Subjectivity and Response: A Theoretical Model of How Humans Become Human

Authors:

Date: 2026-02-23T23:24:11+00:00

Abstract

经典依恋理论以“生存与安全”作为人类心理发展的逻辑起点，但这一前提是否在普通家庭中普遍成立，尚缺乏批判性审视。本文旨在追问：如果婴儿无法通过具身体验建立起生存依赖意识，那么不安全依恋究竟如何形成？整合具身认知、皮亚杰认知发展阶段理论与心智化理论，通过对感知运动阶段“哭”的回应模式与前运算阶段“为什么”追问的回应方式进行概念分析，构建“主体性回应”理论模型。提出依恋形成的真正起点是“主体性回应”——照料者对儿童作为“能动者”与“理解者”的看见、确认与返还。这一机制贯穿两个阶段：感知运动阶段的回应方式（自主型/代劳型/忽视型）塑造婴儿的能动性预期；前运算阶段的返还与否决定儿童能否从“理解者”回到“被理解者”的依赖状态。该框架将依恋理论、认知发展与心智化理论统一于同一底层逻辑，并延伸解释了安全型个体的“不安全转向”、咨询师反移情等临床现象。本文为理论构建研究，核心概念尚需在自然档案中进一步操作化验证；主要聚焦于早期发展，对中年期、老年期的图式变化探讨不足；跨文化适用性有待实证检验。“主体性回应”模型为依恋理论的“内部工作模型”和“敏感回应”提供了可操作的机制基础，修正了“生存与安全”假设的普遍性，并指向一个根本性的伦理承诺：只有在被看见中，人才能成为人。

Full Text

Subjectivity and Response: A Theoretical Model of How Humans Become Human

Yin Zaixi*

(Hebei Medical University, School of Basic Medicine, Shijiazhuang 050017)

Abstract

Classical attachment theory takes “survival and security” as the logical starting point of human psychological development, yet whether this premise is generally valid in ordinary families still lacks critical examination. This article seeks to ask: if infants cannot establish an awareness of survival dependence through

embodied experience, how exactly does insecure attachment form? Integrating embodied cognition, Piaget' s theory of stages of cognitive development, and mentalization theory, this article conducts a conceptual analysis of response patterns to "crying" in the sensorimotor stage and response modes to the "why" questioning of the preoperational stage, and constructs a theoretical model of "subjectivity response." It proposes that the true starting point of attachment formation is "subjectivity response" —the caregiver' s seeing, affirmation, and returning of the child as an "agent" and an "understander." This mechanism runs through two stages: response modes in the sensorimotor stage (autonomous / doing-for / neglectful) shape the infant' s expectations of agency; in the preoperational stage, whether return occurs determines whether the child can move from the position of "understander" back into the dependent state of "being understood." This framework unifies attachment theory, cognitive development, and mentalization theory within the same underlying logic, and further explains clinical phenomena such as the "insecure turn" of securely attached individuals and counselors' countertransference. This article is a theoretical-construction study; its core concepts still require further operationalized validation in naturalistic archives. It focuses mainly on early development and does not sufficiently explore schematic changes in middle and old age; its cross-cultural applicability awaits empirical testing. The "subjectivity response" model provides an operable mechanistic basis for attachment theory' s "internal working model" and "sensitive responsiveness," revises the presumed universality of the "survival and security" hypothesis, and points toward a fundamental ethical commitment: only in being seen can a human become human.

Keywords: subjectivity response; attachment theory; sensorimotor schema; image cognition; mentalization

Corresponding author: Yin Zaixi, E-mail: 23011010312@stu.hebmu.edu.cn

Subjectivity-Responsivity: A Theoretical Model for the Making of a Human Being

Yin Zaixi*

(1 School of Basic Medicine, Hebei Medical University, Shijiazhuang 050017, China)

Abstract

Classical attachment theory takes "survival and safety" as the logical starting point of human psychological development, but whether this premise holds universally in ordinary family contexts has not been sufficiently critically examined. This study addresses the question: If infants fail to develop a sense of survival dependence through embodied experience, how does insecure attachment actually form? Integrating embodied cognition, Piaget' s theory of cogni-

tive development, and mentalization theory, this study conducts a conceptual analysis of caregiver responses to crying during the sensorimotor stage and to "why" questioning during the preoperational stage, and proposes a new theoretical model centered on Subjectivity-Responsivity. The core innovation of this research is the construct Subjectivity-Responsivity, defined as the caregiver' s seeing, affirming, and returning of the child' s subjectivity as an "agent" and an "understander." This construct is positioned as the genuine starting point of attachment formation. A three-fold classification of caregiver responses is introduced: autonomy-supportive, over-helping, and neglectful. This mechanism operates across two key developmental stages: In the sensorimotor stage, these response patterns shape the infant' s sense of agency. In the preoperational stage, whether the caregiver supports returning determines whether the child can revert from the position of "understander" to the dependent state of "being understood." This framework unifies attachment theory, cognitive development, and mentalization theory under a single underlying logic, and further explains clinical phenomena including the "insecure turn" of securely attached individuals and therapist countertransference. As a theory-building study, its core

concepts require further operationalization and validation through naturalistic archival research. It focuses primarily on early development, with limited exploration of schema changes in midlife and later life, and its cross-cultural applicability remains to be tested. The Subjectivity–Responsivity model provides an operable mechanism for the "internal working model" and "sensitive responsiveness" in attachment theory, revises the assumed universality of the "survival and safety" hypothesis, and points to a fundamental ethical commitment: only in being seen does one become human.

Keywords: Subjectivity–Responsivity; attachment theory; sensorimotor schema; figural cognition; mentalize

1. Introduction: The Contributions of Attachment Theory and Its Neglected Premise

1.1 The Core Contributions of Attachment Theory

Since attachment theory was systematically proposed by John Bowlby in the mid-twentieth century, it has become one of the dominant paradigms for understanding early human relationships and subsequent psychological development. Bowlby creatively integrated the intellectual resources of psychoanalysis, ethology, and evolutionary theory, defining attachment as the "emotional bond between an infant and caregiver," and arguing that this relationship is rooted in an innate behavioral system shaped by evolution.

The core contributions of attachment theory may be summarized as three interrelated conceptual frameworks. The first is the **secure base** (Bowlby, 1969) —the infant treats the caregiver as a base from which to explore the external

world and returns to that base for comfort when feeling threatened. The second is **sensitive responsiveness** (Ainsworth, 1978)—the mother' s sensitive perception of, and timely feedback to, the infant' s signals, which is a core predictor of secure attachment. The third is the **internal working model** (Bowlby, 1973)—through continuous interaction with the caregiver, the infant gradually constructs psychological representations of the "self" and "others." Ainsworth and others (1978) further distinguished three basic attachment types: secure, anxious-resistant, and avoidant.

1.2 A Neglected Premise: Survival and Security

However, the above achievements of attachment theory rest on a premise that has rarely been explicitly examined: **survival and security**. Bowlby clearly argued that the evolutionary function of the attachment behavioral system is to ensure proximity between infant and caregiver, thereby increasing the probability of survival. The "ultimate cause" of attachment is survival—the reason infants seek proximity and experience anxiety upon separation is fundamentally that, over hundreds of thousands of years of evolutionary history, the threat that "losing the caregiver means facing death" has been engraved into the nervous system.

This premise plays a foundational role within the theoretical system: it explains the motivational intensity of attachment behavior (survival threats activate the attachment system), the irreplaceability of the attachment object (a specific caregiver controls survival resources), and the universality of separation anxiety. Yet this premise has rarely been problematized in the development of the theory. Researchers have focused more on "how sensitive responsiveness affects internal working models," while few have asked: **In the everyday contexts of most ordinary families today, do infants truly "experience" themselves as depending on their parents for survival?**

1.3 Formulating the Problem: Are Survival and Security Universal?

It is precisely this neglected premise that constitutes the starting point for the present paper' s critical examination.

In recent years, research on embodied cognition has provided new theoretical resources for re-examining the assumption of "survival and security." From Merleau-Ponty' s phenomenology of perception to contemporary radical embodied-cognition approaches, researchers have increasingly recognized that human cognition does not begin with abstract representation, but is rooted in the dynamic interaction between body and environment; infants' prelinguistic "knowing" of the world is a kind of experiential knowledge that cannot be put into words yet is directly given.

Viewed from this perspective, a fundamental fact emerges when we examine

infants' everyday circumstances: **in families where there is no explicit punitive behavior or threatening expression, infants cannot, through embodied experience, establish an awareness that "I depend on my parents for survival."**

For infants, the **sensorimotor stage** (Piaget, 1952) predominates at this moment: "when I am hungry and cry, there is food to eat" does not mean "my parents are providing a service," but rather "the world is operating as usual" ; "after I finish eating, the bowl disappears" does not mean "my parents are laboring," but rather "this is how the world is supposed to be." Awareness of survival and security can be constructed through embodied experience only under two conditions: first, parents repeatedly carry out punitive behaviors (such as actually taking away food after mealtime has passed); second, parents explicitly use threatening expressions (such as "if you don' t behave, I won' t give you food") and then put them into action. In most ordinary families, neither of these two conditions exists—this means that the "survival and security" premise of attachment theory is in fact applicable only to extreme situations in which survival resources are explicitly used as means of reward and punishment.

This finding forces us to ask: if children do not accept parental projections because they "realize their dependence," then how exactly do insecure attachment patterns form? If the foundation on which attachment theory rests is tenable only in a minority of families, then how should we explain the psychological developmental paths of children in ordinary families, who constitute the overwhelming majority of the population?

1.4 The Task of This Paper: Critical Inheritance and Revision of Attachment Theory

The task of this paper is thus clear: to carry out a **critical inheritance and revision** of attachment theory. We accept and fully agree that, in evolutionary design and in extreme situations, "survival and security" are the ultimate cause and direct driving force of attachment behavior. Yet we critically point out that directly transposing this logic into a universal premise for the psychological genesis of individuals in most ordinary families is inconsistent with current research in cognitive science.

Therefore, for psychological development under ordinary conditions, we need to find a proximate mechanism that is more appropriate and more explanatory—namely, **"subjectivity response."**

The theoretical model of the pathway we attempt to propose is this: the real starting point of insecure attachment formation is not survival and safety, but whether caregivers give appropriate responses to the subjectivity emerging in the child. This process spans two key developmental stages:

First, the sensorimotor stage (Piaget, 1952). Through sensorimotor schemas such as "crying," the child uses these as core means of exploration and

communication. At this point, the way parents respond—whether by guiding the child toward the development of autonomy (for example, placing objects within the child' s reach), or by over-intervening or neglecting—will shape the child' s earliest experience of agency.

Next, the preoperational stage (Piaget, 1952). When the child compares their own situation or perceives abnormalities in parental emotion, subjectivity begins to emerge from embodied experience, initiating an active understanding of the world. At this point, the way parents respond—whether by seeing and returning this understanding, or by ignoring, using, or channeling it onto a specific track—will determine whether the child unconsciously takes on the responsibility of understanding others, and whether this ultimately solidifies into a particular attachment pattern.

