REVIEWING THE OPPORTUNITIES:
GUEST EDITOR’S REPLY TO COMMENTS
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This essay is a reply by the guest editor to four published comments about the July 2011 Special Issue: Attachment Theory, Separation and Divorce: Forging Coherent Understandings for Family Law. The comments capture some of the immense interest and passion generated by that issue. Questions pertaining to the structure of the issue are addressed and editorial decisions clarified. The relevant critiques are considered, and the opportunities created by the Special Issue are revisited. Unanswered questions raised about the application of attachment theory to family law matters are left as such: unanswered questions that call for careful consideration in practice and in nuanced, bipartisan research in the near future.

Key Points for the Family Court Community
• This essay revisits the value of the July 2011 Special Issue on attachment theory.
• It considers the relevance of the Special Issue for practitioners.

Keywords: attachment; divorce; children; research; family law

I thank the Editors of Family Court Review (FCR) for receiving comments on the July 2011 Special Issue: Attachment Theory, Separation, and Divorce: Forging Coherent Understandings for Family Law, and inviting me to reply. Since the publication, both the journal and I have been inundated with comments about the Issue, from accolades to diatribes, and all fascinating for the passion of their convictions. The four published papers from Garber, Hynan, Lamb, and Ludolph represent some of that feedback. These comments differ substantively, but collectively highlight areas where the Special Issue left the reader wondering. Some specific questions they raise will remain with the field indefinitely. Some, however, stem from the structure of the Issue, and below, I clarify editorial choices made in conceptualizing this project and trust that this clears the way for ongoing productive engagement with the July 2011 Special Issue.

RECAPPING THE PURPOSE OF THE SPECIAL ISSUE

I had hoped that my Editorial Introduction (McIntosh, 2011) made our aims in forming the Special Issue clear. However, the need to clarify and elaborate is evident from the comments, and I am grateful for the chance to do so. To recap on those original editorial remarks, the purpose of the Special Issue on Attachment Theory was exactly that—to provide a special focus on attachment theory. The impetus came from witnessing a cacophony of different uses of the term attachment throughout the field—in judges’ determinations, in custody evaluators’ reports, and in negotiations in the mediation room. Consistency about the use and application of the concepts inherent to attachment theory was hard to find in the divorce literature; experts continued to use their own versions of what attachment theory is, often without accurately representing what the theory says. The Special Issue aimed to rectify this. The goal was to create a definitive touchstone about what attachment is, as defined by attachment researchers and theorists themselves. To do this, we sought the involvement of the highest-ranking mainstream attachment researchers. In honesty, these are researchers who would not otherwise have offered a paper to FCR, but whose interest were raised and their ability to participate made possible
by our field study approach. The end product was the July 2011 Special Issue. Anyone in the divorce
field wanting to understand what attachment is about, according to the Bowlby/Ainsworth attachment
paradigm, can now find it in that issue of FCR.

There are many things this Issue did not attempt to do, chief among them providing an exegesis of
all developmental research relevant to family law. The Special Issue attempted to be comprehensive
about its core topic: attachment theory in the Bowlby/Ainsworth ethological tradition, and its elabo-
ration in what is now known as interpersonal neurobiology. The focus was squarely on the manner in
which attachment interactions shape the early development of emotional regulation capacities in the
child and related brain functioning. In Siegel’s words,

From the neuroscience research, we understand more that attachment experiences shape the way neurons
are connecting up to each other in the early years of life, from birth on. . . . the first laying down of
structures of what is called self-regulation happens in the first 18 to 24 months of life and is heavily
influenced by what goes on with attachment at that time (Siegel & McIntosh, 2011, p. 514).

Given the stated topic of the Special Issue, it follows that much of the Lamb and Ludolph criticism
about omission of research on other factors that influence child outcomes is irrelevant to the clearly
defined focus of this Issue. Their disappointment seems to have arisen, in part, from their own generic
use of the concept of attachment, referring broadly to parent–child relationships, rather than to the
specific mechanisms of attachment-based interaction. The Special Issue contributors elaborated
extensively on empirically derived definitions of attachment, and none were clearer than Waters on the
importance of accurate application: “Sometimes the word ‘attachment’ can be used as shorthand, and
that should be left to people who are experts and know what the shorthand is being used for. Others
should say what they mean.”

