the attachment figure is available. The secure base criterion is understood in the context of the exploratory system which Bowlby identified as a separate behavioral system that is dynamically related to the attachment behavioral system (Grossmann, Grossmann, & Zimmermann, 1999). The exploratory system motivates active engagement with the environment, thereby leading to the development of skills and competencies that enhance survival potential. Attachment system activation guards against a potentially maladaptive, unbridled expression of the exploratory system without concern for possible dangers by inhibiting expression of the exploratory system when the situation is appraised as threatening.
In effect, the exploratory and attachment systems operate in dynamic equilibrium wherein the extent to which the exploratory system is active is contingent on whether the environment is appraised as threatening alongside the appraised availability of the attachment figure (Ainsworth, 1972; Cassidy, 1999). Exploration is enhanced when the attachment figure is appraised as available and when the environment is safe. It is under such conditions that the attachment figure is said to serve as a secure base from which to explore. In summary, to the degree that the proximity maintenance, safe haven, and secure base criteria apply to a relationship, one can refer to it as an attachment bond.

Defining a Continuing Bond After Death

With the important defining features of the attachment behavioral system identified, it is now feasible to specify what is required to claim that an attachment bond endures following the death of an attachment figure. From an attachment theory perspective, CB must be understood in the broader context of and as an integral part of the phasic model of grief outlined by Bowlby (1980) following the death of a loved one. Although phasic models have been criticized in oversimplifying the normative course of adjustment to bereavement (Wortman, Silver, & Kessler, 1993), such models nevertheless have heuristic value in outlining more general trends in the grief course.

Bowlby (1980) argued that the bereaved did not fully register the permanence of the separation at the attachment system level in the initial period following the death of a loved one. In other words, from an ethological perspective, because the separation response is based on parts of the brain that evolved prior to the ability of mammals to comprehend the permanence of the separation following death, the absent loved one is registered as simply missing (Archer, 1999; Shaver & Tancredy, 2001). Consequently, in the early period following the loss, referred to by Bowlby (1980) as the “protest phase”, the bereaved individual displays a characteristic separation reaction that includes marked protest and distress with the aim toward re-establishing physical proximity to the attachment figure. This reaction implies that at an early stage following the death, the irreversibility of the loss is not fully understood at a deeper organismic level.
An important component of separation distress is a strong urge to search for the dead person (Archer, 1999; Parkes, 1998). Certain CB expressions displayed early on in bereavement are considered to be indicative of such searching attempts to reclaim the dead person. For example, the urge to visit places where the deceased formerly frequented as though he or she might be found, or a tendency to misperceive others for the lost attachment figure such as in seeing his or her face “pop” out of a crowd or mistaking sounds for the deceased’s voice or footsteps, reflect an attempt to re-establish physical proximity. Such phenomena imply failure to acknowledge the irrevocability of the loss. Other CB expressions are similarly indicative of disbelief in the permanence of the separation such as maintaining the deceased’s possessions as they were previous to the death, which may be interpreted as an expression of hope that the deceased may return. To the extent that these CB expressions can be understood as a reflection of the attachment system goal of seeking safe haven activated by the physical absence of the attachment figure, they can be taken as evidence for CB during this phase of grief. Because these expressions reflect failure to appreciate the permanence of the loss, they are also an indicator of grief non-resolution. These CB expressions can be expected to diminish markedly after the first few months following the death as the finality of the loss becomes more fully registered at the attachment system level. Consistent with this, a significant decline in reported illusions and hallucinations of the deceased was found over the course of the first year of bereavement (Grimby, 1993).

Attachment based strategies that characterize the protest phase are psychologically disorganizing because they are ineffective in reestablishing physical proximity to the deceased. Consistent with this, Barbato, Blunden, Reid, Inwin, and Rodriguez (1999) found that a significant percentage of those experiencing paranormal phenomena near the time of death involving the deceased (such as hallucinations) found these experiences to be distressing. Presumably, these fleeting encounters with the deceased’s presence served as a stark reminder of his or her absence in the bereaved’s current life. This painful awareness of the absence of the deceased in turn may incite a secondary goal to avoid reminders of the deceased in order to allay the distress. This may explain the relatively high correlation in the bereavement
literature between intrusion stress symptoms, such as illusions and hallucinations, and avoidance stress symptoms (e.g., Field & Horowitz, 1998).

