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Utilizing Attachment Measures in Child Custody Evaluations: Incremental Validity

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Key words: divorce, custody evaluation, adult attachment, caregiving, Strange Situation

Reference citation: (2009). *Journal of Child Custody*, 6, 1-24.

Abstract

The American Psychological Association Guidelines for Child Custody Evaluations in Divorce Proceedings (American Psychological Association, 1994) stresses the need for a multi-method evaluation, reasoning that by considering data from different approaches, we can best ensure the validity of our findings in making custody recommendations. One of the primary issues in custody evaluations is assessing the quality of the child's attachment to each parent and parents' potential for supporting the child's attachment security. The case study presented in this article demonstrates how research-based standardized assessments of the child's attachment and parents' adult attachment and caregiving adds to the validity of a standardized psychological test battery typically utilized in making custody recommendations.

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Incremental Validity

The American Psychological Association Guidelines for Child Custody Evaluations in Divorce Proceedings (American Psychological Association, 1994) stresses the need for a multi-method evaluation, reasoning that by considering data from different approaches, we can best ensure the validity of our findings. In addition to individual and conjoint interviews, we can administer psychological testing and interview collateral sources (Schutz, Dickson, Lindenberger, & Ruther, 1989; Isaacs, Montalvo, & Abelson, 2000).

Although there is some literature (e.g., Marvin & Whelan, 2003) on the use child-parent attachment measures in custody evaluations, such tools are not typically part of the testing battery; yet, when we are evaluating custody, one of the primary issues we are assessing is the child's emotional attachment to each parent, and how each parent meets the child's attachment and exploration needs. Moreover, attachment measures are significantly correlated with important developmental outcomes for children (e.g., Sroufe, Egeland, Carlson, & Collins, 2005; Thompson, 2008). Because of this, it is our opinion that custody evaluations can be significantly enhanced by including standardized attachment measures in the investigation. This article will demonstrate, through the use of a case study, the incremental validity that may be achieved when attachment measures are added to the battery of tests.

Background of Case

This is a case of a 3-year old boy, Thomas, born to unmarried parents – a 40-year-old mother, who had never been married, and a 45-year-old father, who had been married for 12 years and separated for two. Neither parent had other children. The couple met in a bookstore, and dated for a month, when the mother discovered she was pregnant. The couple decided to try

to make their relationship work, living together for a year and a half. Mother worked full time and Father worked on and off as a consultant. Thomas was cared for by an au pair. When Mother's company closed down, they moved together to New York City, where Mother had obtained employment and Father looked for work. Thomas was put into daycare. Father was not able to find a job, and the couple separated after two months. Thomas was now 2 years old. Father moved nearby into his brother's condominium, which was on the market, and lived there for six months. During this period Mother was with Thomas 60% of the time and Father 40% of the time, alternating on a weekly basis. The parents' relationship was contentious. Six months later Father got a job offer in California at the same time that his brother's condominium sold. Both parents petitioned the court for custody. The court kept custody arrangements the same, pending a custody evaluation. In the meantime, Father moved in to his brother's empty summer house, located two hours away from New York. The temporary custody order translated into 12 consecutive overnights with Mother and 9 with Father. Mother's work schedule required Thomas to be in daycare for 9-10 hours a day. When with Father, Thomas was in his full-time care.

Mother felt that she should have primary custody of Thomas. Father, who had been a heavy drinker, had struck her on two occasions. Following the second incident, she had threatened to leave him and take Thomas with her, but they weathered that crisis. Mother alleged that the father was an alcoholic, never had stable employment, never had a job while caring for a child and was too disorganized as a person to manage Thomas' caregiving. She described one time when Thomas was an infant and Father, unable to stop Thomas from crying, put the baby back in his crib in a manner that she believed was too abrupt and forceful. Mother argued that she had been Thomas' primary caregiver and had a proven record of being able to work, care for

her child, and provide for his other needs, such as setting up doctor appointments, day care, and baby play dates.

Father felt that Mother wanted him out of her life and out of the life of their son. He was remorseful that he had struck her, saying that he had never used physical force in any other relationship. He talked about the shame he felt when he put Thomas down forcefully. He felt helpless to not be able to soothe his son in the first three months of Thomas' life. Since his relationship with Mother ended, he explained that he has taken the role of being Thomas' father very seriously, and had not experienced that kind of helplessness again. He also no longer drank.

Father questioned Mother's mental health. He felt that she emotionally abused those close to her and was inconsistent, impatient and angry with Thomas. He worried that she cared more about what others thought about her in the role of Thomas' mother than about her actual relationship with her son. Furthermore, Father felt that she was hostile toward Thomas' relationship with him and his family, and resented his relationship with Thomas. He pointed out that he had a supportive relationship with both his family and hers, and contrasted the quality of his interactions with Mothers' family with what he alleged was her volatile and angry treatment of her brothers. He described Mother as having very strange ideas about the world, including being persecuted by her co-workers.

Procedures of the Evaluation

Our evaluation combined a traditional clinical assessment and an assessment of attachment and caregiving. The traditional assessment included personality testing of each parent, specifically the MMPI-2 (Butcher et. al, 2001) and the Rorschach (Exner, 2003); interview data collected both individually and in a joint interview with the parents; and

conversations with collateral sources. We also reviewed court orders, prepared statements by each parent, and e-mail correspondence between them.

