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Exploring attachment as a triadic process: The family attachment interview

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Abstract
Attachment theory offers a profound conceptual shift in moving beyond individualised explanations to relational ones. With its battery of assessments based on understanding parent-child interaction and relational narratives, the field has built a considerable evidence base for understanding problems as residing between people rather than in people. In this paper, however, we suggest that this very success has led to such understanding ossifying at a dyadic level – a child's relationship with a specific parent, neglecting the impact of co-parenting relationships on child attachment. For this reason, we sought a means of moving attachment assessment to a triadic level, exploring a child's attachment to his parents' relationship not just his parents as individuals. The essential dyadic nature of current attachment interviews such as the Adult Attachment interview (AAI) and the Parent Development Interview (PDI) we argue, means that key aspects of potential attachment self-protective organisation may be missing. For this reason, we developed out of these interviews, a Family Attachment Interview (FAI), that explores both childhood attachment and current caregiving in triadic terms. We suggest analysing this interview using the methodology derived from the AAI and the Meaning of the Child Interview (MotC; a systemically aware way of making sense of caregiving discourse), as a means of understanding family relationships rather than yielding classifications. We illustrate how this could work using a case of a couple in therapy struggling with their couple relationship and parenting, who were given the FAI. The approach is novel and in development and we invite collaboration in taking these ideas forward.

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Attachment theory has a rich and complex history from its original formulation by John Bowlby. Some of the most significant milestones are the recognition of the centrality of secure attachment to healthy development of children (Bowlby, 1990), the recognition that insecure attachments could also develop in intact families (Ainsworth et al., 1978/2015) and the move to understanding attachment as being revealed in the nature of the narratives we tell about our lives (Crittenden and Landini, 2011; Main et al., 1985). Others have included a wider view of attachment, for example, that romantic relationships can also be regarded as attachment (Shaver et al., 2000) and the recognition of parent's caregiving bonds with their children (George and Solomon 2008; Grey 2025a). There has also been a move away from a deficit view of attachment – 'insecurity', to increasing clarity on how 'insecure' and 'insensitive' 'strategies' of attachment and caregiving can have adaptive value in adverse conditions (Crittenden, 2017 and Grey 2025a). However, we want to suggest that possibly the time is ripe for another significant development: namely a move from a focus on attachment as a dyadic process to a recognition of the importance of it as part of triadic and wider relational patterns.

At the same time, we would argue this is not all that new and was part of Bowlby's initial perspective:

> 'The problem which is brought to the Clinic in the person of the child is not the real problem; the problem which as a rule we need to solve is the tension among all the different members of the family…..With the child, the problem usually lies in the relationships between him or her and the members of the family'.

Bowlby (1949, p.123)

Similarly, in systemic family therapy, triadic relationships, including the suggestion that the child's presenting difficulties may be linked to problems in the parent-parent relationship, have been a central feature of clinical formulation and practice (Bowen, 1971; Dallos and Draper, 2024; Minuchin, 1974; Pallazzoli et al., 1978, Haley, 1978). Attachment theory, from the outset, incorporated concepts from cybernetics/systems theory in the description of attachment as a relational goal-directed feedback system. However, Bowlby's articulation of this system was restricted to dyadic processes, and he did not develop a formulation of how this occurred as a triadic process, beyond the more general descriptions as above. Subsequently, attachment theory has built an enormous body of empirical evidence and theoretical conceptualisations based on dyadic processes between mother (usually) and child. This has evolved into exploring not just behaviours but the representations or working models that a child develops of his/her relationship with the mother. This 'turn to narrative' led to the development of sophisticated ways of exploring working models, such as the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI: Crittenden and Landini, 2011; George et al., 1996) and a range of narrative assessments for children, such

as narrative story stems (Emde et al., 2003; Farnfield, 2015), the Child Attachment Interview (Shmueli-Goetz et al., 2008), and so on.

But is this looking at too narrow part of the picture of family life? As Bowlby hinted, a child also observes how her parents act together and experiences their relationship. For example, when parents argue, especially when they argue about the child, this has profound impact on a child. Fear responses are triggered, heightened negative arousal occurs and children develop various coping strategies that clearly resemble the classic attachment patterns, for example, avoidance/withdrawal, or heightened anxiety/anger. A powerful example comes from a young women Kathy, who was displaying anorexia:

> 'The only thing I ever hear them talking about is me and if I didn't have this [anorexia] it's kind of like, would everything fall apart, at least it's keeping them talking. And they won't argue while I've got this because it might make me worse. So, um...that's kind of bought, sort of like, I'm not in control as such but I've got more control over the situation that way'.

> Dallos, clinical quote

Kathy said her parents argued constantly and she lived in constant fear that 1 day something serious would happen between them. She also appeared to have learnt from this that a child becomes central in managing the conflict between her parents, and that the most effective way of doing that is to become 'ill'.

The evidence base for the importance of triadic processes in attachment is growing. Dubois-Comtois and Moss (2008), found that the quality of family interactions for a group of 5 to 6-year-olds added considerably to the prediction of the child's attachment security as assessed using a narrative test:

> 'These results suggest that the development of internal working models during the middle childhood period is more strongly influenced by ongoing family experiences than by the history of experiences with the primary caregiver'.

> Dubois-Comtois & Moss (2008, p. 427)

For family therapists, this finding comes as no surprise, and in contrast it is perhaps surprising that the attachment world appears to turn a blind eye to the likelihood that children's working model and sense of security will be influenced by the wider relations in a family (Marvin and Stewart, 1990). Even staying within a dyadic perspective, it is fairly self-evident that a mother's ability to respond sensitively to her child will be compromised when she is feeling unsafe, threatened, anxious because of conflicts with her partner.