As the protest phase goal of reestablishing physical proximity to the deceased attachment figure is repeatedly frustrated, the bereaved gradually comes to appreciate the reality of the permanence of the loss. Bowlby (1980) referred to this as the “despair” phase, given the depressive and withdrawn quality of the bereaved’s response in having now more fully registered the finality of the loss. Although the bereaved may no longer hold the belief that he or she will be able to reclaim the deceased, the bereaved’s response during the despair phase nevertheless attests to the fact that he or she has not given up the goal to reestablish physical proximity to the deceased. We emphasize here that belief in the permanence of the separation should be distinguished from the goal to re-establish physical connection. Failure to relinquish this goal despite no longer believing that it is possible to attain leads to a sense of hopelessness (Martin & Tesser, 1989), characteristic of the despair phase. The bereaved’s ability to make effective use of CB expressions in counteracting bereavement-related distress is likely to be limited during this phase since attempts to do so will tend to evoke a keen reminder of the deceased’s permanent absence. In contrast to the protest phase, however, the bereaved should report much less use of illusory or hallucinatory CB expressions, given his or her greater understanding of the irrevocability of the loss. In fact, attempts to avoid reminders of the deceased may be more prominent during this phase, given the painful awareness of the permanence of the separation.

Generally, in the protest and despair phases of grief CB expressions at best provide only temporary relief from the emotional pain of the loss. It is important to distinguish here between CB as a behavioral expression as opposed to CB as an internal state of felt security and connection. In fact, some CB expressions may simply represent an attempt to stabilize felt security. For example, excessive use of the deceased’s possessions may reflect a desperate attempt to recapture a sense of connection but the internal state may be one in which the bereaved is experiencing a keen sense of the deceased’s absence. Thus, it is important to know whether CB expressions provide sustained comfort in determining whether they are effective in coping with the loss.
To reiterate, during the despair phase, the bereaved is confronted with the discrepancy between the goal of regaining physical proximity to the deceased and the full recognition of the permanence of the separation. Internalization provides a mechanism for resolving this discrepancy. A model of mourning proposed by Hagman (1995), involving an integration of attachment theory with Kohut’s (1984) self-psychological perspective, is informative here. Central to a self psychological perspective is the concept of “selfobject”, which refers to functions that a significant other serves—as an auxiliary ego or extension of an individual’s self-system—in assisting the latter in maintaining affective and self-esteem equilibrium. Kohut believed that a child’s built-in “mirroring” selfobject needs to be validated as special and worthy, and “idealizing” selfobject needs to look up to and rely on a significant other as a source of comfort, inspiration, and guidance are never fully outgrown in development.

There is a close parallel between the function of the selfobject in affect regulation from a self psychological perspective and the role of the attachment figure in affording felt security (Schore, 2003). Both self psychological and attachment perspectives emphasize the importance of the role of an affectively attuned significant other in affect regulation. The two perspectives also emphasize the internalization of these regulatory functions allowing for greater capacity for autoregulation as a function of development. Finally, both perspectives acknowledge the continuing reliance on significant others for affect regulation throughout the life cycle despite greater self-governing capacity for affect regulation in development.

The loss of a selfobject as a result of the death of a loved one therefore is experienced as disorganizing to some degree, given the role of the deceased prior to the death as an important external source in affect regulation. Selfobject failure due to death will set in motion a process leading toward internalization wherein the selfobject functions met formerly by the deceased become incorporated into the self, thus enabling the bereaved to provide for himself or herself functions that originally were met by the other. Successful completion of this internalization process marks the end of mourning, as understood from a self psychological perspective (Hagman, 1995).