With regard to the assessment of attachment and caregiving, the following was specifically assessed:

- Thomas's patterns of interactive behavior with Father and Mother in the areas of attachment, exploration, learning, behavior management, and affect management.
- Each parent's patterns of interactive behavior in the areas of attachment, exploration, learning, behavior management, and affect management.
- Each parent's representations of caregiving; that is, his or her thoughts, feelings, and attitudes about being Thomas' parent.
- Because of the well-established link between one's representation of one's own early history and parenting, representation of each parent's attachment experience in his or her family-of-origin.
- The risk levels for psychopathology and developmental risk associated with each set of current attachment and parenting interactive and representational patterns.

The attachment-caregiving component of the evaluation is based on standardized procedures developed and validated over the past 40 years through basic psychological and clinical research worldwide. The attachment-caregiving bond is the cornerstone of the overall relationship between a child and parent (or parent-figure) (George & Solomon, 2008b; Lyons-Ruth & Jacobvitz, 2008; Marvin & Britner, 2008; Sroufe et al., 2005; Thompson, 2008). Currently available cross-sectional and longitudinal studies suggest that if the attachment-caregiving bond is ordered and within normal limits, there is a high likelihood that the child will be able to use the security and stability provided by that relationship to explore and develop

adaptive relationships with others and to develop a strong sense of self-reliance and social and cognitive competence. If that bond is disordered, however, there is a high likelihood that the child will experience significant current and (if disruptions in the attachment-caregiving relationship remain unresolved) future problems in emotional regulation, family relationships, teacher and peer relationships, and academic performance. Additionally, there is a significantly increased likelihood of future legal and psychiatric problems and a significantly increased likelihood that the child, when he or she reaches adulthood, will have disordered caregiving bonds with his or her own children, thus continuing the pattern into the next generation (e.g., (Hesse & Main, 2006; Solomon & George, 2006; in press).

A review of the psychological and developmental scientific literature (Cassidy & Shaver, 2008) would suggest that, after basic medical health issues, the quality of attachment-caregiving patterns may be the single most important variable in assessing and intervening in high-risk family situations, especially with younger children. These predictions of risk for various developmental outcomes reflect, of course, levels of probability, rather than certainty, for any particular child or family that is assessed.

A blind methodology was followed using three scientifically developed and validated forms of assessment – the Strange Situation (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978; Britner, Marvin, & Pianta, 2005; Cassidy & Marvin, 1992; Marvin & Britner, 2008; Solomon & George, 2008), the Caregiving Interview (George & Solomon, 1989; 2008a), and the Adult Attachment Projective Picture System (AAP; George & West, 2001; in press). Robert Marvin analyzed the Strange Situation; Carol George analyzed the parents' Caregiving Interview and AAP; and Marla Isaacs analyzed all remaining data, including the MMPI-2 and Rorschach. All analyses were completed independently, following which the three authors shared their data and conclusions in

a three-way conference call. This allowed us to see to what extent our ‘blinded’ findings converged or diverged, to resolve any discrepancies between the attachment and traditional clinical findings, and to determine how the assessments should be integrated into a single report. This collaborative procedure, carefully integrating traditional and attachment measures, provides us increased scientific confidence in the overall conclusions despite the relative lack of empirical research on this population (cf., Solomon & George, 1999b). The process is also consistent with the logic of a “transportability analysis,” a form of systematic review that can allow one to generalize from results on populations that have been extensively researched to those with relatively little empirical research (see Marvin & Schutz, 2008/this issue).

Just as care is taken in traditional evaluations to construct and schedule the appointments with the child and each parent to be as similar as possible (e.g., the same time of day with each parent for young children), so too must this be done in the scheduling of the Strange Situation. We followed the administration guidelines in the field of attachment. Care was taken such that the sessions were not administered under circumstances that attachment theorists suggest could influence parent-child interaction, such as the child being ill or just returning home to a parent following a separation. Use of the Strange Situation in a large study of infants with divorced or separated parents has demonstrated validity for the use of this procedure and session timing with this population (Solomon & George, 1999b, 1999c). Research has shown that the order and timing of administration of the adult representational measures do not influence their results (e.g., George & Solomon, 1989; George & West, in press). Validity for the Caregiving Interview has been established for divorced mothers (Solomon & George, 1999a) and fathers (Munroe, 2008). Validity for the AAP has been established in adult normative and psychiatric samples and in a range of settings and has concurrent validity with the Adult Attachment Interview

(Buchheim et al., 2008; George & West, 2001). No study has used the AAP exclusively to investigate divorce.

Results from Traditional Clinical Personality Tests

Psychologists can make certain inferences about how each adult might function as a parent by drawing on the results of tests of personality. These tests highlight a range of characteristics, for example, the capacity for empathy or the tendency to disordered thinking, which shape how an adult takes up the parenting role. We used the MMPI-2 and the Rorschach, instruments commonly used in a traditional evaluation, to generate our hypotheses about both parents. Table 1 presents the test results for Father and Mother.

Father

Father responded openly and non-defensively to the MMPI-2 and did not elevate on any of the clinical scales. He was engaged in the Rorschach, thus providing us valid information from two independent tests.

- Father has narcissistic vulnerabilities. He may feel easily slighted and defensive when others express doubts about his decisions or behaviors, though he is unlikely to reveal such feelings to others. A highly introspective person, he prefers to process those feelings internally. He uses intellectualization to distance himself from strong emotions, thus muting the intensity of his feelings. But under the sway of intense criticism, he is likely to erupt, as when he struck Mother. Given that his psychological resources are considerable, and his defenses strong, such uncontrolled reactivity would be rare.