Empirical studies are adding support to the need for a more systemic view of attachment. For example, Brown et al. (2022) looked at the nature of triadic interactions in families with infants and found that significantly more positive affect and cohesiveness than in families where both parents showed secure as opposed to insecure attachment patterns. In discordant families (one parent secure, the other insecure) a pattern has been found that the secure attachment doesn't predominantly protect the child but that negative interactions can arise, such as the child being more strongly attached to the secure parent, spending more time with them and so on and the other parent retreating or becoming antagonistic. Gerlach et al. (2022)

found that family (including triadic) risk factors impacted on parental responsiveness. Similarly, the Lausanne Trialogue play paradigm looks at parent-child interaction triadically, finding a link between family patterns of interaction and children's externalising and internalising difficulties (Gatta et al., 2017). Dallos et al. (2016) looking at school-age children reacting to picture-based attachment scenarios found that the children were more activated by scenarios depicting parental conflict than dyadic threats that in themselves might be seen as more dangerous (such as the mother going to hospital), perhaps because in such scenarios the children perceived they 'lost' both attachment figures.

The family attachment interview (FAI)

Such complexity can quickly become bewildering, leaving clinicians and researchers relying on simpler, reductionist models to get meaningful data and formulations. This is sensible, so long as a pragmatic starting point is not mistaken for the endpoint. Attachment assessment procedures, in making a pioneering leap from the individual to the dyad, appear to have ossified at the dyadic level. We are suggesting that a significant building block in exiting this dyadic and linear cul-de-sac may be in recognising that a child (and the parent they may become) has not only developed a working model regarding their relationships with their own parents but also about their parents' relationship with each other and how their parents work together in parenting their child. Broadly, how secure as opposed to insecure have they experienced their parents' relationship to be, and how they fitted into this dynamic? The answers to this question, we suggest, will have influenced their dyadic attachment relationship with each of them.

Critically important is how they experienced fitting into their own parents' relationship, for example, whether they felt drawn in to take sides by their parents against each other, or whether they develop a role of attempting to mediate in their parents' conflicts. This is summarised in Figure 1 below.

The child has an attachment relationship with each of the parents (which may be similar or different) but also with their relationship, for example, how safe does it feel when the three of them are together? Also, each of the dyadic relationships is influenced by the
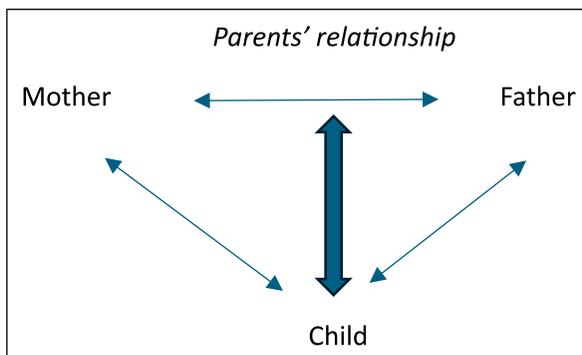
Figure 1. Child has an attachment relationship with each parent, *and also with their parents' relationship.*

child's relationship with the other parent. This also applies to the parents so that each parent can be seen to have a relationship with the child's relationship with the other parent, for example, where a mother starts to see her daughter as a 'daddy's girl', is resentful about it, and punishes or criticises her daughter as a result.

Thus far, in exploring these insights (e.g. Dallos et al., 2023) we have been hampered by the dyadic nature of the tools we have been using. The most well-known tools for exploring attachment and parenting representations, the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI: George et al., 1996), The Parent Development Interview (PDI: Aber et al., 1985), and the Working Model of the Child (Larrieu et al., 2014) protocols query almost exclusively for dyadic threats to dyadically conceptualised relationships (a parent-figure and a child). This may be expanded to include relationships with multiple attachment figures, but almost entirely considered dyadically ('*Describe her relationship with … her mother, … her father etc'.*). This begs the question as to how, if triadic dynamics were central to understanding attachment relationships, we would actually know about them? Certainly, triadic dynamics may occur in parental accounts, but how do we interpret their absence if we have not directly asked about them? It was a striking finding of our analysis of the narratives of couples who had a child with a diagnosis of autism (Dallos et al., 2023) how little the other parent was mentioned, that parents viewed themselves in isolation. In the absence of questions that explored this, we could only speculate as to the meaning of our finding.

Therefore, we have developed an interview based upon the PDI and AAI that directly explores triadic relationships (An abbreviated version of this interview is attached as an Appendix). The key items are.

a. Nature of the triadic relationship in childhood and now
b. Role of the child in the parents' relationship in childhood and now
c. Involvement of the child in the parents' conflicts in childhood and now

Where there are two co-parents being interviewed, we suggest the section about relationships in childhood is done separately, and the section about the current family done together. However, this will need to be varied depending on the family structure being interviewed. We do not intend this interview to be definitive or final; we are still struggling to balance simplicity, clarity and complexity. We have welcomed the involvement of colleagues in trialling and exploring these questions and their impact and have been revising the interview in the light of feedback and interview examples. In particular, we have introduced a button sculpt to establish what triads appear most salient to the speaker; given the complexity and variety of family relationships we do not assume that this is always parent-parent-child, or even parent-stepparent-child. As with attachment figures as individuals, more than one relational triad may need to be explored. Like the AAI and PDI, the interview moves between generalised semantic descriptions of relationships (the adult's narrative of how their relationships operate) and episodic descriptions of specific memories and experiences, allowing the meaning of discrepancies and conflicts between the two to be explored (Grey 2025b).

