Analyzing development of working models for disrupted attachments: the case of hidden family violence

CATHERINE C. AYOUB, KURT W. FISCHER and ERIN E. O’CONNOR

ABSTRACT This article offers a developmental model of attachment theory rooted in dynamic skill theory. Dynamic skill theory is based on the assumption that people do not have integrated, fundamentally logical minds, but instead develop along naturally fractionated strands of a web. Contrary to traditional interpretations of attachment theory, dynamic skill theory proposes that individuals continue to modify their working models of attachments throughout the lifespan. In particular, working models of close relationships develop systematically through a series of skill levels such that the skills vary across strands in the web and will not automatically form a unified whole. The continual modification of working models is particularly pertinent for the consequences of hidden family violence for individuals’ development. Dynamic skill theory shows how trauma can produce not developmental delay or fixation, as has been proposed previously, but instead the construction of advanced, complex working models.

KEYWORDS: attachment – hidden family violence – trauma – dynamic skill theory

This article addresses attachment, dissociation and the phenomenon of hidden family violence from the perspective of dynamic skill theory. In particular, the focus of this article is on working models of violent and abusive relationships. Applying skill theory to violent relationships demonstrates the developmental complexity of individuals’ working models and the importance of context and emotion in the development of these models.

As children develop cognitive maturity through a series of transformations in acting, thinking, and feeling, they reshape their initial working models of relationships to become more complex, grounded in their specific experiences in close relationships. This grounding specifies an individual world view for each child of self and others in particular role relationships defined by a broad evaluation of life as primarily positive and nurturing or as primarily negative and threatening. These worldviews have their roots in the nature and continuity of infants’ and toddlers’ nurturing relationships with key adults. From these relationships a child learns and incorporates a framework for interactions that forms the foundation for later close relationships – a working model – which according to attachment theory sustains nurturing relationships throughout the life span (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978; Bowlby, 1969 – 1980).

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Attachment is clearly a developmental process. However, most researchers and theorists have emphasized continuity in attachment relationships and styles, especially as they relate to models of close relationships over time, and have neglected analysis of developmental process and change (Bretherton, 1985; Grossmann, Grossmann, & Zimmermann, 1999). Responding to the need for tools to analyze the development, maintenance, and dissolution of attachment relationships, we have devised a framework for depicting and assessing developmental pathways for working models of close relationships. This framework combines concepts and methods for analyzing the development of skills, role relationships, and emotions to provide systematic depictions of the dynamic skills involved in developing pathways for working models.

Exposure to trauma and violence powerfully affects working models and disrupts development of positive and enduring relationships. Children who experience significant and repeated trauma in early childhood, such as physical or sexual abuse or witnessing of violence between parents, typically develop worldviews of relationships that are fundamentally different from children who have not experienced violence. Children incorporate the templates for coping skills developed from disrupted or dysfunctional primary relationships into their own socioemotional structures and transform them at each level in cognitive–emotional development through adulthood.

A key characteristic of attachment relationships is that people follow specific roles with each other, based on cultural norms, individual histories, and joint experiences. For close relationships, attachment theorists typically call these role interactions ‘working models’ (Bowlby, 1969–1980; Bretherton & Munholland, 1999; Shaver & Clark, 1996). For maltreated children, the massive changes that occur in relationships during early development combine with continuities in worldview based on trauma to produce a number of coherent, distinctive pathways to psychopathology and violence. These pathways subsume both continuities in coping mechanisms in violent and controlling relationships and transformations to increasingly complex relational models that connect multiple roles.

VIOLENCE, TRAUMA, AND SOPHISTICATED WORKING MODELS OF CLOSE RELATIONSHIPS

People develop specific working models based on their individual experiences in close relationships, including their families and cultures (LeVine & Miller, 1990). The traditional three or four basic categories of working models—secure, ambivalent, and avoidant, as well as disorganized—provide a starting point for analysis but do not capture the range of variation in models developing over time. According to attachment theory, children form varying models of relationships based on caregivers’ abilities to provide them with safety and security. However, diverse components of working models, beyond the dimension of security, are needed to describe the development of alternative pathways based on trauma as well as to examine the formation of close relationships, such as romance and friendship, in nontraumatic situations.

In their early forms, working models primarily incorporate young children’s own motives and experiences in attachment relationships. However, by approximately four years of age, children begin to recognize that attachment figures’ emotions and
motives can differ from their own and incorporate these differences into their attachment strategies. At this point, individuals' attachments become goal-corrected partnerships in which their working models incorporate their own intentions and desires as well as their understandings of others' intentions and emotions (Marvin & Britner, 1999). Working models of close relationships depict development, maintenance, and dissolution of attachments in terms of general role relationships specifying particular types of interactions and accompanying emotions (Fischer & Ayoub, 1994, 1996; Watson, 1984). The development of these patterns of interactions is constructed from both experiences in specific close relationships and the emotions tied to those relationships (Fischer, Shaver & Carnochan, 1990a, Frijda, 1988, Lazarus, 1991). In these models, emotions and relationship models are not only internal experiences but also adaptive reactions. Such models, for example, may assist children in attaining closeness with an abusive, yet important, adult. However, these models may also inhibit children from forming effective relationships with others. For example, a maltreated child may learn to act timid with a maltreating parent to ally their anger. Such timidity may save the child from some abuse, however, may result in their being ignored by other adults thereby making them vulnerable to ineffective relationships with adults.

Models are thus grounded in specific activities and experiences with particular other people, who in Gibson’s (1979) term ‘afford’ (make possible and contribute to) the interactions and models. Based on their working models, people evaluate how a situation relates to their goals and concerns in relationships, and react emotionally based on that evaluation. The dynamic skill system for analysis of the development of close role relationships integrates these components to characterize individuals’ working models of their relationships.

