Attachment in a multicultural context

by
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Welcome to Country & Acknowledgment of Country

➢ I **acknowledge the traditional** custodians of the **land** we have gathered on today. I pay my respects to the Elders past, present and emerging, for they hold the memories, the traditions, the culture and hopes of **Aboriginal** and **Torres Strait Islander** peoples across the nation.
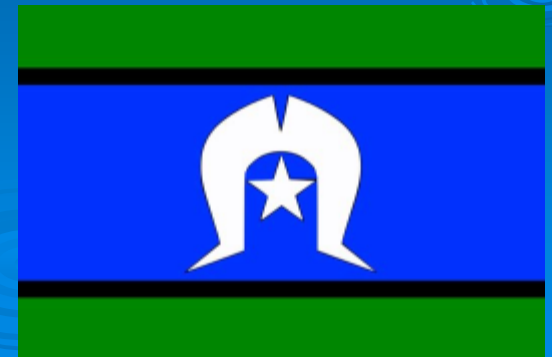
Special Thanks to

➢ **Deborah Cotter, Rima Albert and Sonya Lee Kahn**, Senior Child Protection Workers, for their invaluable input, feedback and guidance on the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders (ATSI) part of this presentation

OVERVIEW

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  - ➢ Pioneers of Attachment Theory
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  - ➢ How does attachment develops?
  - ➢ How does attachment occurs?
  - ➢ Patterns of attachment
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OVERVIEW (CONTINUED)

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  - Is attachment a universal bond across cultures?
  - Do different cultural dynamics impacts on attachment?
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  - Closer to home: Aboriginal children and attachment
  - Key Points

Key Points

➢ Large body of research shows that early Attachment can have life long impacts

➢ In child protection the type of attachment that a child develops with his /her main caregiver is often used to generate opinions about the capacity of a caregiver to meet the child's needs ... BUT...;

Key Points (continued)

➤ Attachment cannot be used as a tool to determine if abuse has occurred as attachment can occur in the presence of abuse

➤ Attachment can be considered as **an instinctual need,** it is the propensity to seek safety and security from the caregiver

➤ Attachment does not equate to love

Why are we talking about attachment?

Studies show that healthy attachment impacts on:

- Brain development and brain functioning
- Memory
- Emotional development
- Capacity to form meaningful relationships with others
- Physiology
- Social skills
- Physical health
- **Belief about the world**
- **Belief about the self**

Why are we talking about attachment? (Continued)

➤ Due to Attachment theory suggesting that early healthy Attachment has long-term consequences on an individual, great emphasis is now placed on 'assessing' the type of attachment that a child has with the main caregiver. Often the type of attachment that a child has, is used as a way to 'determine' if an adult has the capacity to meet that child's overall needs.

Pioneers of Attachment Theory
Edward John Bowlby

➢ John Bowlby was born in1907 in London

➢ He was a psychologist, psychiatrist and psychoanalyst

➢ He created the term Attachment and the key ideas in attachment theory

➢ He died in 1990 (age 83)
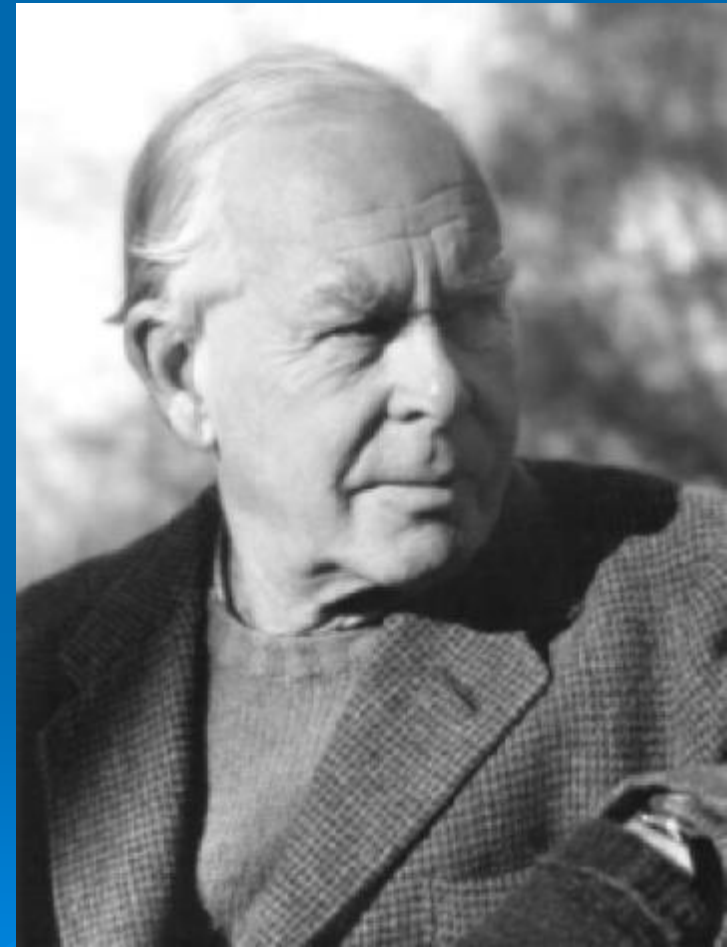
Attachment what is it?