This movement toward internalization of selfobject functions may be reflected in CB expressions involving the use of special
objects that are symbolic of the deceased. These may serve an intermediary or “transitional” function (Winnicott, 1971) in providing the bereaved with a sense of connection to the deceased during the painful transition toward full acceptance of the permanence of the loss. Such objects eventually will no longer be required to serve this function once internalization is completed, although the bereaved may retain certain possessions as keepsakes.

Although one might argue that certain CB expressions are indicative of failure to relinquish the goal of reestablishing physical proximity, a central point of those who advocate CB as integral to successful grief adaptation is that it exists well on after the death and that it does so in the context of full acceptance of the permanence of the physical separation. From an attachment theory perspective, the nature of such expressions can be understood in the context of Bowlby’s (1980) final reorganization phase. In terms of the internal model of attachment to the deceased, the reorganization phase is marked by a change in the top-level goal to reestablish physical proximity toward revising the top-level goal so as to match the input of the new life situation (Archer, 1999). To the degree that the top-level attachment goal can be conceptualized as involving achievement of felt security obtained via psychological proximity as opposed to physical proximity, it is possible to accommodate CB as an integral aspect of grief resolution from an attachment perspective.

A number of CB expressions identified in the CB literature are consistent with this. For example, the representation of the deceased as an important role model, as a valued part of the bereaved’s autobiography, and as a lasting legacy in having left a permanent imprint on the bereaved that remains despite the death do not imply failure to accept the permanence of the physical separation. Such expressions should endure after the death of a valued relationship and thus constitute a central part of grief resolution in enabling the bereaved to preserve a sense of identity and meaningful connection with the past (Attig, 2001; Fraley & Shaver, 1999; Marwit & Klass, 1995; Neimeyer, 2000). In having internalized the deceased as an inner comforting presence, it is possible for the bereaved to be emotionally sustained by the mental representation of the deceased with less need for the physical presence of the other. More specifically, to the degree that the mental representation of the deceased can serve secure base and safe
haven functions, the bereaved should be able to make effective use of CB as a way of coping in affect regulation. Such phenomena would constitute evidence for CB as defined according to attachment theory. Consistent with this, Parkes and his colleagues (Glick, Weiss, & Parkes, 1974; Parkes, 1970) reported that a significant number of apparently well-adjusted widows and widowers in their bereavement studies reported an ongoing sense of presence of their deceased spouse as a constant companion at a point well on after the death. In effect, such sense of presence phenomena might be seen as serving a secure base function in enabling the bereaved to move toward a new life and confront the unknown in the context of continuing to feel psychologically “held” by the deceased. It should be noted that the sense of presence of the deceased as described here can be distinguished from the illusory and hallucinatory experiences indicative of the searching phase that do not imply acknowledgment of the reality of the loss nor are effective in stabilizing felt security. Similarly, anecdotal support for the use of the deceased for safe haven is shown in accounts of bereaved individuals conjuring up the image of the deceased under conditions of threat, such as when having major surgery (Stroebe et al., 1992).

In line with the above, Field and Friedrichs (2004) provided support for the effective use of CB expressions in mood regulation later on after the death in bereaved widows. A group of widows whose husbands had died more than two years ago completed a set of CB coping and mood measures four times each day at 3-hour intervals for 14 successive days. A positive within-person relationship was found between the extent to which the widow reported using CB expressions in coping with the loss and positive mood within each 3-hour interval. In other words, these widows reported experiencing more positive mood at times when making greater use of CB expressions than in times when making less use of such expressions, suggesting that these expressions were effective in mood regulation. On the other hand, a group of early bereaved widows who had lost their husbands within the previous four months were unable to make effective use of CB expressions in coping. Thus, consistent with an attachment theory perspective on the role of CB in providing felt security, CB expressions constituted effective ways of coping in mood regulation but their effectiveness was moderated by time since the death. Presumably, only later on
after the death when enough time had elapsed for these widows to reorganize their internal working model of attachment to the deceased in accord with the reality of their new life situation were they able to make effective use of CB expressions in coping.