The explanatory power of this theoretical model exceeds the scope covered by classical attachment theory. It can not only explain the formation of attachment in childhood, but can also be extended to explain why individuals with secure attachment may form insecure patterns in adult romantic relationships (one-sided understanding in the relationship and the absence of being returned), why experienced psychological counselors may also fall into countertransference (unconscious assumption of responsibility in professional relationships), and why psychological repair after major trauma is so difficult (when the world itself cannot be understood, how can the experience of "being seen" be rebuilt within relationships?).

This paper does not intend to overthrow attachment theory—quite the contrary, we acknowledge the profundity of its core insight (the crucial role of parental response). What we attempt to do is to detach this insight from the fragile foundation of "survival and safety"and place it within an interpretive framework that is more universal and closer to the infant' s real experience. We believe that this revision will enable the explanatory edifice of attachment theory to stand more firmly, cover a broader range, and better respond to the true picture of human psychological formation in complex reality.

1.5 Definition of Core Concepts

To facilitate readers' understanding of the theoretical framework of this paper, the following provides brief definitions of the key concepts:

Subjectivity response: the seeing, confirmation, and returning that caregivers provide to the child as an "agent"and an "understander."It is the core mechanism of attachment formation proposed in this paper.

Seeing: recognizing the signals of subjectivity that the child is expressing (such as crying, reaching out, questioning, sharing). It is the first dimension of subjectivity response.

Confirmation: to acknowledge that the child's signals are meaningful and worthy of response. This is the second dimension of agency-responsive interaction.

Returning: to hand the responsibility for understanding back to the child themself, inviting the child to complete independently the transformation from image → symbol. This is the third dimension of agency-responsive interaction, and also its most crucial link.

Sensorimotor schema: the body' s remembered "if……then……" rules. The first batch of schemas is formed at ages 0–2; they operate throughout life and are updated under the drive of "surprise."

Surprise: a bodily signal of astonishment when expectation and reality rupture. This paper equates it with "prediction error" in predictive-processing theory; it is the driving force of schema updating.

Image solidification: the process by which traumatic images are preserved with high sensitivity, become situational triggers, and automatically activate bodily responses in similar situations.

Alienation of understanding: the process by which, when understanding is not returned, healthy mentalization is alienated from "curiosity after safety" into "control under insecurity."

Returning cycle: the complete interactive process of seeing–confirmation–returning. It is both the formation mechanism of secure attachment and the core of mentalization-based practice.

Healthy mentalization: under the premise of sufficient felt security, an activity of understanding that is open, revisable, and serves connection and exploration.

Distorted mentalization: under the premise of a lack of felt security, an activity of understanding that is rigid, defensive, and serves control and self-protection. Rationalization and external attribution are its foundation; psychic equivalence, pretend mode, and teleological mode are its solidified forms.

Situational avoidance: an avoidant response formed when a secure individual, in facing a partner, retreats into a state of imagistic cognition because of long-term one-way understanding and ineffective effort.

Situational anxiety: an anxious response formed when a secure individual, in facing a partner, retreats into a state of imagistic cognition because effort is occasionally effective and intermittently reinforced.

High-functioning defender: an individual with extremely high mentalizing capacity but a lack of felt security, in whom openness and closure in understanding coexist, and whose motivation comes from fear rather than curiosity.

Imagistic cognition: the capacity of children in the preoperational stage to preserve, reproduce, and deduce experience through internal images. It is the developmental starting point of mentalization.

It needs to be stated in particular that, within my framework, "imagistic cognition" contains two levels; in terms of their genesis, they···

It is one and the same process, but it can be distinguished in terms of its state:

The first is image cognition in automated operation (pre-reflective). This is the level of image cognition directly presented by the child' s body at the moment interaction occurs. It is not a "picture that is recalled," but the body' s direct grasp of the situation—when a child sees a familiar friend approaching, what is directly presented at the embodied-image level is the feeling that "one can move closer" ; when a child has experienced exclusion and then faces peers again, what is directly presented at the embodied-image level is the feeling that "one needs to be careful."This process operates simultaneously with sensorimotor schemas and cannot be separated from them; it is the automated response of the entire bodily system at that moment. It does not require, nor does it involve, the intervention of "thinking." Functionally, it is consistent with the feeling of the sensorimotor schema—both are pre-reflective, automated, and drive present behavior.

The second is image cognition as a tool of thought (capable of being reflected upon). This is the child' s capacity to use inner images for logical reasoning, deduction, and modeling—here, images are not objects to be "extracted," but elements of thinking itself.

- A classic example is a child saying, "The sun must have gone to sleep too." The child observes:
- At night, other people disappear → Mom and Dad say, "They have gone to sleep."
- After sleeping → other people (friends, grandparents, neighbors) appear.
- At night, the sun also disappears → it appears in the daytime.

The child uses existing images ("darkness disappears → sleep") as elements of reasoning, performs logical deduction about a new phenomenon (the disappearance of the sun), and reaches the conclusion: the sun has also gone to sleep. This conclusion is not extracted; it is inferred through images. The moment the child says this conclusion aloud, it can already be reflected upon and narrated —but the reasoning process itself is still completed at the level of images.

The relationship between the two: These two are not two different capacities, but two states in which the same capacity for "image cognition" appears. The first is the state of image cognition in operation—automated and pre-reflective, driving the child' s immediate behavior; the second is the state of image cognition when it is being called upon—the child actively uses it to think, reason, and understand the world. The child' s immediate behavior, such as the performance of a fourth-grade child in interaction, is driven by the first; whereas the child' s ability to understand the world and to say "the sun has gone to sleep too" depends on the second. The occurrence of mentalization is precisely the expansion from the first to the second—from "the body' s direct grasp" to "the ability to actively reason about the world through images."

2. Reexamining Survival and Safety: A Critique of the Embodied-Cognition and Motor-Perception Stage

2.1 Returning to Attachment Theory

Tracing the Origins of "Survival and Safety" in Attachment Theory
The core proposition of attachment theory is that the emotional bond formed between an individual and specific others is, in its deeper logic, rooted in the human need for survival adaptation. This theoretical paradigm, which directly links emotional relationships with survival security, was primarily laid on an evolutionary and biological foundation by John Bowlby, and was systematically revealed and extended through Mary Ainsworth' s ingenious empirical research. Together, their work constructed a complete explanatory path from "behavioral system" to "individual differences," showing that attachment is, in essence, a behavioral system whose fundamental purpose is to ensure safety and promote survival.

John Bowlby' s theoretical foundation: attachment as an evolved behavioral system

Bowlby was deeply influenced by Konrad Lorenz' s Imprinting Theory (1935) and by ethology, and challenged the "secondary drive theory" then prevalent in psychoanalytic schools and mainstream psychology—that is, the view that attachment is merely a byproduct of feeding. He proposed that attachment itself is an independent, evolutionarily derived behavioral system whose primary function is to protect infants and young children from environmental dangers such as predators, thereby increasing the probability of survival (Bowlby, 1969/1982). This system is "set" in children and, through specific behaviors such as crying, crawling, following, and smiling, actively maintains proximity to the primary caregiver—usually the mother. The caregiver, in turn, serves as the child' s "secure base" and "safe haven" : when children feel safe, they can depart from this base to explore the environment, promoting cognitive and social development; when they feel threatened, fatigued, or distressed, they return to the base to seek comfort and protection. Thus, within Bowlby' s theoretical framework, intimacy, separation anxiety, and the sense of security in attachment relationships can all be traced to the survival pressures faced by humans as a species over evolutionary history; the direct meaning of secure attachment is equivalent to the safety of life.

Mary Ainsworth' s empirical deepening: secure-base behavior and patterns of individual difference

Through her pioneering empirical research using the "Strange Situation" procedure, Ainsworth provided crucial operational validation and deepening of Bowlby's theory (Ainsworth et al., 1978). She not only confirmed the widespread existence of "secure-base behavior"; more importantly, she revealed that children exhibit predictable patterns of individual difference when using this behavioral system—namely, attachment types: secure, avoidant, and ambivalent-resistant.

These differences were interpreted as manifestations of children' s "internal working models" of caregiver availability and responsiveness, formed through long-term interaction with caregivers.

From the logic of "survival and security," Ainsworth' s research shows that:

Secure attachment represents the optimal operation of this behavioral system: caregivers' sensitive, timely, and consistent responses convince children that the "secure base" is reliable, thereby enabling them to regulate stress effectively and achieve a balance between a sense of security and exploratory behavior.

Insecure attachment (avoidant and ambivalent types), by contrast, is an adaptive strategy under conditions in which the "secure base" is unreliable or unpredictable. For example, avoidant behavior may stem from the expectation of repeated rejection; it is a self-protective strategy that "deactivates"the attachment system in order to minimize pain. Ambivalent/resistant behavior, meanwhile, may attempt to maximize access to uncertain care by amplifying signals of need. Although these strategies may bring disadvantages over long-term development, at their origin they can still be regarded as secondary adaptations developed by individuals in non-ideal caregiving environments in order to maintain some degree of closeness and guarantee of survival.

The Author's Early Research Trajectory and the Real-World Impetus for a Cognitive Turn

The author' s early exploration of the mechanisms by which attachment is formed originated in observations of real social phenomena and in a personalized attempt at theoretical linkage. Through observation, the author found that urban migrant workers tend, under the pressure of economic survival, to set aside their own psychological problems, and that soldiers in wartime environments may have their traumatic responses overshadowed by survival crises. On the basis of these phenomena, the author attempted to extend and apply, in a personalized way, the Marxist theoretical perspective that the economic base determines the superstructure, and to combine it with the logic of basic needs in Maslow' s hierarchy of needs. This led to the initial cognition that "survival needs take precedence over psychological development," and further to the research hypothesis that "children' s dependence on their parents for survival resources becomes the core motive in the formation of attachment patterns." In reality, the parenting practices of some parents who tie the provision of survival resources to children' s behavior also once served as empirical corroboration for this hypothesis.

The limitations of this initial cognition gradually became apparent in subsequent observations of real-life childrearing. In childrearing contexts involving non-biological caregivers and parental absence, children' s physiological and survival needs may be fully met, yet problems of lacking a sense of security still arise very easily. This phenomenon cannot be reasonably explained through "survival and security dependence." In the author' s in-depth observations of

such contexts, it was found that children, through comparisons in daily life, spontaneously generate the core question: "Why are my father and mother not by my side?" This question became the key node that broke through the author' s initial cognition—the emergence of this question does not originate from a scarcity of survival resources, but rather from children' s active reflection on and exploration of the parent-child relationship and their own state of existence after comparing their own growth circumstances with those of others. It is a direct manifestation of children' s subjectivity consciousness initially emerging from embodied experience.