➤ Attachment refers to a set of behaviors that came to the fore when a child (or adult) is stressed and leads the child to seek safety and security with a caregiver

➤ It is not equivalent to love. To love a parent is different to attachment to a parent

Attachment what is it? (Continued)

➢ According to Attachment Theory, Attachment is important over the life span in providing a template (working model) for future emotional relationships. An internal working model is a mental set of expectations about what relationships will be like. It acts as a template for future relationships; therefore a faulty internal working model may have a detrimental impact.

Attachment what is it? (Continued)

It is the child that attaches to the adult, not the other way around. Adults will have feelings and emotions towards the child but the child is not their source of safety and survival.

How does Attachment, develop?

<u>Bowlby argued that</u>:

➤ There is a sensitive period for the development of attachment between the ages of 3 to 6 months

How does Attachment, develops?

(Continued)

➢ Babies are born with an innate propensity to attach. Attachment is essential for survival; babies are helpless, all of their survival needs are met by an adult including feeding, cleaning, clothing, protection. When all these needs are *consistently* met, the baby develops a more secure attachment.

How does Attachment, develops ?

(continued)

➢ Babies behave in ways that elicits responses from their caregiver: smiling, crying…. These behaviours make a caregiver respond to the needs of the baby …. However …

How does attachment develops?

(Continued)

➢ When these basic needs are not met *consistently*, the world becomes an unpredictable place and babies are in danger of developing an unhealthy (insecure) attachment.
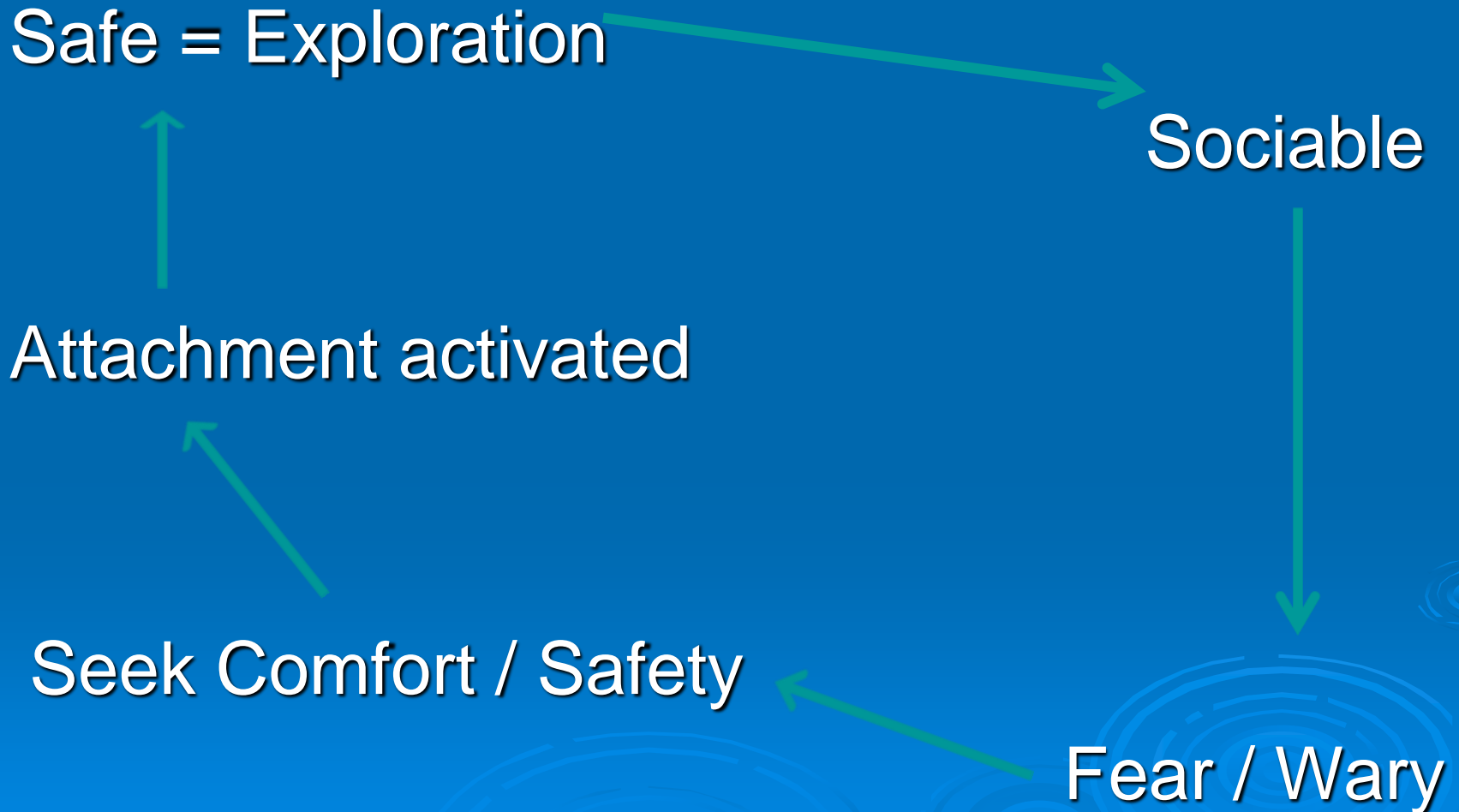
How does attachment develops?