People construct their working models of close relationships based on major role relations that they experience first as young children with one or more caregivers, then within the larger family, and finally through other affiliations. As individuals mature they build increasingly complex models that connect and separate their multiple roles, moving for example from $ME_{GOOD}$, and $ME_{BAD}$, to SELF$_{COMPETENT}$ or SELF$_{TYRANT}$. Roles are organized within the context of the individual’s current interactions as well as in relationship to the specific people engaged in these interactions. Roles are also molded by the emotions generated from the interactive exchange. Through assimilation, some stability in models is established. In particular, representations of previous interactions, with important individuals, bias individuals’ expectations for and perceptions of experiences with other attachment figures (Bretherton & Mulholland, 1999). In adult intimate relationships, the coordination of the pair’s interactions forms a shared working model that continues to shape the relationship and that later serves as a model for other relationships. The meaning of the model may vary for each partner, but the interactional composition of the dance between partners fits an identifiable pattern, which itself develops over time.

Developmental webs and fractionation

Within skill theory we make several assumptions about development that are distinct from traditional concepts. Our understanding of the changes and continuities of the development of working models is based on these distinctive assumptions about the nature of pathways traversed by individuals. A pathway forms a web of multiple developing strands, as shown in Figure 1 (Fischer & Bidell,
1998), rather than a single ladder of stages (the classical developmental assumption). This developmental web is the norm for the full range of skills from relationships to reading. People do not have integrated, fundamentally logical minds, but instead develop along naturally fractionated strands of the web, which under supportive conditions can be potentially integrated over time. These assumptions lead to the conclusion that as working models of close relationships develop systematically through a series of skill levels, the skills will vary across strands in the web and will not automatically form a unified whole. Unification comes only with specific coordination of skills across strands.

**Childhood trauma, violence and working models**

Previously it has been suggested that individuals, who experience trauma, may be unable to adequately update their working models beyond early childhood. Specifically, Bowlby (1980) theorized that individuals may engage in defensive exclusion through which they ward off perceptions, feelings and thoughts that may inflict anxiety and suffering (Bretherton & Mulholland, 1999). If this defensive exclusion precludes the incorporation of pertinent information into working models, Bowlby suggested, the attachment system may be misregulated or deactivated. Bowlby further hypothesized that due to defensive exclusion, children may develop two irreconcilable working models of self and attachment figures. One set may be consciously available but based on incorrect information while another set may be consciously unavailable yet reflect the child’s actual experiences (Bretherton & Mulholland, 1999).

More recently researchers have theorized that maltreated children typically evidence disorganized and apathetic attachment (Cicchetti, 1989; Crittenden, 1985, 1988). These children have been described as demonstrating moderate-to-high

*Figure 1* Two developmental webs illustrating relatively integrated and dissociated pathways
avoidance coupled with moderate to high resistance, which has been most commonly seen as crankiness or aggression that seemed out of context. Crittenden, who studied disorganized attachment among infants, reported that these infants demonstrated stereotypic or maladaptive behaviors such as cocking the head or huddling on the floor, when reunited with their mothers subsequent to brief separations from them. These children’s behaviors have been described as both disorganized and disoriented. For example, Main and Solomon (1986, 1990) described children with disorganized attachments as lacking consistent strategies for dealing with the stress of separation in the Strange Situation (Lyons-Ruth & Jacobvitz, 1999). These inconsistent strategies are theorized to be associated with parenting behaviors that are frightened and/or frightening. Parents of disorganized children often engage in a range of frightening behaviors from sudden looming movements to abuse. These behaviors place the child in an unresolvable paradox as the parent is the attachment figure and is also the source of fear. The consequence of this paradox, according to many researchers, is a disintegration of the infant’s attachment strategies (Lyons-Ruth & Jacobvitz, 1999).

We, however, propose that the behaviors of ‘disorganized attachments’ are neither disorganized nor disoriented. Instead, they represent a trauma dance composed of adaptive fight-flight coping mechanisms that evolve in response to trauma and physical threat and that eventually produce distinctively complex developmental pathways of highly sophisticated adaptation to traumatic environments (Fischer & Ayoub, 1996; Fischer et al., 1997).

Terr (1991) indicates that psychological trauma renders the young person temporarily helpless and breaks past ordinary coping and defensive operations. Traditional coping mechanisms are replaced by responses that are aimed at accommodation and adaptation in an attempt to regain control and promote survival by avoiding, preventing, or minimizing traumatic experience (Barnett, Manly, & Cicchetti, 1993; Raya, 1996). Repeated exposure to trauma or the experience of overwhelming trauma results in the generalization of these coping mechanisms, which overtake more traditional coping skills and alter a child’s view of self and others in relationship. For children who experience trauma, due to an attachment figure’s behavior, their working models must incorporate extreme approach/avoidance responses. These children must approach their attachment figure for caregiving but avoid them when they appear likely to engage in abusive behaviors. These children’s behavioral maneuvers, which compose a trauma dance, include alternating between avoidance/flight and approach, which if threatened may result in a fight response. Therefore, these children’s attachment behaviors may appear disorganized and fragmented.

As children mature, they develop more complexly organized strategies for maintaining relationships with attachment figures. Specifically, by approximately 6 years of age, children who demonstrated disorganized attachment behaviors in infancy develop strategies to control their interactions with caregivers. Controlling children try to directly or indirectly manage the caregiver, using either a punitive or a caregiving strategy. Children with punitive strategies boss the caregiver, usually either in a rejecting or humiliating manner. In comparison, children with caregiving strategies act overly cheerful or solicitous (Jacobvitz & Hazen, 1999). These controlling behaviors are necessary because in cases of disorganized attachment, the child’s and parent’s attachment systems are activated under the same conditions, with the parent relinquishing his/her caregiving at the time of peak need for the child. To receive necessary nurturing, therefore, the child must behave in a manner to activate
the caregiver’s caregiving system. The child’s behaving in either a controlling or caregiving manner will achieve this end (West & George, 1999). When the child behaves in a controlling–punitive manner, the parent’s punitive–caregiving system is activated as he/she is cajoled into disciplining the child for inappropriate behaviors. The child’s taking a parentified stance with the parent, on the other hand, activates a caregiving interchange between the child and parent thus engaging the parent’s nurturing–caregiving system.