The author further found that the emergence of this core question does not in itself directly lead to the formation of attachment patterns

and solidification. The trajectory of attachment patterns is in fact highly correlated with caregivers' mode of response to the child' s subject-oriented thinking: whether the child' s active understanding and questioning are seen, positively responded to, and returned is the key factor determining the subsequent consolidation of attachment patterns. This finding brought about a fundamental shift in the author' s research understanding: from the initial theoretical model of "survival and security dependence," formed through the grafting of personal theory, toward the study of "the interactive relationship between children' s emergent subjectivity and caregivers' responses." It also became an important real-life impetus for the author to critically examine and revise the core premise of "survival and security" in classical attachment theory.

2.2 Infant Experience from the Perspective of the Embodied-Cognition and Sensorimotor Stage

To examine the universality of "survival and security"as a premise of attachment theory, it is first necessary to answer a more fundamental question: **in the sensorimotor stage, how exactly do infants "experience"their relationship with themselves, their parents, and the world?**

"Knowing" and "the inability to speak" in the sensorimotor stage

According to Piaget' s theory of the sensorimotor stage, infants aged 0–2 primarily construct their understanding of the world through sensation and action (Piaget, 1952). At this stage, infants have not yet formed the capacity for mental representation or symbolic thinking; their mode of cognition is prelinguistic and nonconceptual. Merleau-Ponty' s phenomenology of perception further clarifies that the body is the subject' s primordial channel toward the world, and that our "knowing" of the world precedes any linguistic expression (Merleau-Ponty, 1945). Contemporary radical embodied-cognition approaches have inherited and developed this insight, arguing that cognition does not depend on internal representations and computation, but is rooted in the dynamic interaction between body and environment (Varela et al., 1991).

This means that infants'"knowing"of the world is a kind of experiential knowledge

that is unspeakable yet directly present. When infants reach out to grasp toys, explore objects with their mouths, or bring caregivers closer through crying, they are not using conceptual thought; rather, at the bodily level, they are directly "grasping" the connection between action and outcome. This grasp is prereflective and nonpropositional—infants "know"how to obtain satiety, yet they cannot "know" that they know, still less represent this connection as "parents providing a service."

The world operating as usual: the nonreflective experience of there being food when hungry and the bowl disappearing after eating

According to Piaget' s theory of the sensorimotor stage, infants aged 0–2 primarily construct their understanding of the world through sensation and action (Piaget, 1952). At this stage, infants have not yet formed the capacity for mental representation or symbolic thinking; their mode of cognition is prelinguistic and nonconceptual. Merleau-Ponty' s phenomenology of perception further clarifies that the body is the subject' s primordial channel toward the world, and that our "knowing" of the world precedes any linguistic expression

(Merleau-Ponty, 1945). Contemporary radical embodied-cognition approaches have inherited and further developed this insight, arguing that cognition does not depend on internal representations and computation, but is rooted in the dynamic interaction between body and environment (Varela et al., 1991).

This means that the infant' s "knowing" of the world is a kind of experiential knowledge that is ineffable yet directly present. When infants reach out to grasp toys, explore objects with their mouths, or bring caregivers close through crying, they are not employing conceptual thought; rather, at the bodily level they are directly "grasping" the relation between action and outcome. This grasp is prereflective and non-propositional—the infant "knows" how to obtain satiety, but cannot "know" that they know, still less represent this relation as "the parents are providing a service."

"Crying" as an Original Sensorimotor Schema

At this stage, the infant' s innate "vocalization" —crying, calling—constitutes the most primitive tool of communication. It is worth noting that "crying" at this point is not an expression of emotion, but a **biological signal-emitting device**. This signal is innate and requires no learning: the infant "cries," and then the world changes. When the infant cries from hunger, and the breast or bottle appears, satiety follows; this sequence of events constitutes, within the infant' s experience, a complete **sensorimotor schema**: "crying—food appears —satiety." This schema is directly retained by the body and becomes the infant' s earliest expectation of the world: **when I emit a signal, the world will respond in some way**.

Similarly, everyday events such as "crying—being picked up—distress disappears" and "crying—toy appears—can be grasped" are experienced by the infant as rules of the world itself, rather than as volitional acts of some external subject. In

phenomenological terms, the infant lives in a "natural attitude"—the world is simply as it appears, and there is no need to ask why it is so. Cry when hungry, and then there is food to eat, just as the sun rises; cry and no one responds, just as a stone does not move by itself. The infant is not "receiving services," but "living in the world," and through repeated sensorimotor operations gradually constructs an embodied belief in the "predictability" of the world.

The Prototype of Attachment Types in the Sensorimotor Stage: Beginning with the Response Pattern to "Crying"

Ainsworth and colleagues' cross-cultural observations and "Strange Situation experiments" have already confirmed that attachment types can appear before the preoperational stage—that is, in the sensorimotor stage (Ainsworth et al., 1978). This finding forces us to ask: **at a stage that lacks the ability to think in terms of "why," how exactly does the prototype of attachment types form?**

The answer lies precisely in the response pattern of the original sensorimotor schema of "crying."

When the infant repeatedly sends signals by "crying," the caregiver's mode of response directly shapes the infant's **experience of agency** and expectations regarding the **controllability of the world**. More specifically, different response patterns orient the consolidation of schemas in different directions:

The key point here is that what Ainsworth called "sensitive responsiveness," in the sensorimotor stage, does not truly mean simple "satisfaction" itself; rather, it concerns whether the mode of response supports the infant's development of autonomy. Directly putting a bottle into the infant's mouth and placing the bottle within the infant's reach are both "responses," but in terms of the infant's embodied experience they are entirely different. The former allows the infant to experience that "the world completes things for me," whereas the latter allows the infant to experience that "I can complete things myself." It is precisely this embodied experience of "gaining security through one's own control" that constitutes the earliest prototype of secure attachment.

In other words, during the sensorimotor stage, the infant is not "understanding" the parents, but is "experiencing" the world—experiencing whether the world is predictable, experiencing whether the self can influence the world through action, and experiencing whether "when I need it, the world is present." These embodied experiences are repeatedly reinforced and gradually solidify into the infant's earliest expectational schema of the world. This schema is precisely the form in which Bowlby's "internal working model" exists during the sensorimotor stage—it is not a representational, reflective "model," but a bodily, pre-reflective "schema."

The World Operating as Usual: Non-Reflective Embodied Belief

On the basis of the above analysis, we can further understand that, for the infant in the sensorimotor stage, "dependence for survival" cannot be experienced.

When the infant' s crying reliably brings food, this sequence of events is experienced as the world' s own operating rule, rather than as "the parents providing a service." The infant is not "receiving services," but "living in a world in which food appears." Similarly, everyday events such as "the tableware disappears after eating" and "unease disappears after being picked up" are all experienced by the infant as the order of the world itself, without any need to ask why this is so.

To borrow Piaget' s terminology, what the infant is constructing is **sensorymotor schemas**, not a theory of mind concerning the parents' intentions. These schemas directly link "my actions" with "the world's outcomes," with no reflective insertion of "the parents" as independent agents in between. The infant "knows" how to obtain satiety, but cannot possibly "know" that it depends on the will of some external subject.

Conditions for the Formation of Awareness of Survival and Security: Punitive Behavior and Threatening Expression

Then, when and how is the awareness that "I depend on my parents for survival" formed?

The establishment of this awareness requires that the infant be able to: (1) identify the parents as independent, intentional [[unclear: word continues off page after "行"]]

as subjects; (2) establish a causal association between their own state of survival and their parents' behavior; and (3) become aware that this association has the possibility of being "revocable."

The acquisition of the first two capacities requires entry into what Piaget called the preoperational stage (approximately ages 2–7), when children begin to develop symbolic function and theory of mind and are able to understand that others have intentions and knowledge different from their own (Piaget, 1952). The third—the experience of "revocability" —requires particular external conditions in order to be constructed.

An awareness of survival dependence can be genuinely established through embodied experience only under the following two conditions:

First, during the sensorimotor stage, **parents repeatedly enact punitive behavior**. For example, when a child "does not obey," the parents explicitly take food away and withdraw companionship, causing the child to directly experience the causal relation "disobedience → loss of survival resources." This vivid causal rupture breaks the concrete belief that "the world operates as usual," forcing the child to realize that the appearance of food is not a rule of the world itself, but depends on what kind of behavior I perform.

Second, **parents explicitly use threatening expressions and follow them with action**. After the child has acquired a preliminary capacity for language comprehension, verbal threats such as "If you don' t obey, you won' t get food"

or "If you keep doing this, we won't want you anymore" directly mark out the association between "parental will" and "survival resources" and are accompanied by concrete action. Although such marking requires the intervention of language, its force lies precisely in pointing to the most primordial embodied experiences—hunger and satiety, companionship and loneliness.

In most ordinary families, neither of these two conditions exists. Parents usually maintain a relatively stable rhythm of caregiving, and even if they occasionally use verbal punishment or threats, they very rarely truly treat survival resources as direct instruments of reward and punishment. This means that, for the great majority of children growing up in ordinary families, "I depend on my parents for survival" is not a genuine awareness arising from embodied experience, but an after-the-fact, reflective construction—often recognized only through retrospective cognition after adolescence or even after economic independence.

2.3 Demarcating the Scope of Application of Survival and Security

(1) Extreme families: survival resources as genuine means of reward and punishment

In families where survival resources are explicitly used as behavioral rewards and punishments, the logic of "survival dependence" in attachment theory is indeed established. Such families are characterized by the following:

Parents explicitly bind basic survival resources (food, shelter, basic care) to the child's behavioral performance;

Punitive behavior or threatening expressions are repeatedly and consistently used, forming a predictable causal chain;

Through embodied experience (reinforced by preliminary language comprehension), the child is able to establish "obedience → resources obtainable"

the psychological association of "noncompliance → loss of resources."

In this situation, the attachment behavioral system indeed directly carries a survival function. A child's anxiety over separation (stemming from a lack of trust in their own agentic capacities), excessive vigilance toward parental emotions, and strict control over their own behavior can all be understood as adaptive strategies developed under the conditions of an unreliable "secure base." There is a direct causal chain between the formation of insecure attachment patterns and the embodied experience of survival threat.

It is worth noting that families of this kind do in fact exist in reality. For example, some parents use "If you don't listen, you won't get food" as a routine disciplinary measure, or threaten a child who is crying with "If you keep crying, I'll throw you out," accompanied by **actual action**. In these situations, survival resources are instrumentalized as a means of behavioral control, and the child

thereby acquires the embodied experience that "survival depends on the will of the parents." The "survival and safety" logic of attachment theory has full explanatory power in such families.