In summary, an attachment theory based perspective on CB highlights the importance of understanding it developmentally. Although the evolving nature of CB to the deceased is widely recognized in the CB literature (see Klass et al., 1996), attachment theory more explicitly identifies the types of changes that occur in CB expression during the post-bereavement period. In the early phases of loss, CB expressions that reflect the goal to regain physical proximity to the deceased are more prominent. Such expressions at best provide only temporary respite from the pain of the loss in that their use also serves as a reminder of the deceased’s absence. With repeated failure to recover the deceased, however, the bereaved’s schema of attachment to the deceased is gradually revised to accommodate to the new reality brought on by the loss. As part of this, the goal of regaining physical proximity is modified to the goal of stabilizing felt security through maintaining psychological proximity. CB expressions based on evocative memory that reflect internalization should remain present during this later reorganization phase. To the degree that these expressions are present and effective in mood regulation at a point well on after the death, this implies that CB is a part of healthy adaptation.

**Adaptive and Maladaptive CB Variants**

Beyond providing a schema for the normative course of CB expression, attachment theory offers a framework for identifying maladaptive variants of CB expression based on their prominence over time. Under the assumption that the goal to regain physical proximity to the deceased is relinquished over time, excessive use of CB expressions that are indicative of refusal to give up this goal at a later point after the death would constitute bereavement adaptation failure. In effect, prominent use of such expressions reflect failure to revise the working model of attachment to the deceased in accord with the changes in the external world brought about by the loss. From an attachment perspective, such failure of revision lies at the heart of complicated grief (Bowlby, 1980; Horowitz, 1990). On the other hand, a similar relationship should
not be found for CB expressions that are indicative of the reorganization phase because these are assumed to imply acceptance of the permanence of the physical separation. It therefore follows that CB expressions should not be treated as all alike in their implications for adjustment. In this regard, a tendency in the CB literature to imply that CB expressions are unconditionally adaptive can be criticized in ignoring possible negative implications of CB (see Field et al., 1999; Fraley & Shaver, 1999).

Consistent with this attachment theory based perspective, Field et al. (1999) clarified the importance of distinguishing “type” of CB expression in determining whether CB is adaptive. Specifically, they found that CB expressions that were more closely linked to failure to relinquish the goal of reestablishing physical proximity involving hanging onto the deceased’s possessions or excessive use of special belongings of the deceased for comfort, assessed at 6 months post-loss, were associated with more severe concurrent grief-specific symptoms and greater distress expressed in their verbal behavior during a monologue roleplay in which they were instructed to speak to their deceased spouse. In contrast, obtaining comfort through evoking fond memories, a CB expression more clearly linked with the reorganization phase, was predictive of less distress in the monologue roleplay. This study thus provided preliminary evidence for the attachment theory based position that CB should not be treated as unidimensional and that its relation to grief resolution is contingent on its type of expression.

This study also provided support for the maladaptive consequences of excessive use of the deceased’s possessions as a way of coping in showing that these CB expressions were predictive of less of a decrease in grief-specific symptoms over the course of 25 months post-loss. In other words, these results suggested that such involvement with the deceased’s possessions was not simply a correlate of concurrent grief symptoms but in fact actively interfered with grief resolution. Possibly, such involvement with the deceased’s possessions served to reinforce ruminative tendencies, a factor that is known to prolong grief-related distress (Nolen-Hoeksema & Larson, 1999). An inordinate psychological investment in the deceased’s possessions may also leave less personal resources available for taking steps toward constructing a new life, known to be an important task of bereavement (Stroebe & Schut, 1999).
It should be mentioned here that although CB expressions that are most prototypic of failure to relinquish the goal of regaining physical proximity to the deceased are especially likely to be associated with maladaptive adjustment when prominent at a later point after the death, such as hallucinations or excessive use of the deceased’s possessions, to some degree the inordinate use of any type of CB expression later on after the death may be indicative of poor outcome. In other words, frequent use of CB in coping with the loss at a later post-loss point, independent of type of CB expression, may reflect continued preoccupation with the deceased that is associated with failure to emotionally accept the permanence of the physical separation. Consistent with this, Field et al. (2003) found that extent of CB usage at 5 years post-loss, beyond type of expression, was related to more severe grief.

