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# Using Attachment philosophy and Mentalization Theory by Fonagy to examine Emma Stone's life

## Introduction

The appropriate case in this analysis will be the early years of actress Emma Stone. Stone is a very famous actress, and has multiple biographies describing her childhood life online. The details of her childhood will be discussed in more detail in the next section. The primary sources used to gather these details regarding her life will be different biography websites, and popular blog websites, such as Huffington Post. Stone has provided multiple accounts on her life, which will be used as well. This case will be analyzed through the lenses of Attachment Theory and Fonagy's Theory of Mentalization. A discussion surrounding the general soundness of these theories, as well as their soundness pertinent to Stone's life will take place throughout this work. While both theories aid in better understanding the development of this actress through her early years, it will be shown that Fonagy's Theory of Mentalization is an ultimately better lens for analyzing Stone's personal development.

## Outline of the Case

As mentioned, Emma Stone's early years will serve as the case for this analysis. Stone was born in 1988 in Arizona to Krista (Yeager), a homemaker, and Jeffrey Charles Stone, a contracting company founder and CEO ("Biography", n.d.). As a young child, she performed in many school productions, as well as other local productions in her hometown. Alongside her work in various plays, she attended junior high and high school like a regular student until she was 15. She then decided to become more serious about her acting career. She created a PowerPoint presentation in order to convince her parents to allow her to drop out of school, move to Los Angeles, California, and fully pursue her acting career ("Biography", n.d.). Her efforts proved to be successful, and Stone and her mother moved to California. Her mother homeschooled her while she auditioned for a copious number of roles. She was rejected by all of her auditions for the first few years until she was rewarded the part of Laurie Partridge in the television show, *In Search of the Partridge Family*. Her connection with her mother will be discussed in greater detail later in this piece.

Recently, Stone has also opened up about anxieties she struggled with as a child and during the time of her move. This anxiety was supposedly crippling and very demotivating when she was a child. It affected both her emotional and physical beings. For instance, she explains, "When I was seven, I was convinced the house was burning down. I could just sense it. Not a hallucination, just a tightening in my chest, feeling I couldn't breathe, like the world was going to end" (Fuller, 2016, n.p.). She had many other episodes like this, and it was unclear if this was some sort of anxiety mental disorder, or a result of the circumstances of her life. Her parents took action and enrolled Stone in therapy in order to cure her anxiety. Stone claimed therapy helped her drastically. In addition, she explained that acting helped distract her from her feelings, (Fuller, 2016) so her participation in various productions, and then her grand decision to pursue an acting career fully both assisted her in recovering as well. This particular aspect of her childhood is especially pertinent in the discussion of Attachment Theory, and Fonagy's

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Theory of Mentalization, and will be analyzed more deeply in the following sections.

## **Attachment Theory**

In broad terms, Attachment Theory states that in order for an individual to progress successfully through personal development, they must have a strong emotional and physical attachment to at least one caregiver. There are different types of attachment styles one might adopt. An insecure attachment style implants anxieties within children, and generally causes them to feel insecure and worried frequently (Bowlby, 1988). Insecure attachment styles are typically induced by the lack of emotional attachment to at least one primary caregiver; however, the dynamic of the relationship between the caregiver and child can create an insecure attachment style as well. A secure attachment style allows children to experience regular personal development, and occurs when the child can connect emotionally and physically to at least one caregiver. For this particular case, Stone teeters between both insecure and secure attachment styles.

Stone has outright admitted to battling anxiety for most of her childhood, which is very indicative of an insecure attachment style. The actress claimed that as a child, her anxiety was constant. She would constantly ask her mother how exactly the day would fall into place, and would feel nauseous frequently because of her worries (Holmes, 2016). This said, Stone had a seemingly very positive relationship with her mother. She has a relatively neutral relationship with her father; she didn't connect very deeply with him, but there were not any significantly underlying issues. Her mother was a homemaker, and her father was the founder and CEO of a general-contracting company (Diehl, Wolfe & Demarchelier, 2015). Moreover, her parents proved to be very supportive of Stone's anxieties. They enrolled her in therapy, and Stone reported that the assistance of a professional was exceptionally helpful. This act demonstrates that Stone's parents certainly cared about her, but not necessarily that she was able to connect with them very deeply. On the other hand, children may be burdened with anxiety disorders independent of their home life, and struggle with such challenges despite having a very healthy home dynamic.

These things said, the nature of Stone's life very likely could have created feelings of loneliness, and made her disconnect from her parents. Stone enrolled in high school only for a year before dropping out. She convinced her parents to move to California in order to pursue her acting career. She and her mother moved shortly after she left high school. This feat shows that her mother must have cared enough to pick up her life and move with her daughter, but it still does not speak to Stone's perceived connection with her mother. Dropping out of school and moving to a new city in order to audition for large productions are not decisions most people make. It is very likely Stone felt isolated because of her decisions, and as though she could not connect with her mother as her mother could not possibly understand what she was going through.