(Continued)

➢ Quick review at how attachment is 'activated'. Children are curious and they like to explore the world. This happens from birth, they explore with their eyes, with their hands and with their mouth

How attachment occurs

Safe = Exploration

Sociable

Attachment activated

Seek Comfort / Safety

Fear / Wary

When attachment is interrupted

Exploration

Sociable

Emotional Problems unhealthy attachment

Attachment NOT activated

Seek Comfort / Safety

Fear / Wary

When attachment goes wrong

Exploration

Emotional Problems unhealthy attachment

Poor Attachment

Seek Comfort / Safety

Confusion

Fear / Wary

How to differentiate type of Attachments

➢ Studies to determine the type of attachment a child has towards his/her primary carer used the 'strange situation' procedure that was developed by Mary Ainsworth.

➢ M. Ainsworth was born in

1913 and worked with

J. Bowlby in England, researching

on maternal – infant attachments. She died in 1999

The strange situation

➤ Mary Ainsworth developed a procedure to observe the reactions of 9 to 18 month old toddlers when placed under mild stress. Se noted their behaviour when they were reunified with their mothers after an experimental brief separation

Type of Attachments
Secure

- **Secure** : the toddler trusts the caregiver/ mum, the toddler can predict that the mum is a 'secure base' she will be back

- **Toddler's behaviour:** when the mum returns the secure toddler looks at mum, they have 'full face and eye contact'. A secure toddler will negotiate his / her needs. The toddler might still cry, be grumpy, be scared, but knows how to 'deactivate' his/her upset (wariness). He /she can be soothed

Secure Attachment

➢ Secure attachment is assisted to develop by a caregiver who is flexible, balanced, and integrated (George & Solomon, in Cassidy & Shaver,2008)

Photo courtesy donated by Ms Steffany Shaw

Type of Attachment
Insecure **Avoidant**

➤ **Avoidant**: the toddler is avoidant of affect in the relationship. There is a less close relationship between mother and child, it can be a 'teaching style' relationship.

➤ **Toddler's Behaviour:** when the mother returns to the room the toddler does not look at the mother and avoid or ignores her, showing little emotions towards her, toddler continues to play on his / her own.

Type of Attachment
Insecure Resistant (Ambivalent)

➤ **Resistant:** The mother's behaviour creates confusion in the child, the mother is not creating feelings of safety

➤ **Toddler's Behaviour:** when the mother returns the toddler tends to approach and then avoid the mother, the toddler will cling to the mother and at the same time will reject the mother.

Type of Attachment
Disorganised

(Main and Solomon, 1986)

➤ **Disorganised**: The parent has abdicated his / her role, has created terrifying experiences for the toddler. The toddler cannot resolve the fear, toddler wants to go towards his/her parent for comfort, but wants to run away from the source of the fear . There is no solution for the way the toddler's feels.