Attachment theory also provides a framework for explaining maladaptive variants of CB expression as a function of individual differences in attachment security. The adult attachment literature identifies anxious-preoccupied and avoidant-dismissive variants of insecure attachment (Mikulincer, Shaver, & Pereg, 2003). Anxious-preoccupied attachment, derived from experiences with primary caregivers in childhood, involves uncertainty regarding the availability and responsiveness of the attachment figure leading to compensatory efforts to confirm a sense of security through excessive care-seeking behaviors that are carried forth into adulthood. Thus, anxious-preoccupied individuals are more likely to have developed an emotionally dependent relationship with their spouse and consequently are more apt to experience the loss with pronounced alarm (Field & Sundin, 2001; Neimeyer, Prigerson, & Davies, 2002; Parkes & Weiss, 1983). Anxious-preoccupied individuals also are known to possess deficient affect regulation abilities in handling stress, such as use of ruminative and emotion-focused avoidant coping strategies (Mikulincer et al., 2003). The extreme distress precipitated by the loss may therefore interfere with the integrative process of revising the mental schema of attachment to the deceased required to accommodate to the reality of the loss. As a result, the anxious-preoccupied bereaved individual is more likely to report continued use of CB expressions indicative of failure to give up the goal of regaining physical proximity to the deceased. For example, excessive involvement with the deceased’s possessions may represent such refusal to give up the goal of reestablishing
physical proximity to the deceased even though knowing that the loss is irrevocable. Bowlby (1980) associated the anxious-preoccupied type of insecure attachment with a “chronic” grief pattern, involving pronounced distress and helplessness in response to the death that is not tempered over time. Consistent with this, Field and Sundin (2001) found that conjugally bereaved individuals who were more anxiously attached in the past relationship with their spouse exhibited more elevated psychological symptoms over a five year post-loss period. A focus in future research would be to show that failure to relinquish the goal to regain physical proximity to the deceased, as reflected in CB expressions that are indicative of this, mediates the relationship between anxious-preoccupied attachment and bereavement-related symptomatology.

Avoidant-dismissive attachment is thought to evolve from an attachment history wherein the caregiver was consistently unresponsive to the child’s attachment behaviors (e.g., crying, clinging), which eventually resulted in “defensive exclusion” of attachment-related feelings (Mikulincer et al., 2003). To the extent that such defensive exclusion interferes with processing the implications of the loss, including the working through of painful thoughts and feelings connected with the loss, the avoidant-dismissive individual may fail to revise and integrate his or her schemas of attachment to the new reality of life without the deceased. Moreover, because these individuals may be limited in their ability to make effective use of CB expressions in coping with the loss given their tendency toward defensive exclusion, they will not have this coping resource available in helping to modulate the distress of confronting their new life situation.

In summary, attachment theory provides a comprehensive framework for distinguishing normal from complicated grief status as understood in the context of the CB to the deceased. Firstly, grief status can be understood as a function of type of CB expression such that those who continue to report prominent use of CB expressions well beyond the early months following the death that are indicative of the searching phase, and thus reflect failure to integrate the loss, can be regarded as having complicated grief. Secondly, those with normal grief will indicate a greater capacity to make effective use of CB as a way of coping in a fashion that is not possible for those with complicated grief. Finally, attachment security should be an important risk factor in
adjustment to bereavement such that those with anxious-preoccupied attachment will show greater prominence of CB expressions indicative of failure to emotionally accept the loss whereas those who are securely attached will make more effective use of CB indicative of the reorganization phase in coping with the loss. Avoidant-dismissive individuals, on the other hand, are likely to make limited use of CB expressions, given their use of strategies that serve to deactivate their attachment system. Such individuals may therefore lack an important resource for coping with the loss that consequently may impact negatively on their adjustment.