This raises the question as to how the interview can be analysed; are existing methods sufficient or is some entirely new method needed? The method of analysis ushered in by the AAI and adapted by later methods of analysing attachment discourse such as the

MotC, are essentially qualitative, looking at the way in which the story is constructed and its coherence, and locating coherence and incoherence in the emotional and relational history of the speaker (Dallos and Grey 2025). We are not yet sure whether overall attachment or caregiving classification of the speaker will be of much assistance in teasing out what we can learn in terms of triadic complexity. We are interested in learning what particular threats or past dangers within the family system may be salient to the speaker, what specific meanings might have been derived from them, and how they are shaping current family dynamics. To explore this, we have adapted the MotC formulation pathway outlined by Grey (2025c) to focus on triadic family dynamics:

1. Key Historical Danger(s) and Self-Protective Scripts
   Here we focus on identifying triadic dangers in the speaker's past that may be salient or significant to the speaker, not of course ignoring any dyadic threat that the speaker identifies.
2. Current Relational Triangles and Key Caregiving Fear
   What in the current family system may be echoing salient threats in the speaker's childhood triadic relationships? What is most threatening for the parent-parent relationship in caring for the child?
3. Corrective Intentions
   Byng-hall's (1986) notion of corrective scripts is used to look at what the parent is trying to do differently from how they were parented. In particular, are they trying to create a different co-parenting relationship from what they experienced in their childhood, or replicate positive aspects?
4. Impact upon the Child
   This explores the potential involvement of the child in key triadic relationships. What scripts might the child be invited to follow? How clear or predictable would the scripts be to the child, or does the critical information that the child needs for safety lie outside the child's awareness (e.g. in secret aspects of the parent-parent relationship, such as hidden infidelity)?
5. Resources in the Relationship
   Triadic attachment dynamics can also serve as '*chains of resilience*' (Berastegui, and Pitillas, 2024), whereby parents may offer as a couple, comfort, and protection that they might be unable to supply individually and support each other in the challenges of parenting.
6. Implications for Intervention
   Does a triadic formulation offer a different pathway for the needs of the child and each family member for safety and comfort to be met? Possible solutions may emerge that might have been invisible when the family relationships were viewed only through a dyadic lens.

Case study

We present here an illustrative and exploratory case study (Yin, 2018) of Family Attachment Interviews conducted with a heterosexual, married couple who wanted support

in their parenting of a child who had an autism diagnosis and symptoms of anxiety. We have chosen this case to illustrate the interview, explore its explanatory power and potential through the analytic process described above, and the clinical opportunities offered by this process. As outlined, the interview was conducted in 2 parts: interviewing each parent separately about their childhood experiences and later, together, regarding their current family experiences. Both parents gave consent for our use of their interviews; *we have changed some details not relevant to our analysis to retain anonymity.*

Background

Jennifer and David are parents to 2 children, Matthew (12) – autism diagnosis, and Damien (21) (Figures 2 and 3).

Jennifer (54) and David (63) came for systemic therapy to help with their relationship. They both were experiencing extreme difficulties in their relationship as a couple, they described having frequent conflicts, lack of physical and emotional intimacy and contemplating separation. They were also concerned that their relationship difficulties had impacted on their children. Damien had withdrawn from the family, spending little time with them and Matthew was seen to be suffering with anxiety and had received an ASD diagnosis. The parents were both white, highly educated and had a private income, but currently neither of them was employed. They had been together for over 30 years, having met whilst abroad, and described that their early relationship had been exciting, involving partying, drinking, and use of recreational drugs. However, when Jenifer became pregnant, they moved back to the UK to set up a home together with the children.
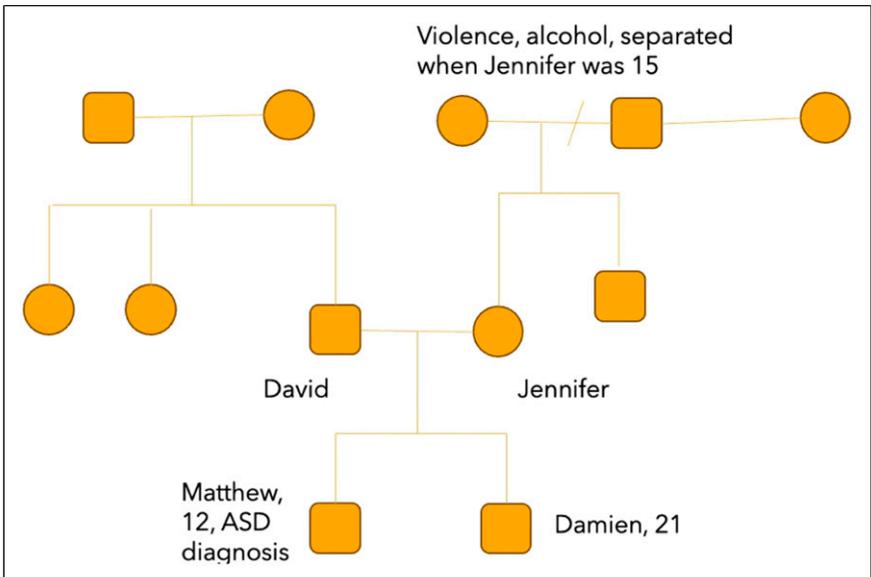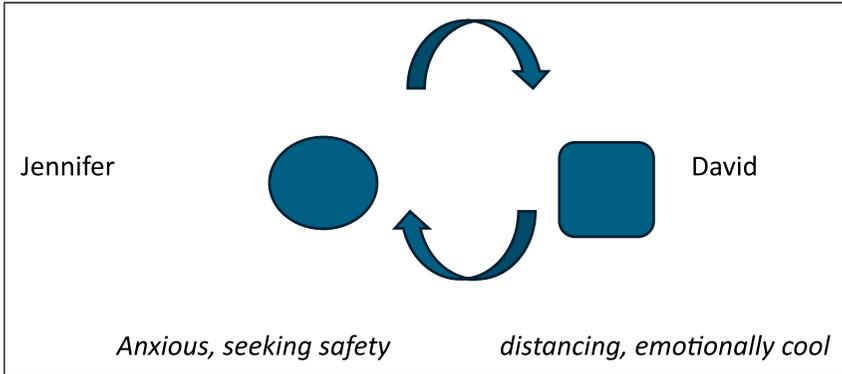

Figure 2. Jennifer and David family genogram.