- Though flexible in his thinking, Father does not always think clearly and coherently. Especially when stressed, he rambles on in his speech, making him difficult to follow. At these times, he expresses his ideas loosely, creating confusion in others.
- His passivity and dependency draw him into escapist fantasies, which are a temporary relief from his feelings of sadness. However, it gets in the way of constructive action and is a particular liability for him, because he makes decisions based on his thinking rather than his feelings. Thinking unrealistic thoughts undermines his ability to take constructive action. In fact, at the end of the evaluation, he chastised himself for having allowed himself to believe for so long that somehow everything would be alright.
- He values collaboration, is interested in others and displays a capacity for accurate empathy. Paradoxically he does not trust others readily and is especially alert to people and situations that he fears can be dangerous to him. One way to understand these contradictions is that people have to pass a certain threshold of trust, before he opens up to them.

These results point to the following questions about Father's parenting ability:

- Will his intellectualization and narcissism make it difficult for him to respond emotionally to signs of his son's distress?
- Would his capacity for empathy and propensity to work on and through his own feelings internally suggest that he could, in moments of emotional difficulty, make accurate inferences about his son's perspective? In other words if he reduces his reactivity to his own feelings by working them through, would he then be able to create a psychological space for understanding his son's feelings?

- Would his expectation that people should collaborate with each other enable him to engage in reciprocal play with his son rather than dominate the play or withdraw from it?

Mother

On the MMPI-2, Mother appeared generally defensive, trying hard to look good and to put her best foot forward, a pattern often seen in parents who participate in custody evaluations. Mother's profile was too defensive to draw any reliable inferences about psychopathology. It did, however, provide information about her character, which together with the Rorschach, allows us to posit some plausible inferences about her parenting capacity.

- Mother harbors a good deal of underlying hostility as well as vulnerability to depression. She can be overly sensitive and touchy in interpersonal situations. Impelled to prove that she is right, she tends to justify her actions to others, making it difficult for others to get along with her. She is not very interested in other people, keeps her distance from them, and is not a collaborator.
- Mother is capable of coping with situations she encounters in a flexible manner, by focusing her attention on matters in a way that is neither too circumscribed nor too broad. She has some capacity for introspection; however, her perception and understanding of what is going on around her is often distorted and she does not always think clearly. She uses her feelings rather than her thoughts to influence her decisions. This can work to her advantage, because her perceptions and her thoughts about them often lead her astray.
- Mother was extremely stressed at the time of the testing. Her psychological resources, which are at the low end of normal, were not sufficient to deal adequately with this stress. In normal

times, Mother can be very reactive. But in periods of stress, she is far more likely to behave impulsively.

These results point to the following questions about Mother's parenting ability:

- Would her flexibility help her to understand her child, or would her distorted thinking interfere with accurate empathy, making it difficult for her to read her child's signals or cues?
- Might her devaluing of collaboration make it difficult for her to engage in reciprocal play with her child?
- Could her reactivity interfere with her ability to stay attuned to her son's feelings?

Father and Mother are similar in many ways. For example, they each shy away from emotions, leading them to appear distant and emotionally detached. They each experience components of depression. There are times when they can each be reactive, responding with intensity, though it is Mother who is more likely to over-react. She has less ability to contain and regulate her feelings than he does. They also each have individual characteristics that are problematic for the other. For example, Father's dependency would make him look to Mother for comfort and nurturance, a demand that would probably annoy her. Mother's high level of anger could readily provoke him.

One provisional conclusion or hypothesis we drew from the results of these tests was that on balance, Father could provide Thomas with more attunement than Mother. We then set out to test this series of hypotheses by directly assessing parent-child interaction as well as the parents' attachment-caregiving relationship using three attachment instruments, the Strange Situation, the Caregiving Interview and the Adult Attachment Picture Projective.

To be sure, traditional home visits or observations of parent and child at play during office visits provide occasions for direct observation, but do not consistently stress the parent-child interaction in a manner requiring some re-equilibration or "repair." Because such stress as observed in the home or office may not be at levels required to activate and thus validly assess the child's attachment system and parent's interactive responsiveness, such observations may fail to tap into the kind of attachment behavior that it is most important to evaluate (Ainsworth et al., 1978). In contrast, this "disruption-repair" process is purposefully designed into the Strange Situation procedure.

Further, most parent-child observations in traditional child custody evaluations are informal, not standardized, of unknown reliability, and lack systematic scientific validation. Inferences based on such informal observations depend on clinical judgment, in contrast to nomothetic inferences based on measures of responses to a standardized stimulus. For forensic cases especially, precision and empirical testing that standardized tests offer are preferable to informal clinical judgment.

Results from Attachment Measures

Thomas was observed separately with each parent in the Strange Situation. The Strange Situation is frequently described as an "attachment drama," whereby the child is presented with a systematic series of experiences that were designed to gradually increase his/her stress, need for proximity to and comfort from the parent, and activation of his/her attachment behavior system. (See other articles in this Special Issue for a more detailed introduction to the Strange Situation Procedure; also Solomon & George, 2008.) To summarize, the child is observed playing with his or her parent in the beginning of the session (low stress). A stranger then comes into the room, and engages the child (mild stress), after which the parent leaves. There are two separations and

two reunions with the parent. In the first separation, the child is left with the stranger (increased but still mild stress). In the second separation, the stress is elevated as the child is left alone, then joined by the stranger and then reunited with the parent. The procedure is designed overall to stress the child's attachment system only mildly (e.g., episodes are ended if the child's level of distress increases beyond his/her own ability to manage it), and is conducted in a manner that conforms to national ethics guidelines. It is coded primarily in terms of behavior during separation and reunion, including such variables as the child's proximity seeking, avoidance, and resistance (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Cassidy & Marvin, 1992; Main & Solomon, 1990). This standardized, observational procedure was used to assess the quality of Thomas's attachment with each of his parents. The quality of his relationship with each parent is revealed by behavior that demonstrates his ability to use each parent as a secure base from which to explore and learn about the physical and social environment, and as a haven of safety when distressed. This procedure also gives us information on the specific strategies Thomas uses to organize crucial, intimate and highly emotional interactions. Interactive behavior coding is typically done from video tape.