(2) Ordinary families: the "imperceptibility" of dependence

However, in ordinary families, which constitute the overwhelming majority of the population, the above conditions do not exist. The characteristics of such families are as follows:

The supply of basic survival resources is stable and requires no additional conditions to be secured;

Even when verbal discipline is present, survival resources are very rarely truly used as instruments of behavioral punishment;

Children live for long periods within the embodied belief that "the world operates as usual" ("Even if Mom and Dad say things like that, they still care about me"), and have never established, through embodied experience, an awareness that "survival depends on the will of the parents."

For children in these families, "survival dependence"is not a psychological reality, but a **theoretical presupposition**. They are indeed objectively dependent on their parents, but this dependence has never entered the level of subjective experience—just as we objectively depend on the Earth' s gravity, yet do not "become aware" of this fact while walking in everyday life.

More importantly, the formation of attachment types in the sensorimotor stage occurs precisely **during the period when awareness of survival dependence has not yet been established**. When infants form anticipatory schemas about the world through the response pattern of "crying," they are not "adapting in order to survive," but rather "adjusting their expectations for action according to how the world responds." Secure infants form the embodied belief that "I can actively exert control" ; anxious infants form the passive expectation that "if I cry, I will be satisfied" ; avoidant infants form the relinquishing expectation that "my signals are ineffective" —all of these have nothing to do with "survival and safety."

This distinction is crucial: **objective dependence is not equivalent to subjectively experienced dependence, and the evolutionary-level "ultimate cause" is not equivalent to the "proximate cause" of individual psychological development**. Attachment theory directly transfers the survival function at the evolutionary level

as a general premise of individual psychological development, and thereby precisely overlooks this crucial fissure.

(3) Summary

In sum, the author draws the following conclusions:

The "survival and safety" premise of attachment theory has an effective explanatory range limited to extreme situations in which survival resources are explicitly used as means of reward and punishment. In such situations, the attachment behavioral system does indeed carry a direct survival function, and the formation of insecure attachment can be causally linked to concrete experiences of threats to survival.

However, in most ordinary families, children cannot, through concrete experience, establish the awareness that "I depend on my parents for survival." At the level of subjective experience, survival dependence is "imperceptible." More importantly, the embryonic form of attachment type happens to take shape during the sensorimotor stage—a period when an individual' s awareness of survival dependence has not yet been established and could not possibly be established. This means that the foundation on which attachment theory depends can stand only in a small number of families, and cannot provide an effective explanation for the psychological development of the vast majority of individuals.

Therefore, for psychological development under ordinary circumstances, we must seek a more fitting and more explanatory proximal mechanism. This mechanism should be able to explain: **in the sensorimotor stage, how infants form anticipatory schemas of the world through response patterns to primordial signals such as "crying" ; in the preoperational stage, when children begin to ask "why," how this active understanding is responded to and returned; and how the interactive feedback between these two stages jointly shapes the individual' s lifelong attachment pattern.**

3. The Establishment of Subjectivity: The True Starting Point of Insecure Attachment Formation

3.1 Defining Subjective Response

(1) The two forms of subjectivity: from "agent" to "understander"

Subjectivity does not emerge in a single leap; rather, it undergoes a continuous developmental process from concrete embodiment to reflection. According to Piaget' s theory of stages of cognitive development (Piaget, 1936, *The Origins of Intelligence in Children*; 1952, *The Origins of Intelligence*), we can distinguish two basic forms of subjectivity:

Developmental stage: form of subjectivity; core experience; mode of expression. In the sensorimotor stage (0–2 years), the subjectivity of the agent is expressed as "I can affect the world" : crying, grasping, crawling, and other sensorimotor schemas (Piaget, 1952). In the preoperational stage (2–7 years), the subjectivity of the understander-cum-agent is expressed as "I want to understand why the world is thus" and "I can affect the world" : "why" -type questioning, social comparison, and emotional awareness (Piaget, 1952).

In the sensorimotor stage, subjectivity exists in the form of "agency." Infants, through "crying"

This primordial sensorimotor schema allows the infant to experience the connection between his or her own actions and changes in the world (Piaget, 1952). At this point, the infant is not a "thinker," but an "actor" —through action, the infant directly grasps "I can."

In the preoperational stage, with the emergence of language ability and symbolic function (Piaget, 1952), subjectivity expands from "being able to do" to "being able to think." The child begins to ask "why," attempting to endow all things with purposes and reasons. At this moment, the child no longer merely accepts the world as it appears; an additional role emerges, and the child steps forward as an "understander."

(2) Subjectivity in Two Stages

Subjectivity-responsive caregiving refers to the caregiver's seeing, affirming, and returning of the subjectivity that children manifest at different developmental stages—whether as an "agent" or as an "understander."

(一) Subjectivity-Responsive Caregiving in the Sensorimotor Stage: Supporting Autonomy

In the sensorimotor stage, the core of subjectivity-responsive caregiving is not "satisfying needs," but satisfying needs in a way that supports autonomy. The real meaning of what Ainsworth called "sensitive responsiveness" (Ainsworth et al., 1978, *Patterns of Attachment*) is re-revealed here, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Three Modes of Subjectivity-Responsive Caregiving in the Sensorimotor Stage and Their Effects

Type of response	Specific manifestation	Child's embodied experience	Consolidated sensorimotor schema
Autonomous response	Placing the bottle or toys within a range where the child can take them independently	"I can do it myself"	Active-control expectation (prototype of the secure type)

Type of response	Specific manifestation	Child' s embodied experience	Consolidated sensorimotor schema
Substitutive response	Immediately satisfying the child as soon as the child cries, even satisfying in advance before the child sends a signal	"I only need simply to cry or fuss to achieve it; the world completes it for me"	Passive-satisfaction expectation (prototype of the anxious type)
Neglectful response	Crying out many times and going without a response for a long period, or receiving responses that are extremely unstable and unpredictable	"My signals are ineffective"	Abandonment expectation (prototype of the avoidant type)

The key distinction lies in this: even though all are "responses," the way of responding shapes entirely different embodied experiences.

Placing the bottle directly into the infant' s mouth, as opposed to placing it within the infant' s reach, gives rise to different experiences: the former lets the infant experience that "the world completes things for me," whereas the latter lets the infant experience that "I can complete things myself." It is precisely this embodied experience of "obtaining satisfaction through one' s own control" that constitutes the earliest prototype of secure attachment.

(II) Subjectivity-Oriented Response in the Preoperational Stage: Returning the Responsibility for Understanding

After entering the preoperational stage, subjectivity emerges in the form of the "understander"(Piaget, 1952). The child begins to actively understand the world, and this activity of understanding gives rise to two forms of expression:

Sharing after understanding: the child forms their own understanding of observed things, processes it, and then develops a desire to express it and share it with their parents— "Daddy is sad because of work; I know now!" "Mommy, look, I understand!"

Questioning in the midst of understanding: when the child encounters something they cannot understand, they expresses it directly in the form of "why," seeking

help from their parents– "Why is Daddy crying?" "Why are other children' s moms and dads by their side, but mine are not?"

The common essence of these two forms of expression is that the child is no longer merely receiving the appearance of the world; the "understander" has burst forth. Whether sharing their own understanding or asking about things not yet understood, the child is expressing the same fact: I am understanding, I am thinking, and I am an active participant in this world.

Two Triggering Contexts for "Why"

The attachment pattern in the preoperational stage begins to take shape and is concentrated in the core questions illustrated below; see Table 2.

Table 2 Two Types of "Why" Questions in the Preoperational Stage and Their Attachment Implications

Type	Form of Expression	Psychological Connotation	Typical Case
Comparative question	"Why do others have it, but I don' t?"	Locating the self through social comparison	Left-behind child: "Why are other children' s moms and dads by their side, but mine are not?"
Empathic question	"Why are you crying / angry / sad?"	Attempting to understand another person' s inner world	A child sees a parent in an abnormal emotional state: "Why is Daddy crying?"

Three Dimensions of Subjectivity-Oriented Response

Whether the child expresses understanding in the form of sharing, or seeks help in the form of follow-up questioning, the core of the parents' response is seeing, affirming, and returning; see Table 3.

Table 3. Operational Examples of the Three Dimensions of Subjective Response: Seeing, Affirming, and Returning

Response dimension	Operational example (for sharing)	Operational example (for follow-up questioning)	Psychological function
Seeing	"So this is what you went out to play with today!"	"Has baby been thinking about this all along?"	Confirms the child' s legitimacy as an observer
Affirming	"Tell me how fun it was; I' d like to hear."	"Thank you, baby, for caring."	Affirms that the child' s act of understanding has value
Returning	"Then next time you can take me along to try it too, hehe."	The parents first mentalize themselves, and then return the topic to the child: "Mom was a little sad yesterday because of work. Thank you, baby, for caring. Then what happy things have happened to baby recently? Share them with Mom, so Mom can be happy too."	Hands the responsibility for understanding back to the child themself

The complete mechanism of returning

Returning is crucial because it completes a full psychological cycle:

(1) The child understands the world (forming sharing or follow-up questioning) (2) The parents see and affirm this understanding (3) The parents engage in self-mentalization (in response to follow-up questioning) or receive the sharing (in response to expression) (4) The parents return the responsibility for understanding to the child themself (5) The child is invited to understand themself ("What am I feeling?" "What do I like?" "What makes me happy?") (6) The child' s capacity for self-mentalization is activated

This process includes two psychological activities that occur simultaneously:

Parents' self-mentalization: when the child asks follow-up questions, the parents

clarify their own emotional state, and use

expressed in language the child can understand. This is a demonstration of "how a person understands oneself." The concept of mentalization was systematically developed by Fonagy and others (Fonagy, Gergely, Jurist, & Target, 2002, *Affect Regulation, Mentalization, and the Development of the Self*), and refers to the capacity to understand the mental states of oneself and others.

The child' s self-mentalization is activated: when a child is asked, "What happy thing happened to you?" the child needs to recall, distinguish, and name their own inner experience—this is the first time the child systematically takes the self as an object to be understood. This is precisely the ontogenetic origin of the capacity for mentalization.

(3) When is an agentic response needed?

A universal principle: whenever a child actively emits a "signal of agency," an agentic response is needed.

These signals include, but are not limited to:

Sensorimotor stage: crying, reaching out, grasping, and other actions that attempt to influence the world (Piaget, 1952)

Preoperational stage: directly asking "why" (explicitly) (Piaget, 1952); actively sharing one' s own understandings and discoveries; repeatedly comparing one' s own situation with that of others (e.g., expressions such as "everyone else has one"); showing unusual concern about the emotional state of parents (e.g., staring at a crying parent); actively communicating and discussing matters while respecting the child' s ideas, and so on

(4) Why is an agentic response "necessary" ?

Because this is a psychological node that every securely attached child must pass through. In other words:

A child who has not experienced "agency being seen and returned" cannot form a genuinely secure attachment.

This is not an empirical "majority case," but a logical necessity: the essence of security is that one "can relax within a relationship, without needing to remain constantly vigilant and understanding" (Bowlby, 1969/1982, *Attachment*).