➤ **Behaviour:** the toddler does not know how to feel, how to be soothed, he/she stays 'activated' in the fear / wary response and in needing attachment, in needing to feel secure.

Secure, insecure, Avoidant, Ambivalent Attachment in Mothers Babies, by Marie Coppola, Published on Nov 5, 2013
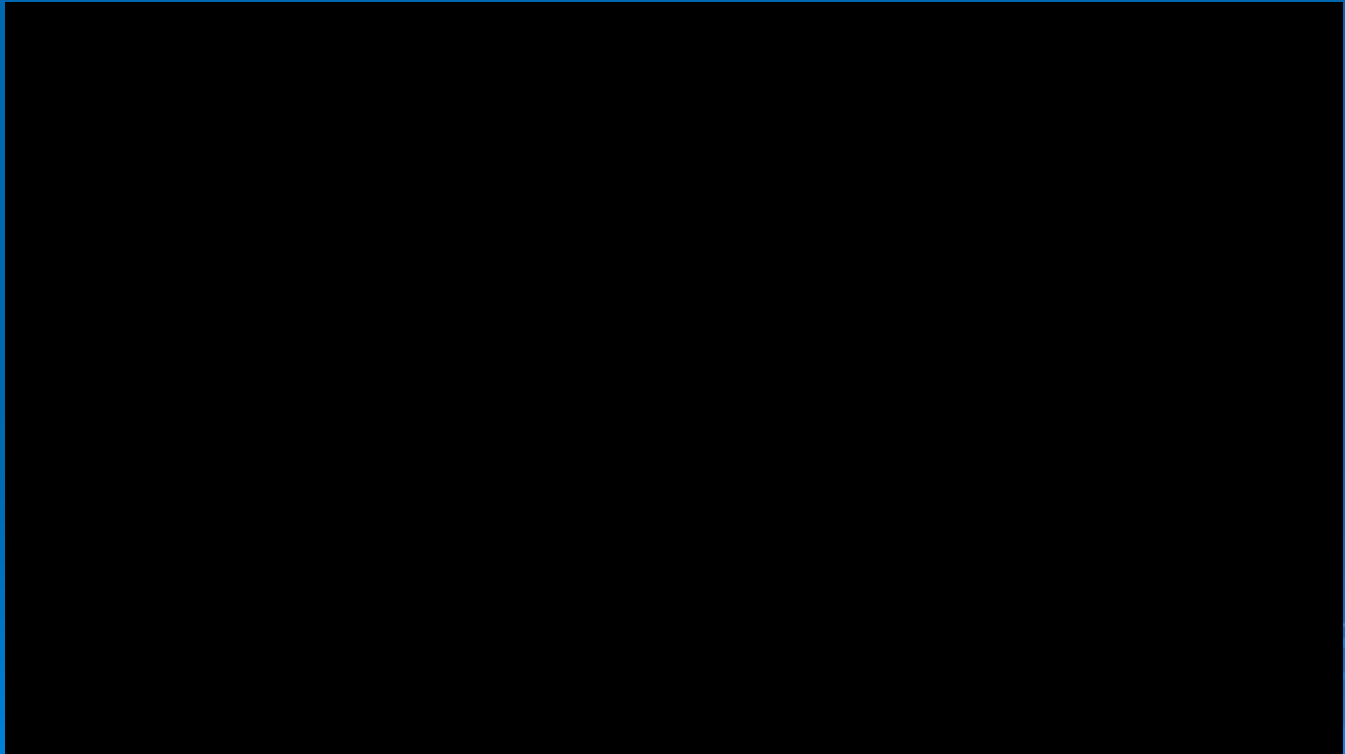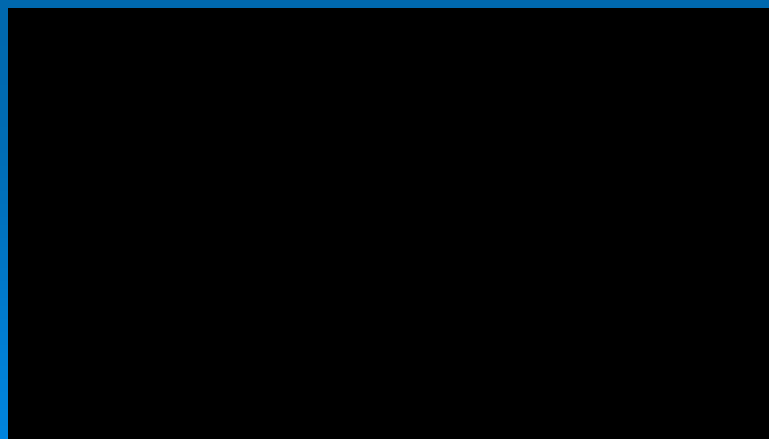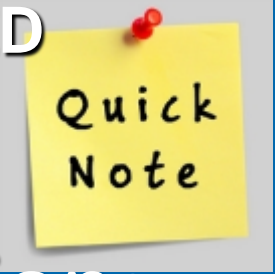
Disorganised Attachment – animated example by David Paterson published on Nov, 11, 2014