Robert Marvin, an expert Strange Situation judge and one of the originators of the Strange Situation classification procedure for preschool children (Cassidy & Marvin, 1992), coded Thomas' Strange Situations in this case. Importantly, as we noted earlier, the Strange Situation enables the evaluator to observe parent child interactions in a standardized and validated context. This has two advantages. First, the presenting situation is the same for both Mother and Father, allowing for more legitimate comparisons. Second, the procedure for observing and coding behavior is based on many years of research and observation across many cultures and populations with different risk-levels. The individual evaluator is not left to his or

her own impressions of the situation, but can draw on the collective knowledge of a large and diverse research community that has accumulated a large body of knowledge over the past 40 years.

Perhaps the most important insight that the Strange Situation offers has to do with the child's competence and ability to adjust to separations as evidenced by the child's actual behavior. Consider the following: A child is playing with toys, his parent leaves the room, the child remains with the stranger or is alone, and the child continues to focus his attention on the toys and pays little attention to the parent's departure. We might naively conclude that the child is demonstrating independence and the capacity to regulate his own feelings. Indeed, this is exactly what Western child developmental specialists in the mid-20th century concluded based on common sense notions about how "good children" behave (Bowlby, 1951, 1969/1982). Children were told to "be good" and "don't cry" when facing stressful situations, such as separation or getting hurt. Attachment theory and research, however, showed just the opposite. Children from all backgrounds and cultures expect parents (or other attachment figures) to take care of them when they are distressed (Ainsworth, 1967; Posada, Gao, Wu, & Posada, 1995).

Developmentalists and clinical child psychologists now understand that young children who exhibit no attachment behavior when a parent leaves them and/or returns in a new situation or with strangers, for example, are in fact inhibiting their attachment needs. While this serves as an emotion-regulation strategy, it is a maladaptive one, having been found to be associated in much research with negative current and future outcomes across a range of developmental domains (see Cassidy & Shaver, 2008).

This failure to show attachment behavior upon separation, and especially on reunion, is what many attachment theorists call a "miscue" (Hoffman, Marvin, Cooper, & Powell, 2006;

Marvin, Cooper, Hoffman, & Powell, 2002). The child might move away from a parent and focus on toys upon the latter's return because he is inhibiting his own discomfort, distress, and "wired-in" tendency to seek proximity; the parent, unaware of the child's successful inhibition, may not attempt to approach and comfort the child. The parent's failure to read a cue ("I am distressed as you leave me") and/or to accept the child's "miscue" ("I am sending you a false signal that I am fine even though you left me") results in a relatively stable, self-perpetuating system or "reciprocal dance." Rather than the miscue drawing attention back to the child's original stressful experience, it reinforces the parent's assumption that the child is okay. This only confirms the child's belief that the parent is not available when he feels distressed. There is much attachment research over the past 50 years consistent with the conclusions a) that it is the caregiver who leads this reliably measured dance or reciprocal strategy (e.g., Britner et al., 2005), and b) that the pattern usually originated in the caregiver's own history of close relationships and emotion-regulation (see Cassidy & Shaver, 2008). The caregiving behavior of both parents, as directly observed in the two Strange Situations, was coded, rated, and classified using the Marvin & Britner Caregiver Classification System (Marvin & Britner, 1995; Britner et al., 2005). A standardized description of the reciprocal, synchronized pattern of attachment and caregiving behaviors for each of these dyads was thus available from the Strange Situation.

In addition to the interaction-based Strange Situation, two assessments were conducted with each parent that measured their representational models or internal working models of their important attachment bonds. One was the *Adult Attachment Projective Picture System* (AAP). This assessment presents the parent with an ordered series of picture stimuli portraying attachment events (e.g. separation, illness, being alone). The parent is asked to tell a story about the picture stimulus. The AAP provides information on the quality of the adult's own early

attachment history, known to affect later intimate relationships and the quality of that adult's current thoughts, feelings, and attitudes regarding intimate relationships. The AAP also provides information about the parent's defensive structure and ability/desire to solve relationship-based problems when faced with situations that require providing care, comfort, and assistance to others. This second component is important in recognizing that the parent's caregiving-attachment relationship with a particular child is not simply a reiteration of the parent's experiences from his/her own childhood. These experiences are good predictors for how a parent will respond to stress, including the stress of caring for a child and managing his/her relationship with the other parent. Many individuals who have very difficult and unfortunate histories manage to overcome or "resolve" that history and function very well in close relationships as adults. Research shows that parents who are "flooded" and unable to resolve, or who alternatively "bottle up," the emotional effects of their early history have disordered and high-risk relationships with their children. But even parents whose thinking about their own attachment experiences is ordered may experience severe problems in providing care for a child who, for example, may be chronically ill, or if the caregiving context is chaotic or hostile (Solomon & George, 2006, in press).