**Additional Considerations**

There are a number of additional considerations that need to be addressed in determining the adequacy of an attachment theory based perspective on CB with respect to its generalizability. Because attachment theory is an ethological approach that attempts to identify and explain universal patterns of response that are common to a species, the normative and individual difference aspects of CB outlined above should be evident among all relationships that meet the functional criteria of an attachment relationship. An attachment theory approach should also be capable of accommodating cross cultural variability in CB expression.

**Type of Attachment Bond**

An important issue to address in arguing for the universal applicability of attachment theory in explicating CB is to verify that it can identify similar patterns of response to loss across different types of attachment relationships, such as whether it involves the death of a parent, spouse, or child, as well as differences within the confines of a universal set of principles. Klass (1999) argued that attachment theory overextends itself in applying the template of separation of a child from its mother to other relationships. In particular, he has questioned whether attachment theory is an adequate framework for explaining CB in parental grief and whether differences in the type of loss, such as involving a child versus a spouse, can be accommodated within this overarching framework.
In order to accommodate differences in the types of CB experiences contingent on whether the loss is a child versus and spouse or parent within an attachment theory framework, it is necessary to understand the attachment system in relation to the caregiving system. The caregiving behavioral system is considered to constitute a separate system from the attachment system, although one that is behaviorally connected to the attachment system (George & Solomon, 1999). The main function of the caregiving system is to provide protection to the child as opposed to the goal of the attachment system toward seeking protection by maintaining proximity to the attachment figure (George & Solomon, 1999). It therefore follows that the death of a child should activate the caregiving system such that the parent will attempt to recover the lost child in the service of protection. A dominant concern then is whether the child is safe. Although both the attachment and caregiving systems apply in any attachment relationship, the extent to which the caregiving system is expressed can be expected to be contingent on whether the attachment relationship is that involving a child versus an adult attachment relationship such as with a spouse. Moreover, the degree to which the caregiving system is activated by the death of a loved one is likely to have direct bearing on the types of CB expression that predominate. In parental bereavement, positive CB expressions would thus tend to focus on assurance in knowing that the child is safe, such as in the hands of God. Negative CB expressions may reside around communications from the child blaming the parent for not having protected him or her and experiencing profound guilt in having been an inadequate caregiver.

In his work on parental grief, Klass (1993) has documented how bereaved parents may treat the deceased child in a demi-godlike fashion, in viewing him or her as all that is pure and ideal, and as a guide or role model. One might argue that this runs counter to the position advocated here that the child is mentally represented as vulnerable and the recipient of care. The nature of CB is likely to be partly contingent on the child’s age at the time of death, however. Older children may serve as important models for the parents in a way that younger children are less likely to do so. Certainly, in the case of infant death, it would be inappropriate for a parent to treat the deceased as a model for self-regulation in a fashion that is reminiscent of an attachment figure.
Individual differences in attachment security are known to play a role in caregiving such that anxious-preoccupied attachment is associated with a tendency toward overprotection of the child and a tendency to attribute danger to situations that do not warrant such inference whereas avoidant-dismissive attachment is associated with a tendency to dismiss or devalue the child’s attachment needs and thereby deactivate their caregiving system (George & Solomon, 1999). Presumably, this will have important bearing on how the parent responds to the death of their child, including attempts to maintain CB. For example, role reversal is an important dimension in determining anxious-preoccupied attachment (Main, Goldwyn, & Hesse, 2002). It is possible that anxious-preoccupied bereaved parents will be more likely to cast their deceased child into a caregiving role as reflected in the types of CB expressions exhibited in relation to the child. Clearly, differences in the nature of CB, depending on whether the loss is that of a child, spouse, sibling, or parent, is something that should be investigated in future research.