Figure 3. Jennifer and David couple relationship cycle.

Initial formulation

RD saw them individually and together over a period of 6 months. Jennifer ascribed problems as resulting from her traumatic childhood; she had sought various forms of therapy and read widely on the topic of post-traumatic stress disorder. However, she felt David aggravated the problems by becoming frustrated at her 'endless psychological theorising. He explained that he had lost sexual desire for Jennifer and found her 'endless psychological theorising' unnecessarily complicating, hindering a more practical solution. This dynamic appeared a recursive, mutually maintaining cycle.

This cycle echoes a frequent dynamic of distressed couples, where one (Jennifer) is employing a pre-occupied (C) attachment strategy from their childhoods and other (David) a dismissing (A) one, with each activating the other. Encouraging a move to a triadic formulation, for example, seeing connections between the children and the couple relationships is often difficult, as here, because many parents employ an intra-psychic discourse of the how the children can be fixed. This can help them avoid feelings of blame for having 'messed the children up'. We find that positively connoting the parents' intentions/hopes regarding the children (their corrective scripts, see below) is an important starting point.

In moving to a triadic understanding, we use the 5-step model described above:

Key historical danger(s) and self-protective scripts

Jennifer. Jennifer described a difficult and unsafe childhood. Her dad drank frequently, had several affairs and could be violent towards her mother. However, Jennifer said that her mother was also a violent '*husband beater*'… who would '*lie in wait for him and then attack him physically and then the violence would, would start*'. Her father left home when Jennifer was about 15.

Her mother, Jennifer said, put on a false front for people of being a happy couple/family and Jennifer felt compelled to go along with this facade. Also, her mother could make Jennifer feel guilty for having fun and not being with her and looking after her needs. Jennifer described her father as '*creative, musical, artistic, kind, but distant*'. However,

her mum tried to turn Jennifer against him, requiring Jennifer to '*vilify him in order for me to please her*'. Her mother would involve her in a 'pretend game' involving mocking her father's anger, also dismissing the possible sense of danger that Jennifer might have felt when her father was angry:

> 'I remember as well when I was a little girl, she [would] sometimes sit in the garden …. she'd say, "Pretend to be your dad. … We do this sort of comical performance of him. Well, getting angry, throwing stuff about, you know, shoving the lawn mower. Or chucking the spade. She'd sit and laugh at me'.

This entanglement left her feeling the object of her mother's ridicule insofar as she identified with her father, as seen in the final sentence where she identifies herself as the one laughed at.

Jennifer felt she had to mediate between her parents. For example, after one of their '*almost nightly*' fights, Jennifer would go to her dad's bedroom to comfort him when he was crying. Jennifer worried that they might kill each other, and she and her brother fantasised about killing her father to end the conflict. Feeling caught between them, holding everything together was a defining triadic image:

> 'I certainly remember holding my mom's hand and then going to hold my dad's hand once, because I held both of their hands at the same time. Mum demonstratively took her hand away from me, because I was holding Dad's hand.
>
> You tried to hold their hands and then your mom took … your hands away from your dad?
>
> As she broke contact with me because I, I was in the middle of them, I, I, I held. I was holding her hand [short pause]. And they'd had this massive argument, and … I think she'd hit him with a heel of her shoe, taking her shoe off [short pause]. And I was trying to [pause] connect them again and I was holding her hand, and I reached out and took hold of Dad's hand, because I'd held his hand. Look, she ripped her hand away from me!'

Jennifer's language is imaged and powerfully evocative, suggesting that this scenario continues to be vividly alive for her. She perceives herself as '*in the middle of*' her parents, desperately '*trying to connect them again*' after an argument. In her mind, if she lets go violence will erupt, but at the same time her mother is breaking free. Her language is very present, as if she is inviting the interviewer to view the scene with her: '*Look, she ripped her hand away from me!*'. Jennifer appears to blame her mother for things falling apart, but the central image is triadic. Like the boy in the legend holding his finger in the dam to stop the water overrunning everything, Jennifer feels that she is trying to stop the violence erupting and destroying her family. Here, the dam itself is resisting in the form of her mother's pulling away just as she tries to hold everyone together.

Jennifer also expressed a profound ambivalence towards and a complex relationship with her parents' romantic and sexual relationship:

> 'Sometimes they might start snogging on the sofa. … Oh yeah, Dad would buy her black magic chocolate, chocolate, chocolates. I can only remember I remember once. I can't remember them

holding hands. I can't remember any affection between them other than [pause] That sort of lustful snog. That, that, was inappropriate. Really!'

Jennifer both laments the lack of affection (contact) between her parents and is disgusted by the contact she does see. '*I can't remember them holding hands*', links back to Jennifer's central image of herself as the only one who can do this for them. At the same time, she ridicules their more sexualised behaviour ('*the lustful snog*', and her father's clichéd bringing of black magic chocolates, like the lover in the 1980s advert), which did not bring her any reassurance around the strength of their bond.