If the child' s understanding is never returned, the child will remain forever suspended in the position of the "understander," unable to return to the position of the "one who is understood" —and the latter is precisely the dwelling place of secure dependence.

3.2 Agency and the Primordial Need for Security

(1) The Two Sources of Security

To understand the relationship between the emergence of agency and the sense of security, it is first necessary to distinguish two qualitatively different sources of security; see Table 4.

Table 4. Two Sources of a Sense of Security: A Comparison of Dependence and Excessive Understanding

Source	Essence	Mode of Expression	Cost
Dependence	Relaxation within a relationship	One does not need to be thinking at every moment; one can communicate honestly, be cared for, and have understanding witnessed and verified in interaction	Requires the reliability of the relationship as a precondition
Excessive understanding	Cognitive control	Gaining a feeling that "I can grasp it" through prediction, explanation, and attribution	Requires the continuous expenditure of cognitive resources and high-intensity, high-frequency thinking, and makes genuine relaxation impossible

Dependence: the original form of a sense of security

Ideally, an infant' s sense of security comes from dependence—from confidence in a "secure base" (Bowlby, 1969/1982). The experience of this confidence is pre-reflective and embodied: I am there; I know someone will catch me; I do not need to think about this.

This is the most original sense of security: one can feel at ease without complete understanding.

Understanding: an alternative when the sense of dependence is shaken

But the problem arises: when the sense of dependence is shaken—when the "secure base" becomes unreliable and unpredictable—what is the child to do?

The answer is: the child begins to "understand excessively."

Excessive understanding, here, is a defensive substitute:

If I cannot be certain whether you will catch me, then at least I can try to "figure you out."

If the relationship itself is unreliable, then at least I can gain some sense of control through cognition.

If I cannot depend on you, then I will depend on my "understanding."

This is one of the core arguments of this paper: excessive understanding is a defense, an alternative when the sense of dependence is shaken.

This view is deeply connected with the defense mechanism of "intellectualization" in the psychoanalytic tradition (Freud, A., 1936, *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defence*), but this paper will take this···

—tracing the genetic source of the mechanism back to the moment at which subjectivity arises in the preoperational stage.

(2) The Essence of "Why" Understanding

Prerequisite for understanding: a sense of security

The reason a child can ask "why," and can actively seek to understand the world and understand others, first requires one prerequisite: a sufficient sense of security.

This is not an accidental juxtaposition, but a logical necessity. When a child is under survival threat or in a state of high anxiety, all of his psychological energy is devoted to vigilance and self-protection; he has no surplus capacity at all to be "curious," to "question," or to "understand." Only when he feels "I am safe," "I can relax," and "someone will catch me" does the subject as an understander emerge, begin to take stock of the world, and ask "why."

In other words:

"Why-understanding" is not a defensive reaction after one' s sense of security has been threatened, but a natural overflowing after one has enough security.

The security foundation of two kinds of "why"

From this perspective, the two core questions in the preoperational stage precisely show that the child already possesses a certain foundation of security; see Table 5.

Table 5 Examples of Manifest Forms of Security

Type	Form of expression	Foundation of security
Comparative question	"Why are other people' s parents there, but mine are not?"	The child dares to speak out about the absence, indicating that he believes this absence can be discussed.
Empathic question	"Why is Daddy crying?"	The child dares to attend to a parent' s emotions, indicating that he is not worried that the parent' s emotions will overwhelm him.

When a left-behind child asks, "Why are my parents not by my side," this precisely proves that he once had a sufficient foundation of security, and therefore dared to raise this most painful question. An abused child lacks the psychological energy needed to explore the world.

The fate after understanding: security is consolidated or weakened

So what exactly is the relationship between understanding and a sense of security? **Understanding is the product of a sense of security, while the result of understanding, in turn, determines the direction that security will take.**

When a child asks "why," he hands over to his parents the identity of the understander that has just emerged in him. The way the parents respond determines whether this understanding becomes a consolidating agent of security or an erosive agent of security:

If the parents see it and return it: the child experiences that "my understanding has value; I can understand the world, and I can also return to dependence." After understanding, he can relax and return to a state in which he does not need to understand everything at every moment; his sense of security is consolidated.

If the parents do not return it (ignoring it, using it, or channeling it onto a track): the child' s understanding is suspended, distorted, or burdened with excessive responsibility. He discovers that he cannot obtain confirmation through understanding, nor can he return to dependence. Thus, understanding itself begins to mutate—from "curiosity in a state of security" into "a handhold in a state of insecurity." This is the turning point at which understanding shifts from a healthy orientation toward a defensive one.

Core proposition

"Why-understanding"is not in itself defensive; rather, it is the natural expression of a sufficient sense of security. Only when this understanding is not properly returned does the child begin to become "stuck"in the position of the understander, and only then does understanding gradually mutate into a defensive strategy —an attempt to control the relationship through continuous understanding in order to compensate for the loss of a sense of dependence.

(3) From "Healthy Understanding" to "Defensive Understanding" : A Continuum

Based on the above analysis, we can distinguish two kinds of "understanding" with different properties; see Table 6.

Table 6 Differences in Understanding under Different Conditions of Security

Dimension	Healthy Understanding	Defensive Understanding
Motivational source	Curiosity and exploration after a sufficient sense of security has been established	A need for control after the loss of a sense of security
Affective tone	Relaxed, open, able to stop	Tense, unable to stop
Relation to dependence	After understanding, one can return to dependence	Understanding replaces dependence; one cannot go back
···relationship		
Typical manifestations	"Why is the sky blue?" "Why do leaves fall?" and sharing after understanding: "Mom, look, I know now!"	"Why is Mom angry? Did I do something wrong?" "I have to figure her out before I can play."

This distinction is crucial: the emergence of subjectivity is not itself the problem; the problem lies in **whether, after this emergence, understanding is appropriately returned**. Understanding that is not returned will gradually become alienated from healthy cognitive activity into a defensive cognitive strategy.

(4) The Restoration of Security and the Consolidating Function of the Response to Subjectivity

It is precisely here that the core function of the response to subjectivity becomes salient:

When a child asks "why" out of a sufficient sense of security, the parents' mode of response determines the child's subsequent path:

If the parents see and return ("Thank you, sweetheart, for caring. Mom is just a little tired; it has nothing to do with you. Are you happy today? Share it with Mom, so Mom can feel happy too."), the child is released from the position of "the one who understands" and returns to the position of "the one who is understood." The child experiences that understanding the world is a good thing; after understanding, I can relax and return to the position of being received. The sense of security is consolidated.

If the parents do not return (ignoring, exploiting, or directing the child onto a track), the child is locked into the position of "the one who understands." The child discovers that they cannot obtain confirmation through understanding, nor can they return to dependency. Thus, understanding begins to become alienated—from "curiosity in safety" into "grasping in insecurity." What the child learns is: I must keep understanding others in order to obtain even a little sense of security. This is the starting point of insecure attachment.

This mechanism explains the phenomenon observed by Ainsworth et al. (1978): the reason sensitive responsiveness can predict secure attachment is not only that it satisfies needs, but even more that, through returning, it allows the child to be released from the position of the one who understands and to return to the safe harbor of dependency.

What needs particular emphasis is that the response to subjectivity is not equivalent to "responding at any time" or "responding promptly everywhere." The formation of secure attachment does not require parents to remain forever in a responsive state—this is neither realistic nor necessary.

When parents, because of work demands, low mood, or other objective reasons, are unable to respond to the child in time, the core of the response to subjectivity lies in this: **whether the parents acknowledge the child's existence as an expresser, and leave open a channel for subsequent response.**

Typical forms of response include: "Mom and Dad are busy working right now. Could you tell us a little later? Or I'll come find you when I'm finished!"

The psychological structure of this response contains five levels:

1. **Seeing:** the parents recognize that the child is expressing something.
2. **Confirmation:** implicit in "tell us later"—precisely because it is worth saying, it is worth saying later.

3. **Honesty:** the parents truthfully express their own state, without pretending and without suppressing it.
4. **Commitment:** they provide a clear expectation (“later” or “when I’ m finished”).
5. **An expectation of return:** they promise that they will come back to receive and hold the child’ s expression.

What this response conveys to the child is: **“I see that you want to express something. I cannot receive it right now, but I will come back—your expression has not been discarded; it has only been delayed.”**

This is precisely the core mechanism of secure attachment: the child does not need the parents to be present at every moment; the child only needs to be certain that he or she is in a relationship in which he or she is being seen. Even if the response is delayed, so long as the delay itself is spoken and promised, the child’ s desire to express will not be frustrated, and subjectivity will not be suspended.

3.3 Points of Connection and Difference Between Subjectivity-Oriented Response and Attachment Theory

(1) Point of connection: the key role of parental response is retained
This article fully accepts a core insight of classical attachment theory: the manner in which parents respond is a key variable shaping children’ s attachment patterns.

Ainsworth’ s “sensitive responsiveness” (Ainsworth et al., 1978) and Bowlby’ s “availability of a secure base” (Bowlby, 1969/1982) both point to the same fact: children’ s psychological development does not take place in a vacuum, but is gradually constructed through continuous interaction with caregivers. This core insight is the foundation of the argument advanced in this article.

(2) Difference One: The Driving Mechanism Is Reconstructed—from Survival Dependence to Subjectivity-Driven Motivation

Table 7. Core Comparison Between Classical Attachment Theory and the Subjectivity-Responsive Theoretical Model

Dimension	Classical Attachment Theory	Subjectivity-Responsive Theoretical Model
Children' s fundamental motivation	Driven by survival needs—seeking proximity in order to obtain protection (Bowlby, 1969/1982)	Driven by subjectivity—once security is sufficient, seeking understanding in order to obtain meaning, seeking autonomy in order to obtain agency, and expressing that understanding
Core question	Whether parents are available and sensitive (Ainsworth et al., 1978)	Whether my subjectivity—agency/understanding/expression—is seen and returned
Source of anxiety	The secure base is unreliable → separation anxiety (Bowlby, 1973, *Separation*)	Subjectivity is not returned → the child is locked into the position of the "understander," and understanding becomes alienated from healthy exploration into defensive control
Essence of security	The conviction that "you will appear when I need you" (Bowlby, 1969/1982)	The conviction that "I can be held even without having to understand you at every moment or control everything on my own"

(3) Difference Two: The Mechanism Is Reconstructed—from "Satisfaction" to "Return"

This is the most central distinction between this article and classical theory:

Table 8. Clarifying the Mechanisms of Sensitive Response and Response to Subjectivity: From "Satisfying Needs" to "Returning Subjectivity"

Dimension	Sensitive Response (Ainsworth)	Response to Subjectivity
Object of response	Children' s signals/needs (Ainsworth et al., 1978)	Children' s subjectivity as "agents" and "understanders," and its expression—whether through crying, sharing, or questioning

Response in the sensorimotor stage

Timely fulfillment of needs

Meeting needs in an autonomy-supportive way (e.g., placing objects where the child can retrieve them independently)

Response in the preoperational stage

Remaining sensitive to needs

Seeing, affirming, and returning understanding itself—whether in the form of sharing or follow-up questioning

Marker of success

The child' s needs are met

The child' s subjectivity is liberated (the child can move from being the "understander" back to being the "one who is understood")

Forms of failure

Neglect, inconsistency, refusal (Ainsworth et al., 1978)

Doing it for the child / neglecting / exploiting / steering onto a track (subjectivity is not returned)

How does classical attachment theory view a child' s repeated asking of "why" ?