Disorganized

Quick Note

➤ In the context of Child Protection; Attachment cannot be used as tool to determine if abuse has occurred as attachment can occur in the presence of abuse;

➤ The propensity to develop an attachment with a caregiver is such a strong biological imperative that once an attachment is formed, even with an abuser, it is difficult to break

In Conclusion: Key Points

➢ Attachment can be **an instinctual need,** it is the propensity to seek safety and security in your caregiver;

➢ Attachment does not equate to love;

➢ Attachment cannot be used as a tool to determine if abuse has occurred as attachment can occur in the presence of abuse.

Any Questions?

Attachment and Culture

Key Points

➢ According to the Attachment Theory the propensity to attach is universal as it is an innate behaviour

➢ Studies until recently have used M. Ainsworth's 'Strange Situation (SS)' to classify the types of attachment, BUT the presumptions of the SS are based on specific Western Cultures. The SS assumes an identical experience of stress and parenting practice in all cultures.

Key Points (Continued)

➤ Enough evidence that all children in the world will attach, but the nature of this attachment varies depending on the culture and parenting practice;

➤ What might appear as an avoidant or ambivalent attachment can be a healthy adaptation to the community of a particular culture.

Key Points (Continued)

➤ Difference between abuse and neglect. Abuse is universally definable, BUT, what is seen as neglect in one culture might not be in another;

➤ When attachment is used to make 'welfare decision or opinion' it is imperative that it is considered the type of attachment in the cultural context.

Culture, what is it?

➢ When we talk about culture, and cultural diversity, it is impossible to over generalise. Any descriptions can never account for the diversity within any culture..

Culture, what is it? (Continued)

➢ …and the diversify of individuals and groups
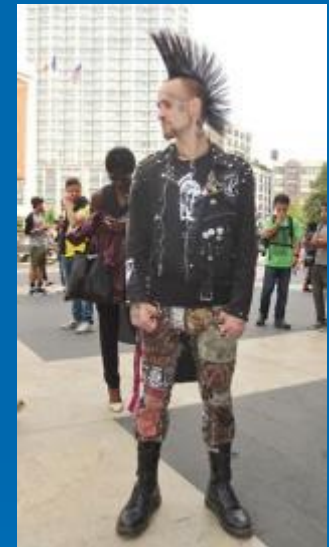
Culture, what is it? (Continued)

➢ In a world where the geographical boundaries between different countries are increasingly becoming blurred, the definition of what is culture is becoming more difficult.

Culture, what is it? (Continued)

➤ Culture is no longer a 'static' dimension stable over time, but is becoming a dynamic system that spread across physical borders and it is evolving through time (Hong & Chiu, 2001)

Culture, what is it? (Continued)

➢ In the past, culture was seen as a set of symbolic meanings located in the minds of people (Spering, 2001).

➢ However culture encapsulates many variables surrounding a group of individuals,

Culture, what is it? (Continued)

➢ One possible definition of culture:

the human-made part of the environment that incorporate both objective elements such as tools and housing, and subjective elements; that is the perception of their social environment (Herskovits, 1955 cited in Spering, 2001).

Culture, what is it? (Continued)

➢ The subjectivity of the perception of the environment holds beliefs, norms and values for that culture (Triandis, Malpass, & Davidson, 1972; Thomas, 1994, cited in Spering, 2001).

Culture, what is it? (Continued)

➢ "cultures are seen as both the <u>products</u> of past behaviour and as <u>shapers</u> of future behaviour, and at the same time, humans are seen as <u>producers</u> of culture and are being influenced by it" (Spering, 2001, p5).

Is attachment a universal bond across cultures?