Traumatized children may also develop more rigid skills than non-traumatized children, with emotions commonly either suppressed or overly intense, often with alternation between suppression and intense expression. This controlled splitting develops into complex, sophisticated dissociative skills. The two webs in Figure 1 illustrate different degrees of fractionation or dissociation: The left-hand web shows modest fractionation between strands with a general tendency towards integration, while the right-hand web shows a stronger dissociation between two subsidiary webs. On the other hand, both webs show approximately the same general levels of development along the strands. Recurrent childhood trauma and violence produces developmental webs like the one on the right. In contrast to what is described in traditional psychoanalytic theory, maltreated or traumatized children do not demonstrate developmental delay or fixation of their relational models, nor do they show disorganization or incoherence (Cicchetti, 1989; Crittenden, 1985; Solomon & George, 1999). Instead their socioemotional development follows a fundamentally different relationship pathway, which in its own terms is both developmentally advanced and coherent.

DEVELOPMENTAL ORGANIZERS: EVALUATION AND HIERARCHICAL COORDINATION

These distinctive pathways for emotional trauma arise from two central organizers of developing close relationships: the evaluation dimension (positive–negative, approach–avoidance) of emotions, and the natural cognitive development from separation and global organization to coordination with differentiation of complex skills (Fischer & Ayoub, 1994; Fischer et al., 1997; Piaget, 1936/1952; Werner, 1957). We will use these two organizing principles to examine the development of individual working models across the life span. To ground our argument, we will examine a specific case focusing on development of abusive behavior in close relationships from childhood through adolescence into adulthood.

Emotions are central organizers of developing relationships, producing natural affective splitting of development into separate positive and negative strands. Biases or constraints growing from positive and negative experiences organize action and thought from birth and thus shape development, producing a developmental web that is naturally split between positive and negative (Fischer et al., 1990a; Sullivan, 1953). In affective splitting, a person separates two people, objects, events, or aspects of a context into positive and negative, even though to some other observer the two items are neither really separate nor simply positive or negative (Fischer & Pipp, 1984; Kernberg, 1975; Kohut, 1971). Affective splitting is normative in early development, as documented by research on positive and negative (good and bad, nice and mean or nasty) social interactions and emotions (Fischer & Ayoub, 1994; Harter & Buddin, 1987), and it is also important for development of psychopathology. In cases of abuse
and other trauma, affective splitting typically shapes the coping strategies that result in development of distinctive personality organizations.

Recent research in trauma and psychopathology supports a connection between the repeated trauma of abuse and a pervasive array of changes in thinking and emotion that involve serious disturbance (Cole & Putnam, 1992; Herman, 1992; Terr, 1991). Assessments of genetic and environmental contributions to trauma-linked dissociation have found a powerful contribution from experience and little contribution from genetics (Waller & Ross, 1997; Waller & Shaver, 1994). In particular, strong associations have been reported between disorganized attachments in childhood and dissociative disorders in adulthood. Symptoms of dissociation are typically described as basic fragmentations in a person’s sense of self and malignant feelings of inner badness at the core of beliefs about self and world. This correlation appears to reflect an early construction of incompatible, simultaneous representations of the self and a single other person.

In this article we explore the development of working models of attachment in children and adults who have experienced significant and repeated physical and emotional abuse and loss in early childhood. We will focus especially on abuse that leads to development of a split between public and private worlds that are dissociated as distinctly positive and negative. These splits and dissociations are illustrated through a detailed case analysis.

Examined in light of the developmental web with its natural fractionation and potential integration at later levels, trauma responses, which are usually seen as unintegrated, have a different interpretation. The skills arising from trauma are integrated in unusual ways, actively separated by powerful emotions and contextual differences and unconsciously coordinated to maintain dissociation and splitting. A child who desires from the caregiver a loving and positive attachment relationship and experiences an intermittently negative and hurtful interaction develops a working model that includes both approach and avoidance held in exaggerated, actively split forms. As the child develops, the complexity of these actively split skills increases systematically as interaction patterns generalize and differentiate to broader environmental contexts, producing solidified working models. The result is that the developmental web itself is organized around the coping mechanisms of coordinated splitting and dissociation.

**DEVELOPMENT OF COORDINATED DISSOCIATION AND SPLITTING IN WORKING MODELS**

Active dissociation is a developmental accomplishment when viewed from a dynamic skills perspective. A person must create a coordination to actively keep elements of working models separate from each other. With development, people can construct more and more complex and sophisticated coordinated dissociation, actively separating components of their relationships and interactions in complex ways (Freud, 1936/1966; Haan, 1977; Noam, Powers, Kilkenny, & Beedy, 1990; Vaillant, 1977). The strong forms of active dissociation that are often described in characterological psychopathology reach a mature form during adolescence and early adulthood, with the capacity to build complex abstract skills coordinating many components of action, thought, and feeling (Fischer & Ayoub, 1994; Fischer & Pipp, 1984). Precursors are typically childhood traumas, which have altered and shaped a
child’s developing response to the world and construction of working models. Contrary to the belief that children may be too young to understand trauma and therefore remain unscathed, their vulnerability is increased because of their limited abilities to cognitively integrate and separate affective elements in complex ways for self-protection.

For children and adolescents exposed to maltreatment and trauma a common framework of working models extends across the many transformations in development. Relationships are organized powerfully around splitting of positive and negative for self in relationship with others. This polarization of affectively loaded exchanges continues across reorganizations with development. To cope with growing up maltreated, children develop along a distinctive pathway, adapting to the trauma they experience to avoid loss or abandonment of their caregivers. This controlled splitting serves two purposes in assisting individuals to cope with their experiences. First, separating positive and negative emotions, regarding specific relationships, assists individuals in developing attachment relationships with important, but abusive, figures in their lives. Second, it permits them to function in some areas of their lives unaware of other’s malicious behaviors towards them.

A common pathway for maltreated/traumatized individuals is dissociation of themselves into an acknowledged but superficial positive self and an unacknowledged, unworthy, threatening negative self. The positive self presents in publicly structured situations and responds to most direct questions about interactions and relationships, appearing as good, competent, independent, and self-sufficient. The negative self may be victim or tyrant, or may vary between those two roles. A person developing along this kind of pathway spends much energy attempting to ward off the underlying negative self view and the threatening working model of relationships that predicts pain and distrust in interactions with others. In clinical practice we find considerable variation in the extent of isolation between the good and bad senses of self. With some adults, the separation is so powerful that the negativity of the self and the models of violent and maltreating attachments are kept out of consciousness. A powerful example of this dissociation is the case of Marilyn van Derbur (van Derbur Atler, 1991). When she was a child, her father abused her secretly at home at night. During the day and in public, however, Mr. van Derbur was a prominent, respected citizen who showed no signs of being abusive. Marilyn’s night time abuse, by her outwardly respectable father, led her to develop two dissociated worlds—the successful, respected and loved, good public child of the day versus the secret, hated and ashamed, bad private child of the night. Ms. van Derbur was so thorough in sustaining this dissociation that she was highly successful in school and public life and as a young adult was chosen to be Miss America. Eventually, in the face of dark feelings and personal problems, she came to recognize the co-existing worlds of her abusive childhood and attempted to integrate them.