Therefore it was important for us to pair the AAP assessment with the Caregiving Interview, an assessment designed specifically to measure parenting representation independent of assessing the parent's own childhood-based attachment representation. The Caregiving Interview yields information regarding the specific current relationship between the caregiver and the child about whom the interview is conducted. Conclusions can be drawn about the caregiver's attitudes, feelings, and thoughts about the child, about him/herself as a parent to that particular child, and about patterns or strategies of parenting that child.

This interview also provides information regarding the parent's defensive structure and ability and desire to solve relationship-based problems, in the context of being a parent rather than the adult relationship context reflected in the AAP. Coding for these instruments was done by Carol George, an expert judge and one of the originators of these assessments (George & Solomon, 2008a, 2008b; George & West, 2001; in press).

Results of the Strange Situation

Strange Situation: Father and Thomas

Father displayed a complex pattern of parenting behavior toward his son. He was very sensitive to his son's signals when Thomas was exploring. That is, he followed Thomas' lead nicely, was not intrusive or controlling, and actively helped Thomas' exploration when needed. He was sweetly affectionate at the beginning of the procedure and "took charge" in a clear, yet supportive and gentle manner when appropriate. He did not "abdicate" his parental role at these times. Thomas, too, displayed at times strong and secure attachment and exploratory behavior, which is generally synonymous with the forensic use of the term "positive interaction." When they first entered the room at the beginning of the procedure, he sat on his father's lap, hugged him, vocalized about wanting to be with him, and then happily played with the toys from his position on his father's lap.

Yet, there were some occasions when Father did not make himself available to Thomas. He briefly "checked out" twice when he was playing with Thomas. Though the time lapse of these interactive failures were brief and Father was not in the technical sense "dissociating," his psychological absence was a cause for concern. Moreover, reunion interaction following separation was somewhat problematic. The pattern of interaction and parental responsiveness

during reunion contributes especially important information regarding the quality of the child-parent attachment relationship. In response to the second separation, Father was aware that his son was distressed (he was observing this through the one-way mirror). Upon reunion, Father acted as if he was unaware of his son's distress while he was absent. He briefly picked Thomas up, but put him down too quickly, and when Thomas misdeed by not approaching him, as if to suggest, "I am fine," Father did not try to discover what Thomas might be feeling and how he might need to be reassured. At the clean up time following the Strange Situation, Thomas dumped out the blocks. Father's response was overly intense and suggested that he was quite angry at this, though he recovered quickly.

Overall, the quality of Thomas' attachment to Father was secure at times, but as his failure to approach his father after a separation suggests, Thomas was also avoidant. In addition, when his father left the first time, Thomas exhibited no behavioral reaction at all. This is an extreme reaction to separation in a child his age. The quality of Father's behavior showed an unusual mix of sincere affection and dismissing behavior (e.g., when he put his son down briskly). This combination of child-parent behavior suggests that Father's parenting and their attachment relationship is problematic and has some features that are considered disordered.

Strange Situation: Mother and Thomas

Unlike Father, Mother was not able to allow her son to freely explore the environment. She hovered too close to him, directing his play. Thomas moved away from his mother as she continued to intrude. Mother was unable to read the cue indicating that Thomas wanted to explore on his own, that he needed her at this moment not as a play-partner but as a secure base for exploration. According to attachment theory, attachment and exploration act in balance. Children use attachment figures as a "secure base" to explore their environment and a "haven of

safety” to which to return if these explorations become distressing (Ainsworth et al., 1978). As naïve observers operating under the umbrella of common sense psychology, we might conclude that the mother is an active parent who demonstrates a desire to stay engaged with her son. This type of interaction might be interpreted as maternal commitment and loving devotion. But attachment theory and research have taught us that a child who is faced repeatedly with this intrusive behavior is likely to inhibit his exploratory behavior and develop an ambivalent relationship with this caregiver.

After the free play, the stranger entered the room. When her son had become engaged in play with the stranger, Mother left the room as instructed. Again, Thomas showed absolutely no behavioral reaction to his mother leaving. Upon reunion, Mother gave her son a short greeting to which he initially did not respond. In response to the second separation, Thomas twice tried to get his mother not to leave the room. Once she did leave, he continued to play and did not show signs of distress despite his earlier attempts to get her to stay. Mother mistook Thomas’ “miscue” for independence, a signal that he felt no distress. Here she behaved just like Father. However, it is noteworthy that Thomas’ response to Mother was more extreme than his response to Father. When Mother left the room for the second time, he pulled on her arm and told her not to leave. This action was an indication of Thomas’ strong need to be near her. But as he did this, he also turned his body 180 degrees away from Mother. This action is hard to execute physically; the awkward juxtaposition of signaling need and turning away from the parent is not a child’s typical attachment signal for proximity or comfort. Attachment researchers have identified patterns such as this one as indicative of extreme conflict between the child’s desire to simultaneously be near and stay away from the parent, and have identified this pattern as “Disorganized/Disoriented” (George & Main, 1979; Main & Hesse, 1990; Main & Solomon, 1990). Notably, when Mother

returned, Thomas managed the distress he had exhibited earlier by avoiding her. During clean up, Thomas was angered by his Mother's attempts to get him to clean up the toys, as revealed by oppositional behavior and taking control of their interaction. Mother's attempts to manage the clean up were such a strong combination of intrusive and ineffective that Thomas was still crying 12 minutes later. At this point, Mother just picked him up and left the building in a manner suggesting rather strong anger toward her son. It was also observed that she made no attempt to soothe him as they waited for a taxi.