Above this, Stone seemed to possess a very secure attachment style in her early adult life. One potential explanation for this is that she actually did connect with her mother deeply, and she was simply burdened with an independent anxiety disorder. Factors outside of a child's relationship with their primary caregivers can contribute to the anxiety they feel. This also makes sense, as Stone felt anxious as early as age 7, which was before she changed her life radically. Put simply, she might have possessed a secure attachment style otherwise, and underneath

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her mental illness. Another explanation is that Stone was able to talk through her issues well enough to not be impacted significantly by them. This concept is known as reflexive function. According to John Bowlby, the ability to talk about and understand instances that perpetuate an insecure attachment style mitigates ongoing negative consequences of the respective trauma (Bowlby, 1988). In this particular case, Stone's trauma was leaving school, moving out of state, and deciding to follow through with something ostensibly silly; albeit these decisions were voluntary. She was able to discuss her feelings with a therapist, and use acting as her tool to cope with her stresses, so it is very possible she eliminated many of the long-term concerns associated with an insecure attachment style. Overall, it can be seen how Attachment Theory fits into the dynamic of Stone's early years, and provide deeper explanation as to how she experienced personal development.

## **Fonagy's Theory of Mentalization**

Stone's early years may also be deeper analyzed through the lens of Fonagy's Theory of Mentalization. Generally speaking, mentalization denotes interest in one's own mind (Fonagy, 2002). More specifically, the theory of mentalization suggests that in order for one to develop, they must be aware of and interested in the operation of their own mind. Attachment Theory and mentalization are closely related; Fonagy argues that a lack of adequate attachment during childhood likely interferes with one's ability to be aware of or develop any interest in their state of mind (Fonagy, 2002). In general, the concept behind this argument is that if a child fails to attach to a caregiver properly, their mind will be shaped in a way that forces them to preoccupy their thoughts with anxiety instead of possessing the clarity required to reflect and understand the facets of their mind. On the other hand, if a child successfully attaches to at least one of their primary caregivers, they will be set up better to understand how their mind works, and why they respond to stimuli in certain manners. Mentalization aids in understanding Stone's early years, and her anxiety disorders and recoveries, very well.

One analysis of Stone's situation is that she attached properly to either her mother or father, and then was able to understand her anxiety disorder well enough in order to improve. More specifically, she was given the tools of self-reflection and analysis because of the strong emotional connections she formed with her parents. This conclusion relies on the assumption that she did actually connect well with her parents, versus failing to ever genuinely connect, and that her anxiety disorder was an independent mental illness induced by external factors. Her self-reflection was evident in many scenarios. For instance, as previously discussed, she understood both as a child and as an adult that she struggled with crippling anxieties as a child. This is a clear example of her ability to reflect and understand her mental condition. Furthermore, she took therapy and acting incredibly seriously, and actively attempted to reduce her anxiety. This demonstrates her interest in her personal development and mental health. In addition, Stone has publicly noted that she prides herself on her humor (Fisher, 2016). This also demonstrates that she possesses at least a basic level of interest in her own mind. She understands her weaknesses, and her struggles, but also the aspects of herself that she enjoys and believes are positive. It can be seen that if Stone actually did develop a strong emotional connection with one of her parents, this connection gave her the correct frame of mind she needed in order to conquer her disorder and continue to develop healthily.

This analysis can be expanded to explain the specific attachment style characteristics Stone embodied as a child and young adult. In other words, the theory of mentalization explains why

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Stone exhibited many insecure attachment styles as child despite being supported by caring parents, and then also why she possesses a secure attachment style as an adult. Furthermore, Stone's initial development of a strong emotional connection with her parents gave her the tools she needed to be able to take interest in her own mind, and reflect and cope. External, independent variables impacted her levels of anxiety, causing her to develop a disorder, and thus, display insecure attachment characteristics. However, because she had developed the tools from her strong emotional connection, she was able to take interest in herself, recover, and then return to a secure attachment style. In addition, Stone maintained very healthy relationships, both platonic and romantic, in her adult life. According to Lee A. Kirkpatrick, true attachment styles, and those attachment styles developed very early on in life, are significant indicators of the dynamics of future relationships one will hold (Kirkpatrick & Hazan, 1994). In other words, if Stone truly possessed an insecure attachment style, it is very likely her other relationships would struggle due to her inability to feel secure and cope. However, she has held many successful relationships, and is prided on her extreme confidence ("Stone Talks Confidence", 2014). This further confirms the soundness of Fonagy's Theory of Mentalization. Despite the crippling anxiety she experienced as a child, and the natural hardships that accompany being a celebrity, Stone has the tools she needs in order to combat these struggles and own her confidence because of her initial development of a secure attachment style. It can be seen that this theory provides much deeper insights into the circumstances of Stone's early years.