Affective splitting, a sub-category of dissociation, is pervasive in human activity and experience because emotions are such potent forces for fractionation, acting as biases or constraints that organize action and thought into particular socioemotional scripts. Normal affective splitting is based primarily in passive (uncontrolled) dissociation, developing from a state of spontaneous splitting induced by an emotional bias. When young children are in a strongly polarized affective state (negative or positive), they are unable to consider the opposite state (Fischer & Ayoub, 1994; Harter & Buddin, 1987; Sullivan, 1953). Older children and adults can construct skills to coordinate across the affective split, but the splitting tendency
remains throughout life. It can be limited but not eliminated. On the other hand, traumatic experiences commonly induce active dissociation and splitting, in which a person seeks to maintain a separation of distinct, typically positive versus negative components of working models.

For example, a person may dichotomize or split the world of people and events as black or white, wonderful or terrible, going beyond the common tendency for affective splitting to shape interactions to support this dichotomy – a defining characteristic of affective splitting in the clinical literature, as described by Kernberg (1975) and Kohut (1971). In adolescents and adults, this active dissociation, triggered by powerful fears of doom, is sophisticated developmentally even though in its polarization it bears some resemblance to the concrete, polarized thinking of the preschool child. The capacity for complex, abstract thinking provides multiple complex connections within the developmental web that a person uses to maintain affective splitting in a variable, inconsistent environment.

Within the attachment literature, a common pathway is described from childhood abuse and maltreatment to disorganized attachment in early childhood and controlling behaviors in later childhood and early adulthood. Previous work on disorganized attachment, however, has not extensively addressed how disorganized infants develop controlling strategies as older children. Dynamic skill theory offers an explanation for disorganized infants’ development of coherent strategies in later childhood and adulthood.

Infants and young children with disorganized attachments have multiple, incompatible models of the self and an attachment figure (see Liotti, 1999). These models are not effectively compartmentalized and thus are all consciously available to youngsters. Children, therefore, approach others with multiple models and appear unorganized and incoherent. As individuals mature, their skills for active dissociation develop such that the number of working models of relationships consciously available to them decreases. Individuals can then consolidate these fewer models to develop coherent and controlling strategies to interact with attachment figures. In adulthood, individuals’ skills for active dissociation and compartmentalization develop further. Individuals may develop highly advanced skills to compartmentalize and dissociate models of attachment such that they may be unable to consciously access any models of attachment related to trauma or loss. This compartmentalization and dissociation may be manifested in the high rates of ‘unresolved’ and ‘can’t classify’ attachment styles, as measured on the Adult Attachment Interview (George, Kaplan & Main, 1984), found among survivors of childhood trauma. Adults with these attachment styles are unable to adequately access memories of previous attachment relationships and appear disjointed in the Adult Attachment Interview, demonstrating their inability to consciously access all previous attachment related memories.

The developmental progression from disorganized ‘fight/flight’ patterns of interaction described in young children to the nurturing or aggressive patterns that enhance the child’s control as they transition into school also depends upon the evolution of the child’s cognitive skills in light of their working models of abusive relationships. In the construction of role relationships, different meanings become salient depending upon the child’s level of understanding; these meanings are evaluated through a sequence of levels of representation that move the child from reflexes to actions to representations and finally to abstractions. Young children (2 years old) construct single representations for social categories and depend upon these constructions to approach or avoid their abusive or neglectful caregiver, hence
the development of the ‘disoriented’ and ‘disorganized’ behavior of the child with the unpredictable, abusive caregiver. However, by age 4 children typically move beyond single categories to form representational mappings for social roles based on their working models. In this way they construct true social relationships; with this newfound cognitive skill set, children can place the behaviors of others into categories and ultimately identify roles. It stands to reason that they will develop organized roles for themselves. As children move into concrete operations (Fischer, Shaver, & Carnochan, 1990a) they construct representational systems for role intersections, which account for issues across time and space. These developmental transformations allow the children with disorganized patterns of attachment to assume a style of interaction that continues to serve as a trauma-protective mechanism for dealing with abusive caregivers. It is likely that such patterns will be more rigidly employed than those of non-traumatized children as the consequences of testing flexible and variable models is risky when the holding environment is dangerous.

Pathways arising from abuse and trauma, therefore, generally share a negative bias and predominance of dissociation and splitting, but they vary in many important ways, depending upon type and severity of maltreatment, timing and recurrence of trauma, children’s emotional reactions, and the presence of additional longitudinal stressors or protective factors (Cicchetti & Lynch, 1993). Consequently traumatic experiences lead to diverse developmental pathways, such as dissociative identity disorder, Munchausen by proxy, and hidden family violence. In this article we will focus on hidden family violence.

HIDDEN FAMILY VIOLENCE

In hidden family violence, children grow up in a family that rigidly separates a private, violent world from a public, benevolent one – dissociating the physically and emotionally abusive private world of the home from the well behaved public world of school, church, and community. These children gradually internalize or appropriate (Rogoff, 1990), this separation and construct their own dissociation based on it (Fischer & Ayoub, 1994; Fischer, Hand, Watson, Van Parys, & Tucker, 1984). Hidden family violence is thus built around a rigid social–situational structure that maintains a sharp dissociation between public and private domains.