The quality of Thomas' attachment to his mother never exhibited components usually associated with security. His attachment could be characterized as disorganized and avoidant, accompanied by some unregulated anger. Her pattern of caregiving behavior is consistent with patterns that are called "Non-Ordered." She showed a shifting pattern of being over-involved or enmeshed with Thomas, dismissing him, and being sufficiently unable to "take charge" of their interaction when necessary that he was encouraged to organize their interaction (i.e., components of a "role-reversed" pattern). Thomas' disorganized-avoidant pattern, combined with Mother's behavior suggests a level of problematic parenting that is more extreme than Father's.

Results of the Caregiving and Adult Attachment Measures

The Caregiving Interview and the AAP provided assessment data with regard to specific results that are germane to parenting that supplement the adult personality assessments and the interactions observed in the Strange Situation.

Father

The Caregiving Interview suggested that Father loves Thomas and enjoys being his father. This quality is particularly evident when Father describes situations when it is just the two of them together. One example was Father telling the story of their engagement in a "co-

construction” pretend game of tea party. These types of games provide important venues for children, not just for intellectual exploration but also to learn how intimacy works by practicing reciprocal enjoyment with another person. Also for Father, these games appear ripe for emotional sharing and feelings of great pride, and can contribute to the mutual joy that is one quality of secure attachment relationships. Research has shown that these forms of intimacy comprise one feature of attachment security in parent-child relationships (George & Solomon, 1989, 2008; Oppenheim & Koren-Karie, 2002; Slade, Grienenberger, Bernbach, Levy, & Locker, 2005).

The interview also demonstrated, however, that Father had difficulty maintaining this quality of intimacy and reciprocity with Thomas. He sometimes steered away from these feelings after expressing them, almost as if he were embarrassed or unsettled by them. On several occasions, Father added remarks that toned down his feelings of joy when he and Thomas were together. At one point in the interview, Father stated, "I don't gush over him when I'm with him." These statements are what attachment theorists consider to be forms of representational deactivation, evaluations that remove the distress experienced from intimacy by creating psychological distance in the relationship. They are associated with more physical distance and removal from intimacy when parent and child are together (George & Solomon, 2008).

Moreover, just as Father distanced himself from feeling joy, he also distanced himself from distress, which was understood during the interview as his attempt to regulate his potentially feeling overwhelmed by distressing feelings. During the Caregiving Interview, he psychologically turned away from discussing Thomas' distress. For example, he described Thomas' upset during separations at day care and when Thomas leaves his custody to return to Mother. Although he knows these moments are very difficult for Thomas, Father could never

fully discuss the steps he took to comfort his son. Father's lack of attention during the interview to the role he needs to play during these separations suggests that he is blocking them out because they are too painful and that Father fears being flooded by feeling.

Paradoxically, Father's interview also demonstrates that he is making genuine efforts subsequently to think about these events, even though he cannot always respond in a timely way when Thomas requires his comfort. Father's reflective and integrative capacity concerning Thomas' distress was reflected in his becoming more aware of his own tendency to distance himself, to cool off, and neutralize these situations. At least at the representational level, Father is beginning to thoughtfully recognize the contributions of his own behavior rather than turning away and shutting off his feelings.

Father's representational caregiving pattern is consistent with patterns called "deactivating." This pattern is typically associated with avoidant attachment in the child. Father's pattern, however, also showed some elements of security as demonstrated through his ability to reflect on Thomas' difficulties in retrospect and Father's genuine enjoyment of togetherness.

The results of the AAP generally reinforced the representational patterns of Father's Caregiving Interview, suggesting that many elements of Father's view of himself as a parent are consistent with his experiences with childhood and adult attachment figures (e.g., Thomas' mother). Like his Caregiving classification, Father's main defensive organization was deactivation, indicated by an adult attachment classification judged dismissing. Adult attachment research suggests that, as a deactivator, Father learned as a child to "armor his heart" against feelings of closeness and comfort. Adults with this predominant mode of attachment defense were most likely pushed prematurely by their parents and given clear signals to act

independently. Father's picture of the primal attachment figure that he carries in his mind (his "internal object") is the "stronger and wiser" other, who primarily guides, explains and participates in daily activities and intellectual pursuits. This figure is not one who comforts and holds when distressed.

Despite these forms of distancing in relationships, the AAP demonstrated that Father has the ability to think deeply about attachment situations in order to try to figure out their origins. This result is consistent with the reflection and thoughtfulness that emerged in parts of Father's Caregiving Interview. Although Father does not appear to be able to fully embrace how threatened or overwhelmed he feels when his own attachment needs are activated, he does seem to be able to moderate his feelings enough to reflect on the links between past and current events. Father appears to be trying to figure out the origins of his behavior and feelings and his contributions to and deficiencies in situations in order to gain a broad perspective on self and relationships. The AAP suggests then that Father is in transition or flux, trying to think actively about and integrate experiences from his childhood and past intimate relationships with being Thomas' father now. Father's AAP response patterns indicate that something is changing in his views of himself as a parent and his role in relationships, and this bodes well for his relationship with Thomas.

In contrast to the elements of mutual enjoyment revealed in being Thomas' parent, Father's AAP suggested that he did not expect mutual enjoyment or closeness in adult attachment relationships. This difference in the findings of the adult attachment and caregiving assessments is important. It suggests that Father's approach to being Thomas' parent can provide elements of security that Father does not expect in intimate adult relationships with romantic partners (e.g., mother) or friendships. It points to the potential of the caregiving relationship in

changing past experience that attachment theorists designate as important in breaking intergenerational transmission of attachment patterns (George & Solomon, 2008b; Marvin et al., 2002; Solomon & George, 2006 in press). This difference points to confidence that Father's desire to think through relationship problems and distress can support making changes in his present relationship with his son and without blurring with his own attachment past.