METHODOLOGY OF THE SPECIAL ISSUE

The format of the issue was decided with the editor and associate editors of FCR. The core idea was
to enable family law professionals (here sampled from the AFCC membership) to put their own
questions about attachment to a field of eminent attachment scholars. The questions asked in the
interviews were elicited through an AFCC member survey (with 298 responses), and the results of that
survey are outlined in the editorial (McIntosh, 2011, p. 420).

SELECTION OF CONTRIBUTORS

The Special Issue deliberately sought a unified view, which could truly be said to represent the
Bowlby-Ainsworth tradition. As Alan Sroufe says in his interview, “I can tell you that absolutely every
person who has won the Bowlby-Ainsworth award for attachment research would endorse the position
I have” (p. 468). Presenting a set of nonconvergent viewpoints and definitions would have added yet
more noise to a system already inundated with multiple versions of attachment and its meanings.
In retrospect, a clearer subtitle for the Issue would have been: “Views and Interviews in the
Evolutionary-Ethological Tradition.”

Noting the intention to engage voices outside of the existing mainstream divorce debates, and to
reach out to the Bowlby/Ainsworth attachment field directly, the decision to include some researchers
and not others was also deliberate. The number of attachment experts consulted reflects the limits of
what was possible in a single Issue, as was clearly stated in the editorial introduction:

An obvious caveat to this selection procedure is this: I could not travel everywhere, and could not interview
everyone I wanted to. I therefore rush to agree with you in advance that there are other attachment
researchers who could have given authoritative, informative interviews. That said, anyone in the know
about attachment will agree: this is a stellar, comprehensive line up of experts (McIntosh, 2011, p. 421).
The selected participants and their published work represent eminent and current knowledge about attachment research. In this light, Lamb’s remark is confusing: “Unfortunately, the special issue offered readers little insight into the substantial progress that has actually been made by researchers, scholars, and clinicians (e.g., Cassidy & Shaver, 2008, now in its second edition, contains a number of detailed reviews).” Indeed 9 of the 12 attachment experts featured in the Special Issue contributed to chapters in that book, which Lamb rightly cites as a gold standard resource on attachment, and have published original attachment data in high-ranking journals. All cite Mary Main’s seminal work on attachment theory. Main is the lead author on the opening monograph of the FCR Special Issue, and citations of her work with Hesse and other colleagues are now in the hundreds of thousands. The two neuroscience interviews (Siegel and Schore) were conducted with the founding editor and the current editor of the Norton Series on Interpersonal Neurobiology, another gold standard resource.

INVITED PAPERS AND INTERVIEWS: AN EXPERIMENTAL FORMAT

The journal was privileged to open the Special Issue with an invited monograph by Mary Main, Erik Hesse, and Siegfried Hesse (2011). This 38-page paper is a heavily cited and definitive account of attachment and the evolution of the field. This paper was designed to provide the anchor for the whole Issue. Much of that theoretical and empirical basis appears in applied form in the second invited paper, a carefully articulated case study by George, Isaacs and Marvin (2011). These two papers provided the go-to empirical foundation for the whole Issue. Ludolph dismisses these papers for some reason in her review of the Special Issue and instead focuses on the dialogues. Perhaps other readers have done the same, and an editorial safeguard was needed, to actively point readers of each interview to the invited papers if they were in doubt about the empirical underpinnings of the discussion.

The remaining eight papers were of a different and experimental format. These were dialogues, designed to be easily read, and thus without research citations. As earlier stated, these participants would not have elected to write a paper for FCR. The survey and interview method captured their interest, and made it possible to get their ideas across to the FCR audience. The collection of eight papers, featuring interviews with 12 attachment and neuroscience scholars, captures the freely spoken thoughts of these scientist-practitioners, and collectively forms a definitive oral history of the ethological-evolutionary tradition of attachment theory.