In early development several factors conspire to produce and reinforce this public/private dissociation including context, task, secrecy, helplessness, punishment, emotional experience, and affective splitting. As a result, children growing up in this situation develop isolating dissociation, which is a strong form of compartmentalization (Noam, 1986), in which public and private worlds are kept separate without integration and affective splitting is engaged. As previously discussed, development moves along two dissociated pathways, one for a public, ‘good’ self and other participating in more conventional and distant interactions and a second for a private, ‘bad’ self and other participating in intimate interactions within the family. The support of the many contextual and emotional factors marking public versus private initially produces a natural passive dissociation that isolates the domains from each other. With development, children and adolescents growing up in hidden family violence develop skills that actively maintain the isolation of the two worlds, transforming from passive to active dissociation.
In the kind of hidden family violence that we have encountered most frequently, children experience private physical and emotional abuse, as well as witness violence to other important adults in their lives. Our developmental model will focus on this pattern of hidden family violence, although it is important to recognize the variation in types of adaptations to child maltreatment, even within the dissociative spectrum (Putnam, 1994). This type of hidden family violence is illustrated by the case of Roger, a case that was described initially by Fischer & Ayoub (1994).

Affective splitting, as an adaptation to maltreatment, appears as early as the first half of the second year. The splitting is especially pronounced in children who have been not only physically threatened and abused but also emotionally berated. These toddlers begin to actively inhibit or avoid some negative emotional expressions, particularly involving activities or characteristics of their caregiving parent. They display conventional but ingenuine positive affect, or they adopt a caretaking, parentified stance that expresses their negative bias (sometimes indirectly) with them in control (Ayoub, Raya, & Fischer, 1993). Other studies describe similar avoidance and false positive displays in young maltreated children as well as sequella in adulthood (Main & Hesse, 1990). These toddlers and preschoolers also show another kind of splitting that is based on their perceptions of the power of others. To adults, whom they perceive as powerful and threatening, the children often defer and inhibit negative affect; but with peers and adults, whom they perceive as less powerful, they are often aggressive.

Children experience sexual, physical, or severe emotional abuse at home and not in school or other public places, and as a result context produces passive dissociation. Also, at home children’s tasks or activities are typically different from those in schools, stores, churches, or other public places. Parents in hidden-violence families are secretive about their life at home and forbid their children from talking about it, especially with outsiders. Violating this prescription can lead to severe punishment. Dissociation is supported by context in hidden family violence. In addition, affective splitting is promoted by the distinctness of children’s emotional experience with their family in public versus in private. Outside the home, their parents are polite and overtly kind to their children, while inside the home they are often abusive tyrants. The home situations are dominated by anger, which follows the prototypical script in Table 1 (Fischer, Shaver & Carnochan, 1990b), overlaid with secrecy and complicity among family members.

A MODEL OF HIDDEN FAMILY VIOLENCE AND THE PUBLIC–PRIVATE DEVELOPMENTAL PATHWAY

This pattern of hidden family violence develops through a sequence of levels of isolating dissociation, moving gradually over many years from representations of concrete agents in social interactions to abstractions of intangible personality and motivational characteristics. Early in this development, the public/private split in young children is maintained by the contextual supports provided by their family’s separation of public and private worlds and by the distinctive organizing emotions in the two worlds. Young children learn mostly to shift from one domain to the other based on contextual factors. They do not consciously coordinate the domains but instead use the mechanism of shift of focus, the simplest kind of association between two skills, requiring no true coordination (Fischer, 1980; Fischer & Bidell, 1998). The development of sophisticated active dissociation and fragmentation is demonstrated
in the case of Roger K, who struggled with hidden family violence from an early age (see Figure 2).

At 3½-years, when alone in his playroom, Roger enacted a story about his father being mean to him. First, Mr. K said, ‘Roger, shut-up! You are the stupidest boy. You will never learn. You embarrass me; you must not be my son. Your mother must be a slut! Slut, slut, slut!’ In response, Roger banged the trucks together until one of the toys broke. Suddenly he panics and hides the broken toy, knowing that his father will rage at him for this transgression. ‘You dumb boy! How many times have I told you not to break your toys? You are stupid, stupid, stupid, just like your mother!’

Later, when Roger was playing with his baby sister he called her a slut and pushed her forcefully into the chair. He ran from the room as she cried. When asked by his mother what happened to his sister, he said, ‘I don’t know, Mommy. Poor baby, poor baby.’

Child victims, such as Roger, are caught between their need to protect parenting relationships and their experience of physical injury, threat, and anger. They become actors who do not know they are acting, living like chameleons who shift colors with shifting adult demands. Based on these private lives, the children develop a sense of badness, and simultaneously they start to identify with the aggressor-tyrant. Eventually, as they grow up, they often take on the tyrant role. This kind of family produces an etiology for an abuser who presents a good face in public while being sadistic, abusive, and controlling in private.

At 2 to 2½ years children develop fluent control of representations of individual agents, such as father, mother, and self. Isolating dissociation starts with a shift-of-focus process, in which, for example, a child becomes anxious when his or her father becomes angry and threatening. They see themselves as negative, $ME_{BAD}$, and try to

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Table 1  Prototypical script for anger

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<tr>
<th>Antecedents: illegitimate interruption, violation, or harm</th>
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<td>Someone or something violates the person’s wishes or expectations, interferes with the person’s freedom of movement or goal-attainment, hurts or insults the person, and/or demeans the person’s status.</td>
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<tr>
<td>This interference or harm is seen as illegitimate, as something that should not happen and that the person should not allow.</td>
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<tr>
<th>Responses: vigorous protest, attack, retaliation</th>
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<tr>
<td>The person’s behavior and thought becomes organized and energized to protest, fight, or retaliate, so as to restore justice, freedom of movement, proper recognition, and the like.</td>
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<td>The person looks and sounds angry (e.g., red face, furrowed brows, raised voice) and moves in a threatening or exaggerated way.</td>
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<tr>
<td>The person becomes preoccupied with the situation that induced the anger and insists repeatedly that he or she is correct, deserves better treatment, etc.</td>
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<th>Self-control procedures: suppression and redefinition</th>
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<tr>
<td>The person may try to suppress or hide the anger or redefine or remove the situation so that anger is no longer called for.</td>
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Adapted from Fischer, Shaver, & Carnochan (1990b)
shift from this negative self-representation to what they think their father wants, \textit{ME\textsubscript{GOOD}}, as illustrated in figure 2 by the line for Rp1: Agents. Most children show
such shifts normally in reaction to their caregivers’ anger, as when 3-year-old Roger heard his mother sounding worried and imitated or reflected her concern. When parental upset leads to abuse, as it did with Roger’s father, children often go beyond the normal reaction, seeking to dissociate the two poles by maintaining vigilance for the slightest hint of negativity and then shifting unconsciously to the positive, $ME_{GOOD}$ or $ME_{NICE}$, in hope of avoiding the negative, $ME_{BAD}$. In this first crude skill for dissociation, a child’s attempt to defend against $ME_{BAD}$ by shifting to $ME_{GOOD}$, requires contextual support. If the context supports only the negative representation, the child will have great difficulty sustaining the shift.