Mother

Mother's Caregiving Interview suggests that she too is a dismissing-deactivator. Her deactivating defenses create psychological distance from Thomas, interpreted as a defensive posture to make herself less vulnerable to his feelings of distress and to her own feelings of distress over his distress. Mother's particular form of deactivation in the Caregiving Interview shows that she directs more attention to the mechanics of care and solving care-taking problems than to emotions and the intimacy, joy, or distress associated with Thomas' attachment. Mother is proud of Thomas' social skills and she organizes his time so that he can have what she considers the requisite peer experiences. The kinds of behavior Mother praises and her goals for regular "play dates" are appraisals and expectations of maturity greater than developmental psychologists expect for children Thomas' age. She emphasized during the interview her desire for Thomas to be competent, which may be one reason she was so intrusive in Thomas' play during the Strange Situation. The Caregiving Interview suggested also that Mother is at some risk of attempting to use Thomas to meet her own needs for attachment and security.

Mother also diverts her attention from thinking about Thomas' distress during the interview. She rarely registers that his reactions are emotionally distressing, even when she describes reactions that others would say are distressing.

Mother's interview also showed strong elements of disordered caregiving representations, elements that research has shown to be associated with feelings of being helpless and frightened as a parent (George & Solomon, 2008, in press). One feature is Mother's confusion of Thomas' distress with her own distress. She describes a situation in which a young peer refused to engage with Thomas at day care. Her description suggests that Thomas was not that distressed by his friend's rebuff. But Mother was so distressed by this situation that she had to "disappear," leaving the situation to be handled by the day care provider as Mother watched on the side lines. She notes that Thomas did not even know she had not left. These descriptions suggest that her view of being Thomas' parent is a combination of deactivation tendencies with abdication of parenting.

Another element of disordered caregiving is Mother's tendency to "glorify" Thomas as a child who is precocious and remarkably sensitive to the needs of others, his Mother included. To the lay observer, these descriptions can appear lovely and indicative of a sensitive and sweet child. Attachment theorists have shown, however, that such sensitivity is not appropriate for a child Thomas' age and is associated with caregiving role reversal in which Thomas is put in charge of his Mother's emotional needs (George & Solomon, 2008a; in press). Further, glorified children are usually highly cooperative and viewed by other adults (e.g., day care providers, teachers) as exemplary "good children." Glorified children also run the risk of being seen as "one" with their parent. Attachment researchers call this phenomenon merging, a form of role reversal in which the parent is not able to distinguish between the child's needs and the needs of the self (George & Solomon, 2008b). One example where merging is manifest is that separation from the child is viewed by the parent as a loss of a part of the parent's body or self.

In sum, Mother's Caregiving pattern showed a strong mixture of deactivating/dismissing and disordered caregiving representation. This combination is associated with attempts to minimize or ignore a child's distress, substituting competency and peer relationships for attachment needs. Mother's inability to differentiate between her own distress and that of her sons, combined with psychological merging and glorification, do not bode well for Mother's ability to provide for Thomas' security.

The results of the AAP were consistent with the results of the Caregiving Interview. Mother has a dismissing/deactivating defensive posture, in which she denies her needs for intimacy and attachment. Her response themes emphasized achievement and social and intellectual competence as more important than providing comfort. In addition, her responses demonstrated a lack of agency. That is, she is often unable to take action to resolve problems and is inclined toward the view that she does not have control over events in her life. The resulting insecurity and anxiety increases the chance that she will draw on her "internal representation" of Thomas in the Caregiving Interview as someone who is super-competent and adults in attachment relationships (e.g., spouse or romantic partner, own parents) as antagonists. In the longer scope, this is likely to sustain the role-reversed situation in which Thomas' competence provides her with the security evidenced in the Caregiving Interview. Parallel to her Caregiving Interview, Mother's AAP test results suggest that she lacks the reflective capacity to puzzle out her feelings and experiences and take the first steps to containing them and thereby regulating her behavior. She appears to focus only on trying to regulate her emotions, and not on thinking about different perspectives to a situation or problem. This is in contrast to Father's capacity for introspection.

Mother's AAP was judged deactivated, with underlying disorganization and helplessness. The overall deactivated classification shows how Mother protects herself defensively from fear and helplessness associated with her childhood experiences with parents. Unlike Father's developing reflective capacity and mutual enjoyment in his present relationship as Thomas' father, Mother current relationship with Thomas appears to activate her helplessness and fears as a mother, despite attempts to turn her attention away from attachment and caregiving through deactivating defensive maneuvers.

Mother's Caregiving Interview and the AAP results support the results of the Strange Situation. The Strange Situation analysis suggested that Thomas was disorganized and avoidant with Mother. These two adult measures suggest an analogous pattern for Mother's representation of attachment and being Thomas' mother, especially the Mother's current parenting representation. Her focus on achievement, combined with the inability to solve problems and Mother's desire to retreat from others, suggests that Thomas is at greater risk with his Mother than with his Father. While both avoid noticing their son's distress, Mother's merged psychological state with Thomas puts him at risk for becoming the parent to his Mother and responsible for Mother's emotional well-being. The Caregiving Interview and AAP suggest that Father is more likely to mature emotionally than is Mother, especially in his growing ability to think about past and present contributions to relationship problems, especially those contributing to being Thomas' father.

Incremental Validity

We began this article by suggesting that attachment-based measures can provide incremental validity to standard psychological tests in evaluating each adult's abilities as a parent.

The following table summarizes the results of the different tests.

Table 1.