Survey results and interview questions were sent ahead to each participant. I conducted each interview in person. Each was audio recorded and the extensive narrative transcribed. I drafted the transcripts into paper form, and these were then finalized by the lead authors. All participants viewed the Editorial and summary table, and many offered comments that were incorporated. Thus, where Ludolph attributes the summary table to me personally, and Lamb comments that the Issue “was dominated by a large number of interviews conducted by the issue editor with people sharing her convictions about attachment research and its implications for parenting plans,” I trust these clarifications make clear that both attributions are entirely incorrect. My coauthorship of the eight interviews reflects the fact that I conducted the interviews, was part of the dialogue, and did the ground work required to produce these papers from extensive raw audio data to the written draft. While the coauthorship naming convention for each of interview-based papers may be confusing, the reader may safely attribute individual comments and statements within each interview to the person who made them.

Together with the four commentators, my own views differ from some views expressed by the attachment experts in the Special Issue, and I found some of the interviews challenging in this respect. The Special Issue was not the place to voice my personal views. Ludolph nearly understands this when she wonders why my “views” in the Special Issue are different to those expressed in an original chapter prepared simultaneously (McIntosh & Smyth, 2012): “It is difficult to resolve the guest editor’s provision of a quasi-recommendation that significantly limits the time of noncustodial parents in the special issue, with her cautions a few months later about the dangers of the provision of exactly such generic parenting plans.”
For this Special Issue, I assumed the role of a willing messenger, qualified to convey communications between the fields through my native tongues in both attachment theory and clinical practice within family law. Some of course would like to shoot the messenger upon hearing things they would rather not hear. Lamb, with Ludolph, suggest that I should better have adopted the role of investigator or indeed prosecutor of attachment theory, and Lamb regards the approach taken as a wasted opportunity. Garber and Hynan thank us for a refreshing issue, readable, engaging, inspiring many questions and further reflections, which they articulate in an inviting manner. In all, I regret confusions caused by any miscommunication about editorial decisions taken in this project. I also remain content with those decisions.

FACTUAL ERRORS

While the four commentators’ remarks represent useful differences of opinion, points of factual error or misinterpretation are another matter. Featured in Lamb’s comment is a report regarding a study on infant overnight care, conducted with my colleagues (McIntosh, Smyth, & Kelaher, 2010). For reasons unclear, Lamb’s account contains many and significant factual errors which may mislead the reader. For those interested, a paper correcting similar misinterpretations is Smyth, McIntosh, and Kelaher (2011).

ON THE PROBLEM OF POLARIZATIONS

Some comments offered on the Special issue and studies discussed within it appear to equate attachment theory with a blanket assumption against overnights for infants. Let us be clear on this. Most contributors offered theoretically based cautions about overnight arrangements for 0–2-year-olds and even 3-year-olds (e.g., Main, Hesse, & Hesse, 2011, p. 444; Sroufe & McIntosh, 2011, p. 468), especially for babies moving between parents who will not or cannot collaborate, and where exchanges and absences are poorly supported. But cautions are not rules. None of the Special Issue authors cast their statements as universal truths for the general population of separating parents. It would be wrong to take them that way. Further, it is wrong to align findings from the two attachment informed infant studies discussed in the Special Issue (Solomon & George, 1999; McIntosh, Smyth, & Kelaher, 2010) with a no-overnights campaign. Respectively, both studies found that attachment security and emotional regulation difficulties in 0–3-year-olds were associated with higher frequency overnight time, not with any overnight time. As Hynan notes, there remains scant research about attachment or any other developmental theory that is directly on point for family law. There is certainly not a body of evidence that could justify a uniform policy or ruling about overnights. Nor did any of the Special Issue participants claim this.