The picture is more complex than this, in that Jennifer feels excluded by her parents' sexual relationship, ridiculing her father's sexual advances because he is in some way, a rival for her mother's affection and comfort.

'I found comfort with my mum. I felt comfort and connection with when my mum slept in my bed. So, I felt like I might have. So, I used to almost. I, I used to. Are you sleeping in my bed? And then I go up to my bed and wait for her because when she got into bed, you know, it was warm and. She would cuddle up to me. And I found that. Comforting. But at the same time, I've known that I used to feel guilty because I felt like I'd almost encouraged her to come and sleep with me. So, I felt guilty. And shame, I guess. And maybe I felt guilty and shameful that I used to side with her when she would vilify him, because I knew at the end of the day she'd be sleeping in my bed tonight.'

Here the triad is set up as a competition between her father and her for who sleeps with her mother, which Jennifer wins by exploiting her mother's anger at her father (siding with her ridiculing him). She can find comfort that was otherwise lacking, but at the expense of feeling guilty and shameful in 'winning' over her mother by colluding in her angry dismissal of her father. To be both safe and comforted, Jennifer needs both to hold them together (to stop the conflict) and keep them apart (to receive her mother's comfort). This explains Jennifer's greater anger towards her mother in the interview; she is preoccupied with keeping her mother close to her, one way or another.

Overall, it seems, Jennifer felt instrumental in both holding her parents together and excluding her father so that she could access her mother's nurture (whilst comforting her father out of guilt for this). Her script of being the lynchpin upon whom all depends requires hypervigilance to the relationship between her parents as well as the balance of the triad as a whole – *I need to attend to everyone and keep them close*. Beneath this hypervigilance is fear – *if I don't, everything will fall apart*. Jennifer's powerfully imaged and evocative language show high arousal and fearful pre-occupation with her parents' relationship. She felt over-powerful but equally convinced of imminent disaster. If she succeeds in winning comfort from her mother, she excludes her father and adds fuel to the parental conflict (Figure 4, left). If she holds her parents together, she loses her mother's affection and comfort (Figure 4, right). Either way, if Jennifer switches off her vigilance (pulls her finger from the dam), everything might be swept away.

David. David grew up with his mother and father and an older sister. David said he always felt closer to his mum than his dad, and to her side of the family. His family life was
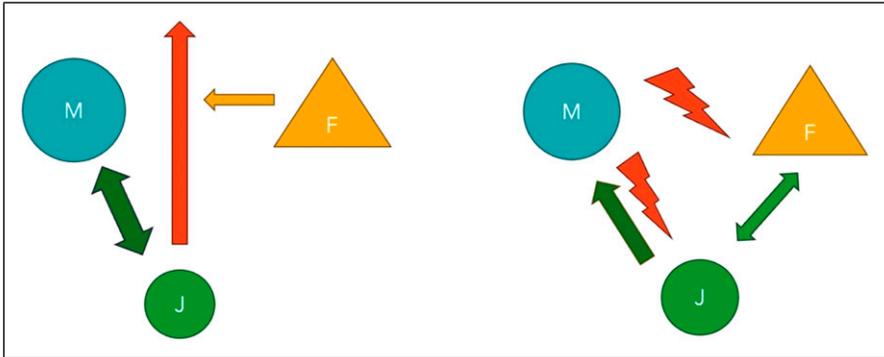
Figure 4. Jennifer can only find parental comfort by fuelling parental conflict.

not very exciting: his mum was somewhat materialistic, having married his dad for security rather than love. David's father went through a period of redundancy. Neither of his parents were good with money, and financial problems caused difficult decisions for them, for example, only keeping David at a private school and not his sister. This was because David was academically outstanding and such achievement was valued, it seemed, above other things.

David described his relationship with his mother as '*emotionally distant, functional and playful*'. For example, David described being in tears having been dumped by his girlfriend and '*desperately wanting her to comfort me. But she was just standing by the sink not responding*'. His relationship with his father was problematic, sometimes erupting into physical violence. '*One time … he had me pinned in an armchair punching me and stuff. Yeah, but I deserved it.*' David said his father unnecessarily worried a lot, but that he was loyal in that David knew he would be available for practical, if not emotional, care. David had a strong feeling of being invalidated, 'put down' by his father. His achievements were never good enough, even as an adult.

David's attachment discourse is more impersonalising and distancing, making triadic dynamics less prominent in his accounts. There is an apparent triadic or systemic position in frequently talking of '*his parents*' or '*we*' but because he does not differentiate the relationships, we do not get an understanding of the differential impact of family members on each other. For example, in David's family, '*voices were raised, but then literally 2 minutes later, 5 minutes later, everything was fine*'. He contrasted this with Jennifer's family where '*raised voices*' signalled extreme danger, and things would escalate. In both examples, his explanations are mechanical and concrete rather than interpersonal – there are no people, only voices. There is clearly a triadic process going on in David's family, where all collude in keeping strong feelings out of the picture, but they are viewed from such an external viewpoint that the effect each has on one another is invisible.

Nonetheless, some tentative triadic dynamics appear in David's descriptions of a parenting approach in which his father would worry, but his mother kept things calm:

'I remember coming home. It was a Saturday night. I came in and match of the day was on. I remember that and I had a few and my dad was like, "What's the matter with him? He's just he's,

he's, he's been, you know, he's been weird." My mum just said "Oh, he's drunk, just", you know. Just, you know, just matter of fact, not, you know, not, not worried about it. Just like, "He's just drunk", you know, and. Yeah. So my dad was trying to analyse, and my mom was, like... You know, and my dad was a bit more wound up at it than my. You know, my mom was just, it's, "He's been drinking, you know. What happened?" I was fine. I mean, it was just, you know, but. It was just a different way of. You know he couldn't work it out. And she just immediately saw it and just wasn't bothered by it. And it was just, you know, it was it was quite it was. It was kind of fun.'