TEST	Father	Mother
Rorschach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Narcissistic issues [Fr=1] -Thinking illogically[WSum6=35] -Introspective [FD=5] -Bottles up emotions but can be reactive [C'=4; FC:CF+C=2:6; Pure C+1] -Strong psychological resources [EA=17.5] -Collaborative [COP=3] -Accurate empathy M=10; no M-Interested in people [Human Content=9] -Psychologically distant [Intellectualization Index = 9; T=0] -Sadness [C'=4] -Dependent [Fd=2] -Passive [Ma:Mp = 4:6] 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Distorted thinking XA%=.53; WDA%=.64; X-%=.42] -Angry and resentful [S=6; S- =3] -Overly reactive [FC:CF+C = 2:4; Pure C =1] -Uninterested in people [Human Content= 1] -Does not value collaboration [COP=1] -Open to experience [L=0.58] -Highly stressed [D=-2] -Limited psychological resources [EA=6.5] -Psychologically distant [Intellectualization Index = 5; T=0] -Vulnerable to depression [DEPI=5] -Idiosyncratic thinking [WSum6=18] -Shies away from emotions [Afr=0.46] -Moderately self aware [FD=2]
MMPI-2	-Open about reporting about himself and not elevated on the validity or the clinical scales	-Defensive about reporting about herself [L= 71; K= 67; S=70]
Strange Situation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -“Dismissing” – not sensitive when his son is distressed -Sensitive when son is exploring, able to scaffold son’s play, not intrusive -Some psychological “checking out” -Overly intense reaction 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -“Dismissing”- took son’s seeming independence as signal that he felt no distress -Intrusive in son’s play -Enmeshed with son -Difficulty taking charge
Caregiving Interview	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Enjoys reciprocal co-constructive play with son -Play provides context for emotional sharing and intimacy -Steers away from intimacy when it becomes too intense [“deactivates” his relationship] -Blocks out Thomas’ distress -Reflection and increasing awareness of his tendency to dismiss son’s distress 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Pride in son’s accomplishments -Deactivates her emotional responses, focuses on the mechanics of caregiving -At risk for seeing Thomas as someone who will fulfill her needs - Abdicates caregiving
AAP	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Learned as a child to “armor his heart” against feelings of closeness -Image of a parent as someone who guides, explains and participates in daily activities rather than comforts. -In transition, thinking deeply about his role as Father to Thomas -Has agency of self, the capacity to take action to solve problems or manage feeling afraid or helpless. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Dismissing stance in which she denies her needs for intimacy -Does not view attachment figures as capable or available to provide comfort and care -Values achievement and social intellectual competence over caregiving -Is unable to engage in effective problem solving -Lacks reflective capacity or problem solving capabilities, which would help her contain her feelings and regulate her behavior

		-Lacks agency of self, capacity to take action. Removes self from others until feelings of fear or helplessness subside. Then carries on.
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While each of Thomas' parents has significant limitations, the cumulative impact of the different tests suggest that Father is more likely to be the parent most able to meet Thomas' needs for attachment, competent exploration and learning, behavior management, and affect management. On the whole, father's patterns of thinking and interaction appear likely to provide a more secure setting for Thomas' development. Both parents were dismissing in their orientation to Thomas' signals of distress, but Mother was more intrusive, less able to follow Thomas' lead and more likely to depend on her son for the satisfaction of her attachment needs. Father was more open on the MMPI-2 and more reality oriented on the Rorschach. He was by far the parent better disposed to having a collaborative relationship with his son. On the AAP and Caregiving Interview, Father showed more psychological-mindedness and gave evidence of being on a journey toward becoming a more competent parent.

As a result, the custody evaluator recommended that if the parents could not live in the same city and share custody, Father be awarded primary custody. Her investigation, of course, had ruled out alcoholism on the father's part and showed little risk that the father would be violent. Would this recommendation have been different without using attachment measures? Probably not. The standard psychological tests, the collateral interviews and home visits may have provided enough evidence that father was the more competent parent. But the evaluator would have made such a recommendation with less confidence, because the scientific validity of the findings would have been much less strong. After all, the data from the collateral interviews supported the view that Mother was instrumentally a fine parent: She arranged for child care, took Thomas to the doctor, made sure he was on time for day care, and that she was on time

picking him up. Mother looked to other adults as if she was the more involved and competent parent, as evidenced for example by the evaluations of Thomas' day care provider. And this impression fits with Mother's emphasis on the importance of maintaining to a tee this societal view of the "good mother." Father was not as assiduous in these areas. Furthermore, by utilizing the attachment measures, the evaluator made the decision for the judge a far more complicated one. The mother's attorney painted the father as a violent drunk who would not be able to remember to pick his child up from school. Even though the psychological testing demonstrated Father's strengths, a judge might easily have been convinced that the mother's proven ability to do the basic parenting trumped Father's psychological strengths.

The attachment measures and the inferences we draw from them, draw our attention beyond the mechanics of care, a common focus for laymen and professionals alike, to its emotional underpinnings. The attachment measures ascribe meaning to the more general findings of adult personality instruments and help us interpret collateral interviews and the values and of individuals speaking on the behavior of Thomas and his parents. Most important, these measures allow a community of researchers and evaluators to compare data from a large number of cases and situations. This ability to compare deepens the scientific credibility of these measures and provides the evaluator with insights not interpolated from subjectively assessed information. Subjectively acquired information often suffices to guide decisions about conducting therapy. But in light of the stakes and the demands of the courts, we need all of the objective information we can bring to bear in making custody recommendations.

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