## Final Evaluation

Overall, both theories discussed provide deeper, more diverse insights into the early life of Emma Stone. This particular case is very interesting because the individual possesses both insecure and secure attachment styles, and the nature of her life is very different from most laypeople; she is wildly famous and dropped out of school at a very young age. Moreover, both Attachment Theory and Fonagy's Theory of Mentalization provide postulations as to why Stone dealt with anxiety, yet had seemingly positive relations with her parents. However, Fonagy's theory ultimately provides more sound insights into this case, and is more sound in general.

Attachment Theory does not speak to the cases where individuals developed very healthy and secure attachments to at least one of their primary caregivers, yet still possess insecure attachment styles. It does not consider other external variables, such as life traumas, bullying, abuse from a separate party, or drastic life changes in the formation of an attachment style. For this particular case, it is clear Attachment Theory does not apply to Stone's early years very well, as she did possess many insecure attachment style characteristics, yet seemed to have very supportive parents, including a mother who was willing to homeschool Stone and move to California with her. It is possible that Stone did not emotionally connect very well to either of her parents, which would make this theory a sounder analysis, but given the lengths her mother went to support her, this is fairly unlikely. Stone was very anxious, worried frequently, and at some points, was even unable to get herself to school because she feared interacting with others ("Stone in Vogue", 2016). Such behaviors would certainly indicate that she was unable to attach to her caregivers, but this was not the case; her anxiety was a result of other aspects of her life.

On the other hand, aspects of Attachment Theory do make sense for Stone's early years, but only when expanded and viewed through the lens of the theory of mentalization. In general,

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mentalization is a very sound theory as it relates to attachment and attachment styles, yet also remains broad overall, and describes an additional quality someone must possess in order to make sense of attachment. It provides additional conditions and explanations of the concept of attachment, making it less dichotomous, and instead, more dependent on every individual's unique situation. In other words, attachment and people's different attachment styles alone cannot explain the greater details of their lives, but the ability to reflect, understand, and be aware of how their minds respond to stimuli can. A specific sort of interest in one's own mind is how individuals are able to experience growth and development in a healthy manner. In this case, it makes sense that Stone was able to recover from her anxieties well because she developed a secure attachment style with her parents, and thus, gained the ability to reflect, or mentalize. It is quite likely she is still impacted by her anxieties, and she has admitted this, but overall, a secure attachment style dominates her current life. This also explains why she was able to discern that she did possess issues surrounding anxiety as a child, and then act on them by following through with therapy, and engaging in acting so heavily. It also makes sense that her anxieties and other insecure attachment style attributes were the result of something external and independent from her parents. This is not so clear, however, when viewing her early years and recovery only through the lens of Attachment Theory.

These things said, neither Attachment Theory nor Fonagy's Theory of Mentalization are not perfect; neither address cases where individuals who did not develop strong emotional or physical connections to either caregiver still possess secure attachment styles. Albeit rare, these cases do exist, and there does not exist an explanation within either of these theories. According to Attachment Theory, there simply would not exist any cases where this is true, for these cases would contradict the very principles of the theory itself, but this is false. According to Fonagy's theory, an individual would only be able to form secure behaviors and coping skills if they were enabled to do so by a secure attachment to at least one caregiver. As seen, neither of these conditions are realistic for these types of cases. Further research is necessary in order to determine how these cases prevail.

All things considered, it is clear that for the case of Emma Stone's early years, Fonagy's Theory of Mentalization is a more sound analysis. Given that Stone expressed many behaviors that would suggest she possesses an insecure attachment style, she had strong emotional connections with her parents, and is now a very secure adult. Because of this, Attachment Theory alone does not provide a convincing argument for why she struggled so significantly with anxiety. However, the key principles from the theory may be extracted and expanded upon using Fonagy's theory to make sense of this case. For instance, it is reasonable to conclude Stone originally developed a secure attachment style, and currently expresses this security in her adult life due to the support of her parents. It is also reasonable to conclude that her anxiety was induced by the unconventional and eccentric nature of her life, and that she had the tools to become aware of and interested in this disorder. Furthermore, she cared enough about her recovery to take the necessary steps required to get better. This sort of mentalization allowed her to regain control of her life, and effectively exposes her true attachment style. Had she not had this development to begin with, it is very likely she would not have been able to cope and recover so successfully.