David is dysfluent, with several restarts when talking about his father's response. His father '*trying to analyse*' becomes '*a bit more wound up*' and then several cut offs around 'he couldn't work it out'. Such dysfluency perhaps suggests fear of his father getting angry, and David is grateful for his mother taking the sting out of this response. Far from finding his parents' lack of affection for each other anxiety provoking, as Jennifer did, David finds reassurance in a parental dynamic where his mother's cool approach could prevent things escalating with his father. His idealisation of her makes sense when this dampening of emotion could protect him from his father's anger.

This anger may have been fuelled by what David described as 'competition between me and my dad for my mum's attention and approval.' This is interestingly similar to Jennifer's family, but his mother did not pull David close in the same way as Jennifer's mother did. Neither did David feel or appear to exert the same amount of power over his father as Jennifer did over hers, nor received comfort from his mother as a reward, which meant that this dynamic would not have played out in the same way. Ultimately, it would seem, David feels rejected by both his parents, especially, but not exclusively, from his father:

'I only exist because if… the second one had been a boy, or if there'd been a boy and a girl, I doubt they would have had me …

I think, I was a central part of their lives. And I think they were. Yeah, I think they were. Umm. Kind of proud of my achievements, but also. I think they're proud of my team … didn't particularly like me as a person or, you know, my dad, you know, struggled with me as a personality.'

Interestingly, being the boy they wanted is not the interpretation that David makes (or feels), but rather that they would have chosen not to have him, were it not for his older siblings being female. Now he feels central to their lives, but not as a person – the triad holds only so far as deep feelings, and authentic self, are unseen.

David has learnt to switch off to stay 'central' to his parents' life. Safety lies with invisibility and not rocking the boat. When describing difficult experiences, David tried not to assign blame and even to take some of the responsibility for what happened on himself, for example, that he '*deserved it*' when his father punched him, and that '*it was all just compensating for his own feeling of inadequacy … he definitely felt like a failure because of what happened to him work-wise*'. Self-blame and exoneration of his father, together with his mother's unresponsive '*calm*', serve to hold the triangle together by not allowing any room for angry feelings to stick (except momentarily). His mother's

distance, like his own, is the protective force that keeps his father's anger in check. The cost is actually being himself in this space; there is a paradox here in that to be 'central' to his parents (play an active role in their lives; not be rejected) he must at the same time be peripheral (check out emotionally and as a 'personality'). The only solution to conflict and difficult feelings is to wait for everything to pass.

Current relational triangles and key caregiving fear. This analysis would suggest that Jennifer could easily see herself as the lynchpin that keeps everything together in her present-day family, fearing things falling apart if she does not anxiously try and 'make sure' things are OK. This is exactly what David told us had occurred when the couple moved from just being a dyad to being a family – recreating inadvertently the triadic risk that preoccupied her from childhood:

> 'David: Jennifer was sort of a relaxed, more relaxed, happy go lucky, sort of, you know, life and soul of the party sort of thing. …. And then the minute we have the kids that just completely shifted. It just turned around. And so, you know, and Jennifer, you know, completely changed and became, you know, totally focused on the kids and their developmental issues and her issues and you know, and it just, you know. So, to be honest, I know this sounds extreme, but having kids completely destroyed our relationship. Jennifer's focus has always been on what's wrong with the kids, right, you know? And, and I honestly think that she thinks that they're they have bigger problems than they actually have, and her worries about them have actually increased their problems and made them worry about themselves where they probably didn't need to. So yeah, it's Yeah. Now, of course, there's been lots of moments of joy, and you know, and you know, but it's been fucking hard, right.
>
> Jennifer, had you? How do you see it?
>
> Jen: Yeah, I will agree with that. Yeah. I became hyper-focused on, you know, and anxious around as soon as Damien was born, you know, it wasn't diagnosed as anything. Then I but I from a very early from, from the beginning, I was finding it, you know, as Yeah, no, just anxious and depressed and neurotic around the children, and couldn't, couldn't prioritise.'

The creation of triadic dynamics appears to have activated Jennifer's fear that if she doesn't manage things, her family will fall apart. Her self-protective scripts both exaggerate the danger and, crucially, her own power and importance in holding things together. She describes feeling fearful around the children but without being able to locate the problem, which makes her more anxious. Jennifer's parent's relationship was shrouded in secrets (e.g. her father's affairs) and internal complexity (their coming together and falling apart) that a young child could not make cognitive sense of, which created the space for her scripts around holding things together. Being unable to pinpoint the problems in her current family (perhaps because, initially, they were not there) Jennifer becomes more fearful: invisible and unknowable danger is more much threatening.

This has completely thrown David. His accounts suggest that his way of keeping the triangle together is hunker down and wait for the storm to pass; a desire to keep things '*calm*' with '*no big, negative incident*s'. However, his attempts to create distance to quell the storm, seem to have the reverse effect of his childhood triangle. They fuel Jennifer's

anxiety, as she senses that he is beyond her attempts to manage danger for them all. If she is in the middle trying to pull everyone together, then David is like her mother, 'ripping' his hand away. The more unknowable and unreachable David becomes for Jennifer, the more she increases her anxiety and pulling for involvement; and of course, the more David retreats. Therefore, she complains that she feels '*disconnected, disconnected, disconnected*', whilst also feeling like she is treading on '*eggshells*' with the prospect of things cracking apart any time. Beyond withdrawing emotionally, the only thing David sees himself as able to do is fix things practically for the children in a somewhat misguided attempt to stop Jennifer worrying about them. Critically, though, this dynamic is triadic, working through and in relation to the children and their 'problems', rather than something inherent in the two of them – the cycle emerged when they moved from being a couple to a triad.