At this age non-abused children also start to distinguish private and public actions, separating for example being with their family at home from visiting a friend’s house or playing in the park. This shift between representations of the two worlds starts the appropriation or internalization of proper behavior in private and public, mostly keeping a focus on $ME_{GOOD}$, in public and saving $ME_{BAD}$ for private settings, as every parent has experienced. Just as young children who are not maltreated commonly slip up in maintaining the distinction between public and private behavior, so do abused children; but they are beginning to learn a rigid separation. When they are in the playground, they must be good and proper, not acting out the private $ME$s of their abusive interactions at home, or else the abuse at home becomes more severe.

This isolating dissociation allows $ME_{PUBLIC}$ to be sustained easily over $ME_{PRIVATE}$ only if the context specifically supports the public representation. The same limit was present for the simpler isolating shift from $ME_{BAD}$ to $ME_{GOOD}$. Single representations provide little power to overcome strong context effects and are therefore not highly effective. Development of relations between representations at the next level gives children the capacity to direct their own activities more effectively and thus sustain dissociation with less contextual support. Firmer dissociation requires the stronger structures that develop with coordination of representations into mappings and beyond at 4 years and older.

Normally the development of mappings leads to many new social skills involving other people (Fischer et al., 1984). Children subject to hidden family violence use these skills extensively in their private lives. For instance, social contingencies help children cope with negative emotions in their families and friends, but in the case of hidden family violence the splitting gains force as well. When 5-year-old Roger’s father started yelling at his mother at the dinner table, the boy began to use a social contingency, drawing attention energetically to the nice drawing he had done earlier that day (which was taped on the wall near the table). Despite Roger’s obvious effort to switch to a positive interaction, Mr. K heightened his hostility by yelling at both his wife and Roger for their stupidity, throwing the food from the table and telling them no one could eat because they didn’t deserve it. The hostility between husband and wife escalated, with Roger as witness. Mr. K pushed Mrs. K forcefully against the wall and slapped her until she curled on the floor repeating ‘I’m sorry, I’m sorry’ at her husband’s demand. Roger’s attempt to create a switch from negative to positive by using a past positive event was a dismal failure.

At the same level children begin to understand common social role relationships, such as mother to father, mother to child, and doctor to patient, as well as roles such as mean boss to bad follower (Fischer et al., 1984; Watson & Getz, 1991). With these new skills children in abusive families start to develop strong separation of public and private roles, a necessity for isolating dissociation of public and private. For example, they may maintain a public style of interaction even in situations that do not provide
strong contextual support for it, such as acting out ME-PUBLIC when playing on a playground with their father, with whom their private relationship, ME-PRIVATE, is one of abusive boss interacting with bad child, diagramed in the line for Rp2: Concrete Roles in Figure 2.

By 6 or 7 years children begin to construct representational systems (Level Rp3), which give them more flexible control over the public and private dissociations diagramed in Figure 2 in the line for Rp3: Combined Concrete Roles. For example, on the playground or at school, they can shift between public and private interactions depending on who is present and who is more powerful. In his behavior at this age, Roger showed a sharp distinction in both affect and action between public and private modes of interaction, and he attempted to impose the private mode on other children whom he thought he could dominate. The emotional tone of the interaction shifted abruptly when he changed between public and private modes:

At 10 years of age Roger consciously tried to please his teacher and gain her approval in class, as well as being a good athlete and showing pride in his accomplishments. In the presence of adults he was a model student, acting charming and showing off his physical agility. With certain teachers he aided in preparing materials for them and offered to watch his classmates when the teacher left the room. On the other hand, when no adult was present to watch him, he became a ruthless bully, threatening other children, taking things from them, and trying to make them help him with his homework. His relationships with peers varied with his assessment of power and status. He would yield to an older, stronger boy and even cry and beg for mercy if the boy threatened him. At the same time, the town soccer coach suspended him from the team for shoving a smaller boy so hard that the boy broke his arm. With girls, Roger was overtly condescending whenever he could get away with it.

Roger said that he came from ‘a good family’ and described his father, Mr. K, as being good at business, having money, and being respected in the community. He made no mention of his father’s physical violence and obsession with control at home. He made little mention of his mother, whom he depicted as passive and not close to him. In private Mr. K often criticized his children as worthless misfits, and he frequently denigrated his wife and beat her up, as illustrated earlier. Typically she cried in silence.

Years later, in adulthood, Roger described his own childhood in idyllic terms, but with no recollection of details. He emphasized that his father was a good provider and a respected citizen.

From these examples, it is clear both that Roger’s home environment followed the hidden family violence pattern and that his dissociation of public and private was already pervasive at a young age. It appeared not only in distinctions between public and private settings but also in his relationships at school. In public at school, when his teachers were watching, he was a good boy who obeyed the teacher and sought her approval. In private at home, he was a submissive child with his father and was punished when he was seen as bad by his father. In private at school, when he thought no adults were watching, Roger was bullying. These relatively complex social relationships involved (a) both public and private representational systems (Level Rp3 and also Rp4) coordinating several roles and (b) an isolating shift between public and private systems.
In this skill, Roger took the roles of follower and student, ME-FOLLOWER and ME-STUDENT, but in appropriate contexts he also could switch which role he adopted, acting as boss or teacher (ME-BOSS or ME-TEACHER) to someone else as follower or student (YOU-FOLLOWER or YOU-STUDENT), respectively. Depending upon the context and affective tone, he could be follower or boss, student or teacher.