It may be placed under the category of "exploratory behavior" or "cognitive development" (Bowlby, 1969/1982, did mention the exploratory behavioral system, but did not directly connect it with the formation of attachment types).

Or it may be seen as a natural response to separation/lack (Bowlby, 1973).

Yet it lacks an integrative explanatory framework, and still less does it directly connect this moment with the formation of attachment types.

The theoretical model of subjectivity response, by contrast, grants this moment a central position:

The moment of "why," as well as the moment when the child shares after understanding, is a turning point at which subjectivity moves from embodiment toward reflection (Piaget, 1952). It is itself the natural manifestation of sufficient security. Whether parents return this understanding determines whether this moment becomes a reinforcer of security, or the starting point at which understanding becomes alienated into defense.

(4) Distinction Three: Expansion of Explanatory Scope

Table 9. Expansion of the Explanatory Scope of the Subjectivity-Response Theoretical Model: Reinterpreting Phenomena Left Unexplained by Classical Theory

Phenomenon	Classical Attachment Theory	Subjectivity-Response Theoretical Model
Secure individuals develop insecure attachment after adulthood	Difficult to explain: the internal working model should be relatively stable (Bowlby, 1973)	Explainable: Secure individuals originally possess the capacity to "return to dependence after understanding." But in adult intimate relationships, if they remain for a long time in a state of "one-way understanding" — continually understanding the other while their own understanding is never seen or returned—their subjectivity will gradually be depleted. Understanding is no longer "curiosity after security," but is alienated into a defense of "trying to maintain the relationship through understanding." Ultimately, they change from secure to insecure.

Phenomenon	Classical Attachment Theory	Subjectivity–Response Theoretical Model
Counselors' countertransference and occupational burnout	Mostly attributed to unresolved personal issues of the counselor (Freud, 1910, *The Future Prospects of Psycho-Analytic Therapy*; later systematized within the psychoanalytic community)	Explainable: The counseling relationship is, in essence, a professional relationship of "one-way understanding." Counselors continuously understand clients, but their own understanding is very rarely seen and returned by clients. This long-term unreturned understanding causes the counselor's subjectivity to enter a state of depletion. When depletion accumulates to a certain degree, understanding begins to mutate into defense—the counselor attempts to control the counseling relationship through "more effortful understanding," and instead falls into countertransference. This is precisely the manifestation of "understanding not being returned" in a professional relationship.

Phenomenon	Classical Attachment Theory	Subjectivity–Response Theoretical Model
Lack of security in children raised by non-biological caregivers	If survival needs are fully satisfied, security should not be lacking	Explainable: The child' s questioning that arises through comparison ("Why are my parents not here?" and so on) is not seen or returned by other caregivers. This active understanding has nowhere to be placed and becomes "suspended understanding." The child is locked into the position of the understander and cannot return to dependence. Security is therefore eroded. But if the child is seen and returned by other caregivers, this active understanding can be placed, and the child can fully form secure attachment.
Embryonic forms of attachment types in the sensorimotor stage	Attributed to the caregiver' s sensitivity (Ainsworth et al., 1978)	Can be explained as different ways of responding to "agency" (autonomy-supporting / doing-for / neglectful).

4. The Consolidation Mechanism of Subjective Experience and Attachment Patterns

4.1 The Lifelong Operation and Updating Mechanism of Sensorimotor Schemas

Task of this section: to clarify a common misunderstanding of Piaget, to establish the premise of the "lifelong operation of sensorimotor schemas," and to introduce "schema failure (surprise)" as the core driving force of psychological development.

(1) Formulating the Problem: An Overlooked Premise

Before entering into the concrete analysis, we must first address a fundamental premise—if this issue is not made clear, the entire argument of Chapter 4 will be left suspended.

Classical developmental psychology tells us that the sensorimotor stage is from ages 0–2, and the preoperational stage from ages 2–7. This stage division is so deeply ingrained that people often unreflectively accept an implicit assumption: **sensorimotor schemas "belong to" the sensorimotor stage; once the child enters the preoperational stage, they are replaced by symbolic operations.**

But can this assumption really stand? Let us return to an example that the overwhelming majority of people have experienced.

Consider an everyday scenario that most adults will go through:

When first learning to drive, you repeatedly practice starting the car, pressing the accelerator, and driving in a straight line. Very quickly, this set of actions becomes "bodily memory" —you no longer need to think about how to start the car, nor about how to keep it moving straight. Starting–straight-line driving has formed a complete **sensorimotor schema**.

But when you face a bend for the first time, or need to parallel park for the first time, what happens?

The old schema— "start–drive" —**fails**. The schema for driving in a straight line cannot handle a curve. Thus, you are forced to activate another system:

At the sensory level: your vision begins to attend closely to the curvature of the bend, and your body senses the feedback from the steering wheel.

At the symbolic-cognitive level: you begin to think— "How should I turn the steering wheel for this curve? How much should I turn it? When should I straighten it back?"

Then you try, adjust, and try again. After several attempts, a new schema takes shape: "start–turn the steering wheel according to the curvature of the bend–straighten back–continue driving." After some time, even taking a bend no longer requires thought—it has become a new bodily memory, that is, a new "sensorimotor schema."

1. **Sensorimotor schemas operate throughout life**—they are our "default operating system." The schema for driving in a straight line is the adult equivalent of the "cry → food" schema formed at ages 0–2.
2. **Sensorimotor schemas are updated throughout life**—the schema for cornering is not formed between ages 0 and 2, but newly formed in adulthood. This means that the formation of schemas is not "a stage," but a lifelong, continuous process.

3. **Symbolic cognition is an "intervention procedure for problem-solving"** —when a schema runs smoothly (driving in a straight line), we live within the "natural attitude" and do not need to think. When a schema fails (encountering a bend), symbolic cognition is awakened and begins to observe, think, and plan.
4. **The essence of learning/adaptation:** from "failure of the old schema," to "registering the difference," to "symbolic intervention and exploration," to "formation of a new schema" —this cycle runs through a person's entire life.

(2) Redefining the Sensorimotor Schema

Based on the above discussion, we need to give the "sensorimotor schema" a definition from a more lifelong perspective:

A sensorimotor schema is a bodily remembered "if···then···" rule.

Its basic structure is:

If (a certain situation appears) + **then** (a certain result will occur)

If (I issue a certain action) + **then** (the world will respond in a certain way)

These rules are not encoded in language, but in the body. They operate at the pre-reflective level—we do not need to "think" in order to know how to walk, how to eat, or how to act in a familiar environment.

The source of schemas:

Age 0–2: through repeated interaction with the world, the first batch of schemas is formed (for example, "cry → food appears")

After age 2: new schemas continue to form (learning to ride a bicycle, learning to swim, learning to drive, adapting to new environments)

Throughout life: old schemas are strengthened (through repeated verification) or weakened (not repaired after failure)

The storage of schemas: Schemas are stored in the body, in the "procedural memory" system. They are not like "declarative memory," which can be retrieved and verbally stated at any time; rather, they run automatically when needed.

The relationship between schemas and symbols:

The example of driving perfectly illustrates this relationship:

Schema layer: "start—drive straight" —runs automatically, with no need for thought.

Symbolic intervention: encountering a bend, the schema fails, and symbolic cognition is activated— "How do I get through this bend?"

Formation of a new schema: after learning to corner, cornering also becomes automatic.

Essence of the relationship: schemas are the underlying system, symbols are the upper-level architecture; when the schema runs smoothly, symbols do not intervene; sche···

when the schema fails, symbols intervene; after symbolic exploration succeeds, the new behavior settles downward into a schema.

This is why psychotherapy is so difficult for some clients, and also why psychotherapy is genuinely possible:

It is difficult because the old schema has been remembered by the body; it is possible because a new schema can be formed through new bodily experience.

(3) Schema Failure (Surprise): The Core Driving Force of Psychological Development

If schemas operate throughout life, then the question arises: when do schemas change?

The moment of schema failure is the most critical moment in human psychology —it is both a possible entry point for trauma and an opportunity for growth.

The structure of schema failure:

Expectation: a schema formed on the basis of past experience generates expectations about the future

- Infant: "crying → food will appear"
- Driver: "turn the steering wheel → the car will turn"
- Adult: "expressing needs → they will be accepted"

Rupture: expectation does not match reality

- Infant: no food appears after crying
- Driver: turns the steering wheel, but the car does not turn as expected (the first time taking a curve)
- Adult: is rejected after expressing a need

Surprise: the gap between expectation and reality is perceived by the body

- "Huh? Why is it different?"
- This is astonishment at the bodily level, not thinking at the linguistic level
- Surprise contains both the residue of the old schema and the sprouting of new possibilities

Response: faced with surprise, the individual must respond

- either adjust the schema (adaptation)
- or deny the rupture (defense)

- or give up exploration (helplessness)

The key status of "surprise" :

Surprise is not a negative emotion, but a signal— "my schema needs to be updated."

Surprise contains both the residue of the old schema and the sprouting of a new schema.

Whether surprise can be transformed into the formation of a new schema depends on whether the environment provides conditions for exploration, as well as on one' s own

psychological capacity (mentalizing capacity)

(4) From surprise to a new schema: the complete process of schema updating

Let us break down the complete process of updating a schema. To use the example of driving mentioned earlier:

Scenario: A person has already mastered driving in a straight line—the "start the car-drive" schema operates smoothly. Now, for the first time, they encounter a bend in the road.

Step 1: Anticipatory activation The driver operates according to the old schema—turning the steering wheel. The anticipation embedded in the old schema is:

"Turn the steering wheel → the car will turn."

Step 2: Anticipatory rupture The car does not turn as expected, or it turns by the wrong amount. The car deviates from the route.

Step 3: Surprise The driver experiences a rupture between anticipation and reality. "Huh? That' s not right. Why is it different?"

Step 4: Activation of the sensory-symbolic system

Vision begins to attend closely to the curvature of the bend.

The body senses the feedback from the steering wheel.

Symbolic cognition intervenes: "How should this bend be handled? How much should I turn the steering wheel? When should I straighten it back?"

Step 5: Exploratory trial The driver tries a new mode of operation—turning a bit more, then adjusting again, and observing the result.

Step 6: Formation of a new schema After repeated attempts, a new sensorimotor schema begins to form: "See a bend → adjust the steering wheel according to the curvature → straighten back → continue driving."