➢ According to the Attachment Theory it is because it is an 'innate behaviour to attach' , it is a

survival need

Is attachment a universal bond across cultures? (Continued)

➢ Universality thesis of attachment predicts that attachment will occur across cultures, but it does not imply that one of the variations of attachment patterns is universally normative.

Is attachment a universal bond across cultures? (Continued)

➢ If there is enough stress in a culture it will impact on the caregiver and child attachment process.

Do different cultural dynamics impacts on attachment?

➤ Insecure attachment may be elicited in the context of continual threats to national and personal security

➤ Daily stresses increases parental preoccupations and may lead to overprotectiveness and impaired sensitivity to children's needs for exploration

Cross Cultural Studies on Attachment

➢ Uganda 1954-1955 study by M. Ainsworth

➢ Universality of the infant-mother attachment

➢ The presence of multiple caregiver did not interfere with the development of a secure attachment as long as the continuity and quality of the mother-infant was healthy
(Van Ijzedoorn, and Sagi-Schwartz, in Cassidy & Shaver, 2008)

Attachment – Cross Cultural Differences
by Adam, published on Mar 24, 2013

The Gusii Study (Kermoian and Leiderman, 1986)

- Western Kenya
- Population 1.3 million
- Language Ekegusii
- Religion Christianity mixed with Traditional belief

The Gusii Study (Kermoian and Leiderman, 1986)

➤ Gusii childrearing different from Western countries

➤ A) large share of childrearing from the mothers with other caregivers and older siblings

➤ B) division of tasks very strict: mothers provide physical care and responsible for health, other caregivers responsible for leisure, social and playful interactions

The Gusii Study (Kermoian and Leiderman, 1986)

➢ 26 families, infants aged 8 to 27 months

➢ Gusii children are greeted by their mothers and caregivers with a handshake rather than the 'western hug'. Therefore at reunion with adult they anticipate the handshake in the same way as Western children anticipate a hug.

The Gusii Study (Kermoian and Leiderman, 1986)

➢ 61% securely attached to mothers

➢ 54% securely attached to caregiver

➢ Study did not differentiate between the two insecure attachments

➢ Children's exploration was not physical but visual

The Gusii Study (Kermoian and Leiderman, 1986)

➢ Study concluded: the development of differential or person-specific attachment behaviours for 'polymatric' infants is similar to that observed in 'monomatric' Western societies

The Gusii Study (Kermoian and Leiderman, 1986)

➤ However two different context of attachment

➤ Mother: physical care, therefore linked to physical status

➤ Caregiver: stimulation of social, verbal and playful interaction, scored higher in the Bayely Scales of Infant and Toddler Development. It assess cognitive, language, motor, social-emotional and adaptive behaviour

The Gusii Study (Kermoian and Leiderman, 1986)

➢ Note, in this study it was noted that the birth of a new baby increases the risk of insecure attachment

Is there variation of attachment across cultures?

- ➢ Van Ijzendoorn and Kroonenber (1988) Cultural Variation and Attachment

- ➢ A meta-analysis of research comparing findings of Ainsworth's Strange Situation across different cultures

Country	Secure	Insecure / Avoidant	Insecure / Resistant
Germany	57	35	8
Britain	75	22	3
Israel	64	7	29
Japan	68	5	27
China	50	25	25
USA	65	21	14
Netherlands	67	26	7
Sweden	74	22	4

➤ **Insecure avoidant**: avoid or ignore the caregiver showing little emotions when the caregiver departs or returns, little exploration of the room

➤ **Insecure resistant**: the child will explore a little bit the room and often wary of stranger when caregiver is present. When caregiver departs the child is often highly distressed, when the caregiver returns the child is ambivalent

Country	Secure	Insecure / Avoidant	Insecure / Resistant
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What do we know about these countries?

➢ Germany, Netherlands, Great Britain, Sweden and USA are individualistic society;

➢ Japan and China are Collectivist cultures

➢ Israel is both a collectivist and individualistic society

What do we know about these countries? (Continued)

➢ Cultural difference that might account for these results are the way children are reared;

➢ Some cultures promotes independence more than others, i.e. Germany, Netherlands and Sweaden

What do we know about these countries? (Continued)

➢ Cultures who promote interdependency, (Japan) are less likely to promote independence where the children are left alone during their exploration. They promote the importance of caring for one another, to care for the younger siblings or the older family members

Some Parenting Styles

➢ French : 'hands off' parenting, but matriarchal and demand respect;