During the elementary school years, most children become skilled at deception and lying (Lamborn, Fischer, & Pipp, 1994; Saarni, 1984; Saarni & Lewis, 1993). Deception plays an especially important part in hidden-violence families because family members lie so pervasively and systematically. To lie on purpose requires at least relating two representations to each other, what is true and what is false. Children coordinate the two representations, in their own minds, in order to understand that they are lying and how to lie effectively.

Lying on purpose develops further with the next level of skills, representational systems. When Roger stole a baseball from another student named James, he went on to ‘help’ James by saying that their unpopular classmate Colin had stolen it. To form this kind of lie Roger had to coordinate several representations of James’ potential knowledge (such as one for Roger helping and another for Colin stealing) with several representations of Roger’s own claims or actions (such as one for Roger stealing the toy and another for blaming Colin).

**Later development of abstract working models**  At 10 to 15 years Roger moved to the next developmental tier, as shown in Figure 2, developing from representational systems combining concrete agents to abstractions integrating systems into personalities (Level Rp4/A1). With this new level, he developed a new effectiveness at isolating dissociation, using his emerging understanding of the complexities of motivation in relationships for constructing general personality characterizations and for skillful maintenance of the separation of public and private relationships.

For instance, as diagramed in the line for level Rp4/Ab1 in Figure 2, he coordinated two private representational systems for abusive bossiness: In one he bossed another person as victim, and in the other he yielded as victim to another person acting as boss. Roger’s general goal in these interactions was to act as the boss whenever possible, acting as what we call a tyrant, SELF_TYRANT. Roger became particularly adept at being the tyrant on the football team. He frequently threatened the other players, especially targeting his smaller teammates, whom he berated and hit when the coach was not around.

Continuing his isolating dissociation of public and private domains, he built even stronger separation of his two worlds. By age 16, his consolidation of single abstractions and emergent abstract mappings (Level A2) made it possible for him to highlight his public personality in school, SELF_COMPETENT, using it effectively:

At 16 years Roger was on the football team, did well in school, and was on the student council; but he had no close friends. He spent a good deal of time attempting to gain the attention of older students whom he thought had power and status. He would do things for them, including beating up other classmates. On the football team he became known as ‘the enforcer,’ a nickname that embodied his vision of himself. Also he assisted the vice principal, whom he saw as the person in the school with the power to set the rules. He continued to
ignore or be openly cruel to younger or weaker students and condescending to girls in general.

At home Roger continued to be quiet and withdrawn, especially with his father, who remained cold, abusive, and rigid. For example, if his father confronted him, he would whimper and act remorseful. On the other hand, he verbally abused his mother when his father was absent, and once he even pushed her into a door. He dominated his younger sister and forced her to do many of his chores, and he was accused of date rape by a female student that he dated, although she later withdrew her accusation, when he privately told her that he would cut up her face if she continued with the charge.

Roger was building abstract mappings for personality roles, coordinating abstract categories for victim and tyrant in the private domain and for competent student leader and impressed authority in the public, as shown in Figure 2. In addition to being in the common personality roles of victim and competent student leader, Roger could also switch the private relationship to adopt the preferred role of tyrant in relation to another person as victim, as illustrated by his treatment of girls, younger students, and his mother. We are not certain whether he could reverse the public relationship to take on the role of satisfied authority, because he tended to become tyrannical when in a dominant role.

As Roger became an adult, he built on these skills and established himself as a member of the community, gradually becoming more effective at playing the role of good citizen in public, including that of satisfied authority. When he decided that it was time to find a wife, his affective splitting was unfortunately clear in his treatment of the young woman that he courted.

At age 24, Roger continued to grow in public competence and other good qualities, becoming a member of the local church and serving on the church board, as well as joining the Young Republican Club and participating in anti-abortion rallies. He opened his own restaurant, and worked with the Chamber of Commerce to promote the town’s businesses, but he had several disputes with the Chamber and did not obtain favors that he requested.

Roger was attracted to a 17-year-old woman named June, who had just graduated from high school and come to work for his restaurant as a temporary office assistant. He flattered her with compliments and attention, sending flowers to her frequently and giving her expensive jewelry, such as a sapphire ring and diamond earrings. He said repeatedly that she was ‘perfect’ and told her that she was without a single fault.

With time, however, he began to shift to the private mode of interacting with her, becoming possessive, domineering, and controlling in the extreme. When she went to have her hair styled, he insisted on going along ‘to help the stylist know how I like your hair.’ He made her throw away most of her clothes and helped her pick new ones. He claimed that he knew more than she did in nearly all areas and began to imply that she could not cook well, did not know how to dress effectively, and was so naive that she should not be left alone.

With the complex skills of abstract systems (Level A3 in Figure 2), Roger continued his dissociative split between positive competence in public and negative tyranny in private. Unfortunately for June, he attempted to construct their family around a
combination of love with tyranny. He tried to incorporate her in his private world and keep her from joining the competent part of his public world, remaining only a stereotype of the perfect wife (victim). On his own, however, he continued to expand his public world by joining his general competence with a prosocial approach of serving the community through the church and the Chamber of Commerce.

The increase in sophistication of Roger’s skills for isolating dissociation continued, as June collaborated with him in building dissociated private and public worlds. At least one more optimal level (A4: systems of abstract systems) becomes possible in the middle to late 20s (Kitchener, Lynch, Fischer, & Wood, 1993). Roger was able to construct highly sophisticated, complex skills that continued simultaneously to be pathological and dangerous.

By the time Roger was 26, he and June had married and the couple had two children. Roger had successfully started and maintained his own business. He stated that he had to go into business for himself because he could not work for anyone. He was a successful film producer and editor. However, he prided himself in working at many new projects rather than those that were of some duration. Roger was charismatic upon first meeting new people. He presented as confident, witty, and in control. However, he usually worked alone and had turned down some large jobs because they would require that he work closely with others. In spite of these issues he was esteemed in his community. In public Roger and his family were seen as ‘ideal’. His wife, June, and his two children, John and Amos were always well dressed and gracious. However, in the privacy of his home, Roger remained a tyrant. He continued to manage his wife’s every activity as well as those of his young sons. He was quite rigid in his requests and all involved knew that they should obey. Roger had become violent, first with his wife, and later with his sons when they did not do as he asked. June initially was quite submissive, feeling totally helpless in the face of her husband’s unpredictable requests and explosive temper. She frequently instructed her children to ‘be very quiet when Daddy is home’. June often sent the boys to bed and took the brunt of her husband’s wrath. She was frequently slapped across the face, kicked and told to stand naked in front of her husband. He continued to criticize her looks, and to make derogatory comments on her intellect. He described her as a ‘worthless ugly bitch with no brains or sense’. Finally, after Roger left bruises on his son’s face and shoulders for leaving his bike outside in the late afternoon (John was planning to escape his house by riding to his friend’s to do homework after dinner), his wife planned her escape. She waited until Roger had to go on a 2-day business trip to film and left with her children. She stayed in a shelter and eventually moved to another state, leaving no information as to her whereabouts. She continues to live in fear that Roger will find them. Roger, for his part, continues to look for his family, insisting to friends and neighbors alike that he cannot understand their disappearance.