Culture and Religion as Moderators of CB

Cultural and religious world views on death and the existence of the soul are likely to have an effect on the likelihood of continuing to express ways of maintaining a bond to the deceased that might normally be considered as indicative of the searching phase. In fact, this might call into question an attachment theory based perspective outlined above. An important way of distinguishing the two however is that CB expressions indicative of the searching phase reflect a disorganized strategy in a way that is not the case for CB expressions that are a reflection of a religious worldview. The disorganized quality of the former is clearly evident in illusory CB expressions involving a fleeting sense of recovering the deceased that is immediately followed by the painful awareness of the deceased’s absence. From a cognitive viewpoint, these illusory CB expressions can be understood as being indicative of a hyperactive attachment system in which, given the high accessibility of mental representations of the deceased, input that has only a partial resemblance to the deceased is likely to be misinterpreted as the deceased. Such selective processing effects are similar to that found following exposure to a traumatic event in which intrusive
images, thoughts, and feelings are commonly experienced in the period shortly following the event (Horowitz, Field, & Classen, 1993). The intrusive nature of these mental contents reflects their lack of integration within an overarching meaning system. On the other hand, the CB expression involving a concrete sense of the deceased’s presence that is linked to the religious belief that the deceased is in heaven and is aware of the bereaved would not be indicative of dissociation in that it is fully compatible with the person’s dominant belief system. In other words, CB expressions linked with culturally and religiously prescribed beliefs in the continuing existence of the soul are an integral part of a cohesive meaning system. As an aside, it should be noted that sense of presence and hallucinatory CB experiences might be interpreted by those with pre-existing religious beliefs as evidence for the existence of the soul continuing on after death. Therefore, those who are religious may be comforted by such experiences whereas those who are not religious may have difficulty assimilating such experiences (see Barbato et al., 1999).

An important consideration in explaining cultural differences in grief practices, including differences in the way in which a continuing bond to the deceased is expressed, requires taking into account the involvement of other goal systems in addition to the attachment system (Parkes, 2000). There are times when the attachment system response to loss through expression of grief and searching may be inhibited if their expression is perceived as a threat to personal survival, such as life-threatening situations in which it is imperative to take action that may require suppression of attachment-related expressions (Parkes, 2000). Also, although the attachment goal to express grief and to reestablish contact with the deceased will be activated by the death of an important other, this goal can come into conflict with cultural beliefs such that an attempt to maintain contact with the deceased can result in disturbances to the spirit world. In societies of this sort where discourse on the deceased is sanctioned, it would be expected that there would be minimal public reference to CB. If CB were simply a culturally-driven phenomenon, one might view such absence of public display of CB as a demonstration of the cultural relativity of CB. However, important discrepancies might be assumed to exist between public display and private experience. If it were possible to obtain reports of the private experience of grief
in such cultures, one yet might find evidence for CB. At the other extreme, many cultures have practices of remembering important figures that symbolize and embody central values in the culture such as religious or political figures that are regarded to have played an important role in the construction of cultural identity. For example, President’s Day in the United States is a public holiday commemorating the present and past presidents. Despite the public display shown in the annual commemoration of such figures, would it be justified to consider such phenomena as evidence for CB? Assuming that one is unlikely to regard such figures as attachment figures as defined earlier, it would be a mistake to cite such practices as support for CB. Yet, CB theorists adopting a socio-historical perspective appear to do so (e.g., Klass & Goss, 2003). Again, attachment theory is useful here in specifying the functional criteria that need to be met in order to determine whether a given CB expression should be taken as evidence for CB.

Finally, in considering the role of spirituality in continuing bonds, it is important to consider the attachment literature on God as an attachment figure. Kirkpatrick (1999) has argued that God can be viewed as an attachment figure in that God fulfills the functions of proximity seeking, safe haven, and secure base. Kirkpatrick identified the omnipresence of God as serving the physical proximity function. Because individuals are most likely to turn to God when under stress or threat, God can be said to serve as a safe haven in affording emotional comfort during such times. In regard to secure base, individuals are more likely to confront the unknown and enter threatening situations such as going to war when experiencing the felt security of God’s protection. It should be noted, however, that unlike other attachment figures, God is a figurehead for which there is no history of physical contact. In this regard, one might call into question whether God in fact should be considered as an attachment figure. However, in that God can be effective in affect regulation in serving safe haven and secure base functions, one could make the case for God as an attachment figure. Applying this to CB, it is interesting to note that the spiritual bond that emerges with the deceased resembles attachment to God in that for both there is no physical connection with the attachment figure. The sense of presence at a later point after the death wherein the deceased is experienced as always there
is similar to the experience of God as omnipresent. CB thus appears to represent a transition from a corporeal attachment to a spiritual attachment. Whereas earlier on after the death there is a keen sense of the deceased as missing, later on the deceased has been recovered as a spiritual being.