➢ UK : Rationalising;

➢ South Africa: Heritage and tradition;

➢ China and South Korea: respect for elders;

➢ Nigeria: authoritarian and 'hands on';

➢ Some Western cultures: parents are their children's best friends

BUT

> No study is perfect, when looking a Meta-analysis it is important to look at the number of studies that are used for comparison

Number of studies in Van Ijzendoorn and Kroonenber (1988) Study

- Germany: 3
- Britain: 1
- Israel: 2
- Japan: 2
- China: 1
- USA: 18
- Netherlands: 4
- Sweden: 1

BUT (Continued)

➢ Our own cultural bias

➢ What might appear as insecure avoidant - avoid or ignore the caregiver showing little emotions when the caregiver departs or returns – might be 'normal' cultural behaviour for children who are used to be encouraged to explore alone their environment with less supervision and are used to have main caregiver coming and going.

BUT (Continued)

➢ The validity of the 'strange situation' procedure was questioned as it assumes an identical experience of stress in all cultures.

BUT (Continued)

➤ For Example: Japanese toddlers, when left alone became so distressed that the 'leaving the infant alone stage', had to be abandoned.

This situation was quite unnatural and broke cultural norms for the infants

Closer to Home

➤ The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders (ATSI) perspective is based on a collectivist view of family and social life that sees responsibility for the growing children invested in many people(Anderson, 2014)

➤ ATSI people think of themselves in terms of **their affiliation with other people and their community and country**

(Yeo, 2003)

Closer to Home

➢ Great emphasis on the values of:

❑ Interdependency

❑ Group cohesion

❑ Spiritual connectedness

❑ Traditional links to the land

❑ Community loyalty

❑ Interassistance

(Yeo, 2003)

Closer to Home

➤ In some traditional communities, various mothers will breastfeed the infants, therefore these children will seek comfort from several women, which may be misconstrued as indiscriminate attachment

➤ Traditionally there was no real concept of 'aunts' but 'mothers'

(Yeo, 2003)

Closer to Home

➤ ATSI mothers (caregivers) will anticipate the need of a baby and possible discomforts

➤ Anglo-Australian mothers (caregivers) tends to respond to the physical distress signals of the baby

(Yeo, 2003)

Closer to Home

➢ The strange situation is based on the concept of having a secure base which represents the infants' sense of safety in all aspects of engagement with the world

➢ Sense of safety for ATSI people has being eroded through years of discrimination and the impact of the 'stolen generation'.

(Yeo,2003)

Closer to Home

> ATSI children who are less exposed to non Indigenous adults will shy away more or become more distressed when their main Indigenous caregivers are absent (personal communication Deborah Cotter and Rima Albert, Senior Child Protection Workers, Department of Communities)

Closer to Home

➢ Therefore the ATSI sense of security is derived from having a positive ATSI identity

➢ The security of an ATSI child is **derived from a network of regular caregivers** and acceptance in their community and country

(Yeo, 2003)

Closer to Home

Closer to Home

In an ATSI context, attachment is **NOT** to a single person but to a network of multiple caregivers. This 'multi' attachment allow the children to feel supported emotionally throughout their lifespan

(Yeo, 2003)

Closer to Home

➤ In the Western culture, exploration, autonomy and efficacy are valued and seen as signs of competence.

But

➤ ATSI children live in a collectivist culture with reliance on others. ATSI children are discouraged from exploring their environment prior age 2

(Yeo, 2003)

Australia's Deadliest

Closer to Home

➢ Western culture secure attachment = exploration and independency (<u>toddlers</u>)

➢ ATSI culture secure attachment = show dependency behaviour (<u>toddlers</u>)

(Yeo,2003)

Closer to Home

➢ When the children are older, the parents place more importance on developing the child self-reliance, early independence and capacity to defend themselves when threatened

Closer to Home

➢ In some communities there is more autonomy in all daily functioning

➢ Feeding themselves whenever they want (no compliance with adults' directives)

➢ Coming and going from a house without asking permission

➢ This behaviour can be interpreted as lack of empathic parenting and lack of connectedness to their carer.

(Yeo, 2003)

Closer to Home

➤ Self-expression, affect regulation and emotional openness in Western culture = competence

➤ ATSI Culture expression of negative emotions is discouraged especially towards someone who is older, it is disrespectful.