Step 7: Integration

After some time, taking a bend no longer requires thought. The new schema becomes bodily memory, and symbolic cognition can withdraw.

Why is this the essence of learning?

Because this process reveals a universal truth: **all learning of bodily schemas—whether it is an infant learning to grasp, a child learning to tie shoelaces, an adult learning to drive, or a visitor learning new interpersonal patterns in therapy, as well as an individual learning mentalizing capacities—follows the same structure:**

Old schema fails → surprise → sensory-symbolic system intervenes in exploration → new schema forms → new schema operates automatically

(5) Schema failure without updating: the starting point of insecure attachment

Now, let us use the infant' s most primordial sensorimotor schema— "crying" — to analyze the schema in concrete terms.

different fates when it fails.

"Crying" as an original sensorimotor schema:

At the sensorimotor stage, crying is not an "expression of emotion," but rather the **signaling device** with which the infant is born.

The infant cries, and then the world changes—this is the first and most basic sensorimotor schema formed by the infant:

"Crying → the world will respond in some way"

This schema is remembered by the body and becomes the infant' s earliest expectation of the world. On the basis of this expectation, the infant begins to explore: Are my signals effective? Is the world predictable? When I need it, will the world be there?

Now let us look at how different environmental responses, when this schema fails, shape different destinies.

Scenario 1: No one responds after crying—the starting point of avoidant attachment

The infant' s experience:

1. **Activation of expectation:** The infant cries because of hunger/discomfort. The act of crying activates the existing schema: "crying → the world will respond."
2. **Fracture of expectation:** After crying, there is no response. No food, no holding, no one comes.

3. **Astonishment:** The infant experiences the rupture between expectation and reality. "Huh? Why is it different?" This is an alarm at the bodily level.
4. **Waiting:** After astonishment comes waiting. The infant continues to cry and raises the volume—perhaps if I wait a little longer, it will happen?
5. **Void:** Waiting yields no result. The cry dissipates into the void and brings about no change. Astonishment is gradually replaced by void.
6. **Giving up:** After many repetitions, the infant's body learns a cruel truth: "My signals cannot affect the world." The frequency of crying decreases, the volume diminishes, and finally—the infant stops crying.

The new schema formed:

"When the schema fails, the world is silent."

This is not an "idea" encoded in language, but an expectation remembered by the body: when I need, the world is not there; when I send out a signal, there is no echo.

This is the prototype of avoidant attachment: not "I do not need," but "I needed before, but no one came."

Scenario 2: When the response after crying is not timely, the infant further raises the volume—the starting point of anxious attachment

Infant' s experience:

1. Expected activation: the infant cries because of hunger or discomfort.
2. Rupture of expectation: the response is not timely.
3. Surprise: sustained surprise and repetition—beginning to explore a new schema coexists with attempts to keep crying.
4. Waiting: the infant continues to cry and increases the volume—the parents respond.
5. Amplifying the signal: the infant learns a new schema: the volume must be increased in order to ensure a response. The crying becomes sharper, more sustained, and more frequent.

The new schema that forms:

"Crying before did not obtain the expected result; the signal needs to be amplified."

The infant's body remembers: I must continually send signals and amplify them in order to obtain the response I need.

This is the prototype of anxious attachment: "I must keep sending signals in order to ensure that you are still there." In other words, the child begins to adapt to the parents' perception.

Scene Three: After Crying, Everything Is Always Done for the Infant

Infant' s experience:

1. Expected activation: crying → the world will respond.
2. Rupture of expectation: the key here is that the expectation almost never ruptures. The caregiver always satisfies the need before, or at the very moment when, the infant sends a signal.
3. Absence of surprise: the infant rarely experiences surprise. The world always operates according to expectation—even faster than expected.
4. Passive satisfaction: the infant does not need to make active efforts, does not need to send a clear signal, and does not need to wait—everything has already been completed in advance.
5. Autonomy not activated: the infant has no opportunity to experience the feeling of "I did it myself."

The meta-schema that forms:

"I do not need to cope with failure myself—because failure almost never occurs."

More precisely: the infant does not form any meta-schema about "how to cope with schema failure," because failure has never been allowed to occur. When failure does occasionally appear—for example, when the caregiver is momentarily negligent—the infant' s sense of panic becomes unusually intense, because they have never practiced how to cope.

This meta-schema constitutes another embryonic pathway of anxious attachment—overdependence on external responses, and lack···

lacks an intrinsic capacity to cope when response fails.

Scenario Four: After crying, the infant is sometimes responded to and sometimes not responded to—the starting point of disorganized attachment

The infant' s experience:

1. Expectation activation: crying → ?—impossible to predict.
2. Expectation rupture: sometimes there is a response, sometimes there is none. The infant cannot form a stable expectation.
3. Bewilderment: persistent bewilderment—why is there a response this time, but not that time?
4. Uncertainty: the infant is trapped in uncertainty and cannot find any pattern.

5. Schematic impasse: the infant tries various strategies such as "keep crying,""cry louder,"and "stop crying,"but the outcome remains unpredictable —no strategy can reliably bring about a response.

The new schema that forms:

"No schema is available—because any strategy may fail. "

The infant' s body remembers: this world has no pattern; I cannot ensure that I will be responded to in any way.

I can neither obtain stable results by "amplifying the signal," as in anxious attachment, because sometimes amplification is useless; nor can I avoid pain by "not crying," as in avoidant attachment, because even when I do not cry I may still be ignored, and the pain remains.

This is the embryonic form of disorganized attachment: it is not "I have learned some strategy," but rather "I cannot learn any strategy" —because the world follows no discernible pattern.

(6) Learned Helplessness and Research on Depression in Mammals: Cross-Species Evidence

When we say that "the failure of a schema to be repaired leads to the abandonment of expectation," this is not merely a psychological phenomenon unique to human beings. Research in experimental psychology and comparative psychology provides us with cross-species evidence.

Seligman' s learned-helplessness research (Seligman & Maier, 1967)

Classic experimental design:

Group 1 dogs: escapable electric shocks (pressing a panel would terminate the shock)

Group 2 dogs: inescapable electric shocks (the shock was unrelated to behavior)

Group 3: no-shock control group

Key finding: when all the dogs were placed in a new environment in which electric shocks were escapable:

Groups 1 and 3: quickly learned to jump over the barrier to escape the shock

Group 2: most lay down and whimpered, passively accepting the shock

Seligman' s explanation: the second group of dogs formed the expectation that "behavior is unrelated to outcomes." This expectation was generalized to new situations, leading to deficits in motivation, cognition, and emotion.

Its isomorphism with this theory is shown in Table 10.

Table 10. Schematic Failure and Learned Helplessness: A Structural Analogy Between Two Frameworks

This theoretical framework	Learned-helplessness framework
Crying / expressing needs	Behavior attempting to escape electric shock
Parental response	Termination of the electric shock
Repeated nonresponse	Inescapable electric shock
Expectation of giving up	Learned helplessness
"When the schema fails, the world is silent"	"Behavior is unrelated to outcomes"

Kaufman & Rosenblum's study of separation depression in macaques (1967)

When the mother monkey was removed, the infant monkeys went through two stages:

Protest phase: crying, searching, anxiety (corresponding to "astonishment → waiting")

Despair phase: reduced activity, withdrawal, giving up (corresponding to "void → giving up")

This two-stage model—the complete process of "crying and then no one responds"—is isomorphic with this theory: from astonishment (protest), to void (despair), and then to giving up (deactivation).

Harlow's rhesus-monkey studies (1958–1965)

When the cloth mother provided a "secure base," the infant monkeys explored.

When the mother monkey rejected or threatened them, the infant monkeys displayed behaviors similar to avoidant/disorganized attachment in humans.

Together, these studies confirm that the expectation of giving up caused by schematic failure is not a psychological phenomenon unique to humans, but a basic adaptive mechanism shared by mammals—it is rooted in the evolutionary design of the attachment system.

Animals can only remain at the level of bodily memory in which the "schema fails," whereas human children, in the preoperational stage, acquire symbolic cognition and mentalization capacities. This means that:

Schema failure can be "narrated": the child can use language to express, "Why is my mother not here?"

Failure can be "returned": the caregiver can, through language and actual verbal responses, return understanding and repair the schema.

Failure can be "reinterpreted": even when objective conditions cannot be changed—for example, when the parents truly are absent—understanding and return at the symbolic level can still provide repair.

This explains why:

The "despair phase" in rhesus monkeys occurs almost inevitably and is irreversible,

whereas human children—if their subjectivity is seen and returned to them later in psychological counseling—can still form secure attachment.

The reason humans can transcend learned helplessness is not that their physiological mechanisms are different, but that language and mentalization provide a symbolic pathway for "schema repair" —and this is precisely the biological basis that makes psychotherapy possible.

4.2 After the Preoperational Stage: The "Acquisition" and Adaptation of Insecure Attachment

Task of this section

Section 4.1, from the perspective of predictive processing theory, revealed how infants in the sensorimotor stage form the rudiments of attachment through the repair of prediction errors. This section will focus on the preoperational stage and, from an ontogenetic perspective, expound the pathway by which insecure attachment is formed. We will argue that, in this stage, children develop image-based cognitive capacities and become able to preserve, reproduce, and enact the interpersonal scenes they have experienced; these preserved images later become situational triggers in similar contexts, automatically activating corresponding sensorimotor schemas and emotional responses; and the way parents respond to children' s externalization of images determines whether children can integrate these images and form a coherent internal working model, thereby leading to different attachment types.

(1) New capacities in the preoperational stage: symbolic cognition and mentalization

Upon entering the preoperational stage, at approximately ages 2–7, children' s cognitive capacities undergo a qualitative leap. Piaget summarized the core feature of this stage as the emergence of **representational thought**—that is, the ability to use one thing to "stand for" something that is absent (Piaget, 1952). However, the actual forms of representation are not singular. Piaget himself, in *Play, Dreams and Imitation in Childhood* (1945/1962), had already distinguished two forms of representation: **symbol** and **sign**. A symbol relies on imagistic similarity (such as

(using blocks to represent a car), are constructed by the individual and are image-based; signs, by contrast, are conventional (such as spoken and written language) and require social transmission. Symbols appear before signs, and symbolic play is the earliest form of thinking in the preoperational stage.

Subsequent research has further revealed the multilayered structure of representation. Piaget and Inhelder' s (1971) research on **mental imagery** confirmed

that, before children can explain things in language, they are already able to use images for anticipation and inference; these images are the products of the internalization of sensorimotor schemas. Karmiloff-Smith' s (1992) theory of **representational redescription** points out that children' s earliest knowledge is implicit, procedural, and image-based; over the course of development it is gradually redescribed into more abstract symbolic forms, yet the underlying image-based representations always remain. Thelen and Smith's (1994) dynamic systems theory emphasizes that thinking is rooted in sensorimotor experience: children' s "understanding" of the world is first manifested as action tendencies and sensitivity to situations, while signs are only the tip of the iceberg. At the intersection of psychoanalysis and developmental psychology, the **psychic equivalence** mode proposed by Fonagy et al. (2002) describes how children equate internal images with external reality, a process highly consistent with the mode of operation of image cognition. Fivush and Nelson' s (2004) narrative research, in turn, reveals how children transform the mental images of experience into linguistic narratives through dialogue with their parents.