Unfortunately, when David tries to take control to shut down the problem, Jennifer is likely to feel less 'in the middle' of things and so less able to prevent family breakdown. A recent conflict over Matthew's schooling illustrated this conflict. Matthew expressed an interest in going to another school because he is friends with some boys there and lacks friendships in his current school. David rang up the school and found. Out that a place had suddenly become available that very day (there hadn't been previously) and Matthew was offered a trial.

'David: She went into sort of moment of panic, despair, anxiety and

Jen: and you got angry. just very angry. And through, you know, we were in that corridor, and then David exploded at my reaction!

David: I just said, Oh no!

Jen: Exploded for me, it felt like you. And for me it's just, yeah, thing, and, and it's just shouted or said, you are, you know, you, you just, I don't know, just, there was a lot of you, you, you, and you stormed off.

David: Well, I was excited about it. I thought, this is great, you know, this is a, this is serendipity. There's one, you know, that somebody's literally just left the day I call them, you know. So, there's, it is, and all you can see is the negative!

Jen: it was, it was a shock to me, because Matthew, whichever school he's at he struggles, and it takes time to settle, and especially after a half term or a break from school, he doesn't want to at every single school! He doesn't want to go back in! So, he starts voicing, "I don't want to go to this school! I want to be home schooled. I don't want to do such and such." So, he's, he has, he struggles at every single school that he goes to, with school refusal or a reluctant resistance to go. So, you know me with my endless reading and research, and what have you, you know I've been trying, you know, whichever, wherever he goes, I try and get him, get him settled'.

David is excited because he thinks he's solved Matthew's current dissatisfaction, but Jennifer is horrified that despite her huge efforts to manage the situation, '*endless reading and research*', and being the one for whom '*wherever he goes, I try and get him … Settled*', the situation was taken out of her hands. David's actions put Jennifer on the

periphery of solving Matthew's problems and that frightened her. This made David angry (because his motivation was to try and calm Jennifer's anxiety by trying to address the problem): '*all you see is the negative*'. This then echoes Jennifer's primary fear of everything descending into violence: '*you stood in the corridor. You stood in the corridor, that small, enclosed space, and you threw the dog's Wanger down*!' David's 'violence' is nothing like the fights she experienced as a child, but her repeated image of the '*corridor, that small, enclosed space*' echoes the sense of being trapped in her parents' violence as she was as a child.

Child-protective triadic intentions. Jennifer developed a very strong corrective script from these experiences that she did not want to have a marriage like her parents' which looked good only from the outside:

> 'I wanted to replicate other than appearing to be successful, successful as a couple. I wanted; I wanted to be connected. I wanted to. Yeah, I wanted. And with the children, I wanted a family. I really, really want it! To be, loving and affectionate and for somebody to love me and support me! And be kind. And. Hold me. And the children. I really wanted a husband that that'.

Jennifer's intense, even desperate longing is for a family that doesn't pretend to be functioning whilst hiding conflict, but where she can feel connected and comforted without the risk of things falling apart. A wish for a husband that support and love her and the children but as she speaks her line of thought falters, 'a husband that that'. This appears to leave her with a longing for something different, without offering scripts for doing anything differently: a corrective fantasy rather than intention. This heightens her sense of what is lacking in her partner, intensifying rather than correcting Jennifer's attempts to pull everyone close, especially Matthew, who is most receptive. Once again, finding comfort fuels conflict for Jennifer (see Figure 4). Involving her own children in conflict with David is not something that Jennifer wanted to do but she reflected that, '*I can see it's wrong now, but I am guilty of having done it*'.

David said that his parents did not overtly show much affection towards each other; '*don't think I ever saw even a peck, never once*'. David wanted to have a more passionate marriage but feels with sadness that this has not happened: '*a part of me that's kind of resigned to it, that ship has sailed*'. At the same time David didn't want to be sarcastic or angry like his father. He prefers a more distant approach, where emotions are moderate and not overblown. However, in his relationship with Jennifer, any signs of conflict or anger seem very dangerous to Jennifer and unfortunately things end up escalating in ways that neither of them wants: their relationship is '*fractured*'. David didn't want to repeat the sense of competition with his father, with his sons, but mentioned that Matthew can be '*triangulating between the two of us, tries to parent us*' and that he sometimes sides with Jennifer against David, which David finds difficult.
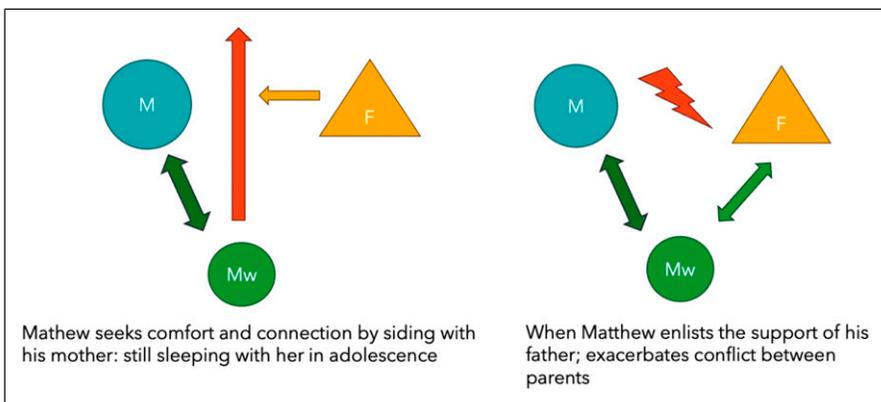
Impact upon the child. The interview centred on Matthew. Damien, now an adult, still lived with his parents, but appeared to have absented himself somewhat from the family ('*withdrawn into his own space and activities*'), which may possibly be self-protective given the dynamic unfolding for Matthew. Interestingly, both parents seemed to see the

family as three of them together: *'Matthew's, we're all engaged, we're three…. Jennifer and I and Matthew are all engaged'*.