(Yeo, 2003)

Closer to Home

➢ Western culture: a secure attachment will lead to be a competed adult

➢ The standard for a competent adult is one who is assertive and autonomous

(Yeo, 2003)

Closer to Home

➤ One traditional ATSI definition of a competent person:

'Someone who is an effective role-model, caring, sharing and supporting the community. Someone who is part of the community, gives back to the community, committed to the community and work hard for the community, for example fighting for land rights, take on caring kids'

(Aboriginal workers Rhonda Smith and Betting King, in Yeo, 2003)

Closer to Home, The strange situation

- Western Culture : toddler explore room, when adult leaves some distress, when adult returns toddler seek proximity and is easily soothed = secure attachment

- ATSI Culture: toddler stays in close proximity of adult, adult leaves room great distress and confusion, adult returns toddler might not show distress and might not seek proximity for soothing = ………

Closer to Home

- From a Western perspective lack of exploration = not secure attachment
- Restraint in expression of negative emotions could be assessed as the development of an 'avoidant attachment

But ……

- **In a cultural context it is a healthy adaptation to their community**

(Yeo, 2003)

Closer to Home

- Attachment has being often used as a base for welfare decisions

- If attachment type is used to make decisions in relation to caregiver – child relation, it is important to consider all the possible variables that might be impacting on our observations including our own **cultural biases**

Closer to Home – Abuse Vs Neglect

➢ Abuse is more definable and recognisable across cultures

➢ Neglect can be more subjective

(Long & Sephton, 2011)

Closer to Home – Abuse Vs Neglect

- Sleeping arrangements; co sleeping with children 2+;

- parents sharing bedrooms with younger children;

- Siblings and cousin sharing bedrooms or mattresses.

(Long & Sephton, 2011)

Closer to Home – Abuse Vs Neglect

➢ Western society = overcrowding and unethical

➢ ATSI = positive parenting technique that helps establish attachment between the child and their family members

(Long & Sephton, 2011)

Closer to Home – Abuse Vs Neglect

- Young children independence
- Self-regulation
- Self-reliance
- Responsibility towards younger siblings

Ok for younger child to wander off out of sight of mother if older sibling present

(Long & Sephton, 2011)

Closer to Home – Abuse Vs Neglect

➤ Western society = parentification

➤ ATSI = teaching responsibility towards younger children important for socialisation with kin and community development of social and family responsibility

Closer to Home – Abuse Vs Neglect

➢ Cultural and spiritual needs

➢ Importance of children knowing 'where they are from ' being 'who they are' and becoming 'who they are meant to be'

➢ Case by case basis

(Long & Sephton, 2011)

Closer to Home – coming into care

➢ If the attachment of ATSI children differ from the attachment of Western children, what happens when ATSI children are taken into care?

Closer to Home – coming into care
Attachment Vs Affiliation

➤ Attachment vs affiliation

➤ Western culture over emphasises 'Attachment' and tends to dismiss affiliation

➤ Young ATSI children will attach to the 'welfare' carer, regardless of the carer cultural identity

➤ BUT

Closer to Home – coming into care
Attachment Vs Affiliation

➤ ATSI children who are placed in non-ATSI families will tend to identify themselves with the culture of the 'welfare carer' and will tend to be alienated from their birth culture and community

(Anderson, 2014)

Closer to Home – coming into care
Attachment Vs Affiliation

➢ Experience of emotional difficulties in developing positive relationships

➢ High level of confusion regarding identity and feelings of belonging neither to their natural nor to their 'welfare carer' culture

(Anderson, 2014)

Closer to Home

➢ More and more there is a recognition that ATSI children needs to feel connected to their country, land, culture, spirituality

➢ What is for the 'best interest of the child' needs to have broader spectrum

➢ ATSI children needs to be raised in their **true culture**

Closer to Home

➤ Today there is a skewed perception of how all ATSI culture is / has become

Closer to Home

➢ The 'wound' and the 'introduced destroyers of culture'. The surface poisons (drugs and alcohol) and the subsurface poisons (historical trauma) has created a 'bastardised culture'.

(Long & Sephton, 2011)

In conclusion
Key Points

➢ Attachment is universal, but cultural differences in relation to how attachment is expressed;

➢ M. Ainsworth's 'Strange Situation (SS)' has cultural biases;

Key Points (Continued)

➤ Difference between abuse and neglect. Abuse is universally definable, BUT, what is seen as neglect in one culture might not be in another;

➤ When attachment is used to make 'welfare decision or opinion' it is imperative that it is considered the type of attachment in the cultural context.

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Any Questions?

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