Several comments by Ludolph and Lamb also align attachment theory with anti-father sentiment. I find this hard to reconcile with what I heard from each contributor. All acknowledged the early origins of attachment research with mother–infant dyads, but took great care not to make gender attributions in their discussions of contemporary family life. Many discussed the growing body of research on father attachment. While Schore (p. 504) openly discussed the neurological basis of mother-ease, he went on to emphasize the role of psychological gender in a modern world: “Ultimately, what the infant needs for a secure attachment is access to a well-functioning adult right brain that can empathically receive and regulate the infant’s emotional communications.”

In the same troublesome realm of polarized father vs. mother, and overnights vs. no overnights claims, Ludolph voices her assertion that the Special Issue positioned attachment as the trump card to all other determinants of children’s outcomes. Again, I find her view hard to square with what actually appears in the Special Issue. Unquestionably, a large body of excellent research differentiates factors that affect the outcomes of young children in divorce, factors which are rightly incorporated in divorce related decision making. I did not hear anyone involved in this Issue challenge or contradict that body
of research. For example, most actively addressed the emotional and physical risks of extreme conflict and family violence. Zeanah puts it succinctly: “The biggest challenge we have in infant mental health is the direct and indirect effects of violence on these very young children... this is not something that is waiting to be demonstrated” (Lieberman, Zeanah, & McIntosh, 2011, p. 530). Contributors to this Issue did—without question—prioritize attachment security, but the suggestion that attachment ranks above or excludes other priorities is unfounded. Waters says this most clearly:

Successful attachment as an outcome is something I would like a child to have. To have a secure base in childhood is an asset that I would like a child to have, on par with having an education, good health, and a safe neighbourhood. Openness to a wide range of developmental needs and possibilities should be our focus, rather than any particular outcome. Things that we decide in court matters should not preclude a child developing and going to many different places with his or her life (Waters & McIntosh, 2011, p. 482).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

One of the great strengths of FCR under Andrew Schepard, Janet Johnston, and now Robert Emery has been its willingness to uphold the legitimacy of academic debate and to source different points of view on complex topics that have incomplete research documentation. Testimony to this is the many rounds of debate hosted by FCR on domestic violence and alienation. When it came to approaching the topic of attachment, FCR staff were unwavering in their support.

The Special Issue has elicited strong reactions, from anger in some quarters, to standing ovations in others. The polarized responses are themselves intriguing. Beyond speculation is this: the July 2011 Special Issue made a loud and unanimous call for a renewed focus in family law on infant mental health, brain development, and their relationship to the early care-giving context. In the mix of multiple factors that must be considered in making custody and access plans, attachment theory, and its extension into interpersonal neurobiology, asks us to prioritize children’s emotional security, in our practices, policies and research.

The value of this Special Issue will continue to lie in its generation of renewed interest and thoughtful debate about the place of the Bowlby/Ainsworth attachment tradition in family law matters. Although some may want to continue to shoot me as the messenger, I stand by this Special Issue for the answers it offers at this point in time, while recognizing that some questions it raises may ultimately prove more important. I hope these questions lead to bi-partisan research projects across the attachment and family law fields, and that with these studies, more complete and finely nuanced answers will come in the future. Until that research is with us, the FCR Attachment Special Issue of July 2011 Issue leaves us with at least one indelible message. Coining Garber’s words, that message is the importance of making each child’s secure base as “unambiguous” as possible, within the unique circumstances of his or her family life.

NOTES

1. I thank the reviewers of this reply for their generous input.
2. The development of the July 2011 Special Issue was funded by two grants from the Amini Foundation for the Study of Affect, and a grant from the ‘Protecting Children from Conflict’ group, an affiliate of the Judith Wallerstein Center for the Family in Transition.
3. Chief among the errors are these: The infant study (“Study 2” in the collected report) was not conducted with a small sample of parents “who had resorted to litigation” as Lamb claims. General population data were used, from two nationally representative cohorts: one comprising 5,000 infants and another comprising 5,000 young children aged 4–5 years. Data were from multiple informants wherever possible, and not as Lamb suggests the “uncorroborated reports of parents (mothers) who opposed overnight arrangements”.
REFERENCES


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