

A Vulnerability Theory of Emotional Bonding: Preliminary Experimental Support for a New Quantitative Theory

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Abstract: In an internet-based study with a diverse group of 1,000 subjects in the U.S. (456 males, 543 female, M age = 34.1, SD = 11.4), support was found for a “vulnerability theory of emotional bonding,” according to which the strength of various aspects of an emotional bond can be predicted by independent measures of the vulnerability that each of two persons shows with respect to one another, where vulnerability is defined by self-reported measures of states of need and empathy. In a pretest-posttest design, subjects were first asked a number of questions regarding their current states of need and empathy, then shown a still photograph of a male confederate and asked various questions regarding their feelings toward him. Subjects were then assigned at random to one of four groups in which they viewed a video showing the confederate responding to the same set of questions about cancer but showing, in each of the four respective groups, reactions indicating either (1) low need and empathy, (2) low need and high empathy, (3) high need and low empathy, or (4) high need and empathy, following which subjects were again asked questions regarding their feelings toward the confederate. As predicted, bonds were weakest between subjects in low need and empathy states and the confederate in the low need and empathy condition, higher between subjects in moderate need or empathy states and the confederate in the mixed need and empathy conditions, and highest between subjects in high need or empathy states and the confederate in the high need and empathy condition. Regression analyses yielded an equation in which various aspects of an emotional bond were best predicted by the subjects’ self-reported states of need and empathy and the subjects’ impression of the confederate’s level of empathy. Overall, the study suggests that further research along these lines may make it possible to develop a formal and predictive theory of emotional bonding with the general structure $B = f(E_1, E_2, N_1, N_2)$, where E and N are measures of empathy and need, respectively, and B is the strength of the resulting bond. Exceptions to the theory, along with possible experimental explorations of such exceptions, are also discussed.