In Roger’s relationships his reactions were based powerfully on affective splitting – his perception of the other person as all good or all bad. The active separation of good public and bad private selves led to a public self characterized by little self-reflection, inability to acknowledge mistakes, and difficulty acknowledging relationships that were not positive. Negative relationships were not described in any detail in public.
At the same time, the private world embodied a negative, bad world characterized by tyranny, violence, and injustice. Roger built his close relationships on a strong need for control, including his partner’s conformity to his wishes. Even in situations in which someone conformed to his wishes, however, violence and conflict arose when events did not proceed as planned. The nature of these evolving working models made the maintenance of healthy attachments impossible. In another article we describe in detail a case in which a couple joined working models to form a romantic relationship, but the hidden family violence of one partner’s model interfered in the formation of a viable joint working model and eventually destroyed the relationship (Fischer & Ayoub, 1996).

The developmental pathway for working models based in hidden family violence begins with a violent, abusive family that dissociates their public, idealized world sharply from their private, tyrannical one. Children in this family suffer routine physical and emotional abuse, and sometimes sexual abuse as well. The splitting combines context with affect, leading the children initially to develop strong passive dissociation that isolates public from private. Eventually they construct active dissociation of public and private as well, learning to use context and affect to shift their skills away from one world into the other. Eventually, with development, the active dissociation becomes so extreme that children growing up in hidden family violence become incapable of coordinating their two separate worlds (except for dissociative coordination), unable to access one world while they are experiencing the other. Hidden family violence illustrates how trauma can produce not developmental delay or fixation but instead construction of advanced, complex working models, every bit as complex as those of people with more secure working models of attachment. A task for researchers in developmental psychopathology is to describe the array of pathways to pathology arising from maltreatment. We have merely begun the task by proposing pathways to hidden family violence and multiple personality disorder (Fischer & Ayoub, 1994). Development of related patterns such as Munchausen by proxy, overt violence, borderline disorder, and various other dissociative disorders remains to be described.

CONCLUSION

An important agenda for attachment research is depiction of developmental pathways for working models. In addition to the consistencies with age in such pathways, developmental transformations occur simultaneously. Using the tools of dynamic skill theory, we can describe and analyze these pathways in terms of development of a person’s dominant roles and emotions in close relationships and how he or she coordinates related roles and emotions. Hidden family violence illustrates a pathway for development of working models that is distinct from the normative attachment pathways described by Ainsworth et al. (1978), and others. Hidden family violence begins with a violent, abusive family that sharply dissociates a proper, public world from a tyrannical, private one. Disordered attachment, which has as its hallmark the need for control in the face of danger, continues as a powerful force that encapsulates adolescent and adult relationships. Growing up in a family like Roger’s family, children experience repeated physical and emotional abuse and sometimes sexual abuse as well. The contextual and affective
splitting that they live with leads the children to develop strong dissociation that isolates public from private. Instead of developing one integrated working model for close relationships, as described by standard attachment scenarios, children like Roger learn working models that sharply dissociate a public, good world (roles such as $ME_{GOOD}$ and $SELF_{COMPETENT}$) from a private, bad one (roles such as $ME_{BAD}$ and $SELF_{TYRANT}$), depending on context and affective state. The dissociative splitting is so massive that people can become literally unable to acknowledge their public and private worlds, being caught in one or the other. This splitting, however, is adaptive as it allows individuals to control a threatening world and to ward off overwhelming feelings of loss and abandonment.

These coping strategies, resulting from early trauma, lead to powerful and pervasive negativity biases about the self in close relationships: The world is full of threats, with attack from others not only possible but expected. With these strategies, people develop complex working models at advanced developmental levels, making the maintenance of healthy attachments difficult at best. The dissociation of private and public worlds leads victims of hidden family violence to move from the idealized relationships of their first (public) encounters with potential friends and mates to recreation of hidden family violence as the relationships move into the private domain. In this way victims of hidden family violence routinely undo the promise of new relationships, not because their adaptive skills are immature remnants of early childhood, but because their working models for private relationships center on violence and dissociation to assure control and self-protection. Although these skills may be maladaptive in potentially non-traumatic interactions, they are impressive adaptive mechanisms that follow normal developmental progressions toward ever growing complexity and sophistication of attachment relationships.

Effective intervention with such negative, dissociated working models requires understanding of the adaptive nature of these models, such as in the case of hidden family violence. Contrary to common practice, therapists should not assume that a client has only low level, developmentally immature working models that must become more mature. Instead, therapeutic goals should be changed to reworking a client’s worldview and reframing his or her concept of trust by working with current relationships. The goal in this relationship work is learning new coping mechanisms that are currently outside the person’s working models of close (private) relationships. This challenge implies that the basic structure of relationships is a critical focus of therapeutic intervention. The treatment hope is that negativity and splitting can be balanced by increasing experience with more positive and integrative ideas about interactions with others in close relationships.

For attachment research and theory in general, an important goal is to depict developmental pathways for transformation and continuity in working models, instead of treating attachment as following a similar working model from toddlerhood throughout the life course. With the tools for describing and assessing development of working models, researchers and practitioners can portray individual pathways with some precision and analyze commonalities and differences among pathways. Only with specification of developmental pathways, including both transformations and continuities, can attachment work move beyond the overly simple characterization of a few general attachment types that give the illusion of applying to infants, children, and adults alike.
REFERENCES