There seems a remarkable similarity between the dynamic between Matthew and his parents, and the experience of Jennifer as a child (albeit without the level of violence). Matthew would feel his mother's pull for closeness (at the expense of his father), as well as the need to keep his parents' together (*'trying to parent us'*, as David put it). Interestingly, Jennifer revealed that he is still sleeping with her, aged 12. Matthew would likely be aware of the sense of safety his mother receives when she feels close to him and able to manage his difficulties. Both parents felt that Matthew frequently sided with his mother, but as seems to have occurred in the schooling incident, he appears able to use his father's distanced position, when he feels the need to enact any kind of separation from his mother. However, given the *'explosive'* effect on his parents' relationship it would be difficult for Matthew to push this dynamic far. However, at the same time, his *'problems'*, although worrying his mother, also reinforce her position as the one holding it all together – which may offer Jennifer some sense of safety. Matthew may feel as trapped in the middle as Jennifer did in her own childhood (see Figure 4) with the same irresolvable bind of needing to keep his parents together, whilst keeping his mother close, fuelling parental conflict. This is depicted below (Figure 5).

Resources in the relationship. Firstly, it was notable that both parents voiced some of these key dynamics, were able to discuss them with each other (with surprising agreement) and were actively trying to avoid some of the worst aspects of what they experienced in their childhood. In this they had clearly succeeded, as it would seem evident that neither of their children would have experienced the violence and rejection that Jennifer and David had endured in different ways.

Secondly, it was interesting that even if they described their own relationship as *'fractured'* (David's words), as a triad with Matthew, the family seemed to function better than any of them dyadically. This offered some kind of shared positivity – although most clearly expressed by David (without being denied by Jennifer). There are clearly costs to

Mathew seeks comfort and connection by siding with his mother: still sleeping with her in adolescence

When Matthew enlists the support of his father; exacerbates conflict between parents

Figure 5. Matthew must choose between comfort and conflict.

all of them in the status quo, not least for Matthew, but equally some resilience in this triad should be noted.

Suggestions for the future. Our triadic formulation offered new insights into Jennifer and David's relationship. It had been possible to understand their difficulties as related to their conflicting attachment strategies but there was a key missing element in this revealed vividly by the example of the 'good news' about the possibility of a new school for Matthew. A triadic focus also shed light on other apparent inconsistencies. For example, David described recently how Jennifer seemed to have become more rather than less anxious because he had been nice to her. This became seen as yet another example of her being neurotic and David as having a sinister underlying anger. Such interpretations can trap couples so that even potentially positive events are ignored or viewed within a pathological framework. Realising that each of them is responding in terms of resonances to dangers experienced in previous triadic processes from their past can help to liberate. Jennifer can see that her inability to trust positive events is shaped by her experience of deception between her parents: to be safe she had to become continually monitoring this deception and could not and now cannot trust a sense of safety. For David that he felt safe by keeping a lid on things and saying and doing positive things would please his parents and help him to keep safe.

Drawing on their corrective scripts (see above), we were able to explore how aspects of their relationship with each other, and how they worked together as parents, indicated their attempts to make improvement on their past. It was clear that neither of them had wanted simply to repeat their parents' relationship as a couple nor as parents. Given their declaration of their couple relationship as having failed, we discussed the option of separating and perhaps finding new partners. This option produced an initial anxious response resonating with their childhood roles about not being 'good enough. However, it also revealed positive features, such as sharing a strong sense of humour. Flashes of fun sparked between them at times. They also resolutely defended and supported each other in relation to their parents. For example, that they both supported each other in being sympathetic for those negative actions of their parents. Jennifer sympathised with David's vulnerability in the face of his father's sarcasm and David in Jennifer's emotional control by her mother. In this sense, as a triad (David, Jennifer, Parent), David and Jennifer were able to create a '*chain of resilience*' (see above) creating safety for each other that each had lacked in their dyadic childhood relationships.

Conclusion

Our experience of using the Family Attachment Interview, illustrated by Jennifer, David and their children, has suggested that attending to historical and current triadic attachment dynamics could be a fruitful line of enquiry. Interestingly, reference to the third person in the relationship dynamic, sometimes made more sense of *dyadic* attachment patterns than looking at parent and child alone. Equally, there are evidently difficulties also in the approach. The triadic questioning and analysis can be confusing to both parents and clinicians immersed in monadic and dyadic ways of thinking (Ugazion et al., 2012). This can make administering the interview feel 'slippery', as if one is chasing the parent for

something always just out of view. However, we would argue that the reason for this is the conceptual shift being demanded; one that the FAI is an attempt to contribute to rather than complete. It would seem premature to abandon this opportunity for fuller and more accurate understanding of family difficulties because it is difficult. Indeed, we have argued, this appears to have led to Attachment theory becoming somewhat stuck, held back by restricting itself to the constructs originating with the breakthroughs in assessment developed in the 1970s and 1980s. We hope here to clear some breathing space to allow for more systemic attachment assessments, constructs, and interventions to emerge.

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Supplemental Material

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