Clinical Implications

A number of clinical implications follow from the attachment based perspective on CB outlined above. This attachment perspective highlights how CB expressions should not all be treated as though identical in terms of their implications for adjustment to bereavement. CB is a multidimensional construct wherein different CB expressions vary in terms of their prominence at various points in time after the death. Therefore, whether a given CB expression is adaptive depends on whether or not it deviates from the normative course of CB expressions. One would expect hallucinatory and illusory CB expressions to be reported early on after the death in knowing that searching attempts to re-establish physical proximity to the deceased is part of the normative course of grief during the initial protest phase. Thus, the presence of such phenomena at an early point after the death should not necessarily be taken as a sign of maladaptive response. However, the presence of such expressions later on after the death may indicate maladaptive adjustment in reflecting failure to relinquish the goal of regaining physical proximity. Therefore, a clear understanding of the normative course of CB expressions is informative in alerting bereavement counselors and psychotherapists as to whether an individual is adjusting well or not to the death of a loved one. Cultural considerations as well as religious belief would need to be heeded here as an important moderator of these normative changes, however.

Although the type of CB expression may shed important light on whether a bereaved individual has not relinquished the goal to regain physical proximity to the deceased or has successfully internalized the deceased and thus is capable of experiencing felt security exclusively through psychological proximity, it is important to recognize that no simple one-to-one correspondence exists between type of CB expression and internalization. In other words, more information may be required in assessing whether internalization
has occurred beyond simply knowing that the bereaved makes use of particular CB expressions. This is clearly illustrated in the case of the deceased’s possessions as a CB expression. Holding onto objects linked to the deceased may represent denial of the irrevocability of the loss, may serve as a transitional object in the movement toward internalization, or represent keepsakes that are part of an enduring CB connection associated with the reorganization phase.

An understanding of individual differences in attachment can be an asset for clinicians working with bereaved clientele in knowing that this may play an important role in whether they can make effective use of CB in coping with the loss. Specifically, knowing how different patterns of insecure attachment are implicated in the nature and extent of CB usage can serve to guide clinical interventions. One might expect an individual with an avoidant-dismissive attachment pattern to make limited use of CB expressions in coping with the loss, given the person’s tendency to deactivate attachment strivings. Consequently, such individuals lack the important resource of being able to make use of CB as a secure base in confronting the stresses of the new life situation. In this case, interventions that promote a sense of continuing connection with the deceased should be most effective. A continuing connection may be promoted by talking about the deceased, recalling memories of the deceased, going over photographs of the deceased, visiting places where the deceased used to go or visiting the deceased’s gravesite. These interventions would also be effective in counteracting these individuals’ tendencies to defensively orient their attention away from the attachment to the deceased and thereby facilitate the process of working through the loss.

On the other hand, anxious-preoccupied individuals are more likely to make excessive use of CB expressions that reflect failure to give up the goal of regaining physical proximity to the deceased at the expense of taking active steps toward constructing a new life. Therefore, tactfully confronting these individuals’ tendencies to make defensive use of CB expressions in order to avoid facing the reality of the loss may be an important consideration. These clientele could also be assisted in making greater use of more internalized types of CB expressions that provide them with a sense of connection to the deceased in the context of fully acknowledging the irrevocability of the loss. For example, having the bereaved focus on the legacy of the deceased and what they have gained
from the past relationship as well as the shared values and ideals that can be maintained and cultivated further in their new life will help the bereaved to experience an enduring connection to the deceased in the midst of embarking on a new life.

References