On the basis of the above research, this paper proposes the concept of **image cognition**, referring to the primordial form of representation through which children in the preoperational stage preserve, reproduce, and infer experience by means of internal images. Its characteristics are as follows:

Images are concrete and analogical, bearing a pictorial resemblance to the things they represent;

Image cognition operates at the prelinguistic level, manifesting in such forms as deferred imitation, symbolic play, drawing, and animistic thinking;

Image cognition precedes sign cognition and coexists with it over the long term —just as Piaget stated, symbols are the precursors of signs, but they do not disappear with the emergence of signs (Piaget, 1945/1962).

In the context of attachment development, image cognition occupies a central position: children understand the relational world by preserving, reproducing, and inferring the interpersonal images they have seen, and they externalize these images in behaviors such as drawing, play, and imitation. Parents' responses to these externalizations of images—seeing, confirming, and returning them, or ignoring, distorting, and exploiting them—directly shape the child' s expectation as to whether "my images can be understood," thereby influencing the formation of internal working models. This is precisely the analytical basis to be developed below.

These new capacities fundamentally change the mechanism of schema updating. In the sensorimotor stage, schema updating relies primarily on **prediction errors at the bodily level** (for example, the surprise brought about by "no one responds after I cry"); whereas in the preoperational stage, [[unclear: text continues after the visible character "表"]]

representational-level prediction error begins to enter the picture—the child not

only experiences "what happened," but also asks "why did it happen," "what does this mean," and can infer that "the little bear also has to sleep."

How symbolic cognition changes schema updating:

Prediction can be based on narrative: the child predicts not only behavioral outcomes, but also the reactions of self and others ("If I do this, will Mom look angry or sad?").

Error can arise at the level of meaning: when reality does not fit one' s existing schema, "surprise at the cognitive level" emerges ("Why would Dad cry?").

Model updating can be repaired through language: the caregiver' s response can directly revise the child' s internal model, without having to rely on repeated bodily trial and error (Fonagy et al., 2002).

This is precisely why the subjectivity response is so crucial in the preoperational stage—it helps the child complete the repair of representational-level prediction error through linguistic, emotional, and pictorial exchange.

What needs further clarification is that, in my framework, "image cognition" contains two levels. Genetically, they are part of the same process, but as states they can be distinguished.

The first is image cognition in automated operation (pre-reflective). This is the level of image cognition that is directly presented by the child' s body at the moment an interaction occurs—not a "picture recalled to mind," but the body' s direct grasp of the situation. When a child sees a familiar friend approaching, what is directly presented at the embodied-image level is the feeling that "one can approach" ; when a child has once experienced exclusion, then on facing peers again, what is directly presented at the embodied-image level is the feeling that "one needs to be careful." This process operates simultaneously with, and is inseparable from, the sensorimotor schema; it is the automated response of the whole bodily system at that moment. The function of embodied images is consistent with the feeling of sensorimotor schemata—they are all pre-reflective, automated, and drive present action.

The second is image cognition as a tool of thought (capable of being reflected upon). This is the child' s capacity to use internal images for logical reasoning, inference, and modeling. A classic example is when a child says, "The sun has probably gone to sleep too." The child observes that at night everyone else has disappeared (interpreted as "having gone to sleep"), and that in the daytime everyone else appears again; at the same time, the child observes that the sun also disappears at night and appears in the daytime. The child uses existing images ("disappearance → sleep → appearance in the daytime") as elements of reasoning, carries out a logical inference about the new phenomenon, and reaches the conclusion: the sun has also gone to sleep. This conclusion is not extracted; it is inferred by means of images.

(2) Internal Differentiation of the Preoperational Stage and the Evolution of the Subjectivity Response

The preoperational stage is not a monolithic block. Viewed in terms of the temporal process by which children acquire symbolic capacities, it can be divided into

give rise to two sub-stages that are both continuous and qualitatively distinct: the **representational-thinking-dominant period** (approximately ages 2–4) and the **language-intervention period** (approximately ages 4–7). This division is consistent with Piaget' s observations—symbolic play reaches its peak at ages 2–4, while language, as a socially conventionalized symbol system, is mastered through a gradually deepening process (Piaget, 1945/1962).

Representational-Dominant Period: Enacting Images with the Body; Response Still Needs to Return to Sensorimotor Experience

During the representational-thinking-dominant period, although children can already retain and reproduce images internally, their symbolic expression—especially linguistic expression—remains very limited. They cannot accurately say "what I want" or "what I feel" ; rather, they more often externalize internal images through actions, play, drawing, and other means. For example, a 3-year-old child may take an adult' s hand and lead them toward the refrigerator, or point upward while making an indistinct sound, yet be unable to clearly say, "I want to drink milk."

At this point, the signals of subjectivity are still sensorimotor in form—although the child' s inner world is already accompanied by images, outward expression still depends on actions, gestures, and simple vocalizations. Therefore, effective parental response must still return to the logic of the sensorimotor stage: meeting needs in a way that supports autonomy, and linking the child' s perceptions with images.

In practice: parents should neither directly do things for the child (substitution), nor wait for the child to express them accurately in language (neglect). Instead, they should accompany the child in experiencing and perceiving. For example, when a child points to something high up, the parent can lift the child and let the child reach out to get the object by themselves; guide the child step by step in completing the action, while using simple language throughout the process: "Which cup do you want? Come, let' s reach for it together—you stretch out your hand; you got it!" By demonstrating to the child, in an embodied way, how such an action can be accomplished, the child not only experiences at the bodily level that "I can do it," but also connects the image of "wanting–acting–obtaining" with their own agency.

Core objective: to help the child, during the image-dominant period, establish the embodied belief that "my images can become reality through my actions." This is the continuation of secure attachment at the level of images—the child is not "understanding" in an abstract sense, but experiencing, through action,

the interaction between their own images and the world.

Language-Intervention Period: Combining Language with Behavior; Returning the Responsibility for Understanding

As linguistic ability gradually matures (after approximately age 4), children begin to be able to express needs, describe events, and ask "why" using simple sentences. At this point, symbolic cognition begins to intervene, but image cognition still operates in the background. Signals of subjectivity also evolve from a purely sensorimotor form into an image-language hybrid form: the child may narrate a story while drawing, or talk to themselves during play.

At this point, the mode of response needs to shift from a sensorimotor mode to **a combination of symbols and behavior**—that is, the complete mode of agentic response described in Chapter 3: seeing, confirming, and returning. Yet it must be emphasized that language cannot replace action; rather, it must work in coordination with action.

Concrete practices:

- When the child uses language to share or to ask questions, parents should first confirm verbally ("Are you saying that ···?"), wait for the child' s response, and then coordinate with behavior—for example, if the child says, "Mom, play with me," the parent can put down what they are doing and truly play with the child for a while.
- When the child expresses confusion ("Why is Dad crying?"), parents should not only explain verbally ("Dad is feeling a little sad today"), but should also respond emotionally and physically—hugging the child and allowing the child to feel comforted. Finally, they should return the topic to the child ("Were you happy today?"), and may use action to support the child' s expression ("Let' s go draw a happy picture").

Core objective: to help the child complete the transformation from image to symbol while maintaining connection with the body. Verbal returning enables the child to gain understanding at the symbolic level, while behavioral returning enables the child to confirm again, at the bodily level, that "my needs can be seen, and I can return to dependence."

The connection between the two sub-stages and its significance

Distinguishing these two sub-stages is crucial for understanding the "acquisition" of secure dependence:

If, during the image-dominant phase, parents fail to provide sensorimotor responses—for example, by ignoring the child' s action signals or by directly doing things on the child' s behalf—the child may form, at the level of superficial thinking, the expectation that "my actions are ineffective" or "I do not need to act," thereby laying the groundwork for later anxiety or avoidance.

If, during the language-intervention phase, parents provide only verbal responses

while lacking behavioral coordination—for example, merely saying "I understand" without any actual change—the child may learn, at the level of representational thinking, that "what Mom and Dad say is useless."

Therefore, agentic response in the preoperational stage is **a continuous yet layered process of evolution**: in the representational-thinking-dominant phase, sensorimotor response serves as the foundation, helping the child establish the connection between image and action; in the language-intervention phase, symbolic returning is added, helping the child complete the transformation from image to symbol while preserving the warmth of bodily response. This is precisely the mechanism through which secure dependence can be continuously constructed within cognitive development.

(3) The Formation of Secure Dependence in the Preoperational Stage

The core functions of image cognition: preservation, reproduction, deduction, and situational triggering.

Image cognition performs several key functions in ontogenesis:

1. **Image preservation** Children preserve the interactive scenes they have experienced as internal images. These images are not isolated snapshots; rather, they are images that contain the situation, the process, the outcome, and bodily feelings. For example, an experience of play being forcibly interrupted may be preserved as:

   Situational image: mealtime, the parent approaching, hearing "Time to eat"

   Process image: the parent reaching out, the toy being taken away

   Outcome image: empty hands, the toy disappearing, oneself standing there in shock

2. **Image reproduction** When a real situation resembles a preserved image, the image is automatically reproduced. This reproduction requires no conscious effort; it is pre-reflective. For example, the next time the child hears "Time to eat" and sees the parent approaching, the image of the toy being taken away last time, together with the bodily feeling of grievance, will automatically surface in the child' s mind.

3. **Image enactment** Children can actively enact images through play, drawing, and other means, attempting to understand or alter the relations within the images. For example, they may use dolls to recreate the scene in which a toy was taken away, or draw a picture of "what if my toy had not been taken away."

4. **Situational triggering** Image reproduction activates the sensorimotor schemas associated with it—the response patterns for which the body is already prepared. For example, when the image "the parent reaches out to

take the toy" is activated, the body immediately generates the impulse to "stop playing and voluntarily put it down," in order to avoid the impending sense of loss of control. Here, the image cognition of representational thought functions as a "situational trigger," triggering the automatic operation of sensorimotor schemas.

This situational triggering mechanism is a core capacity through which human beings adapt to the environment: it enables us to predict the future on the basis of past experience and to respond in advance. Yet in the formation of insecure attachment, this mechanism may lead to rigid, defensive adaptive strategies.

Representational-level signals of subjectivity and parental response

Just as infants in the sensorimotor stage send out signals of subjectivity through "crying," children in the preoperational stage send out signals of subjectivity through the externalization of images:

The core of these signals is this: the child is thinking about relations through images and is trying to share these images with others in order to obtain understanding, confirmation, and help.

The way parents respond directly determines whether these images can be integrated and whether they can form a stable internal model:

Seeing and confirming: let the child see such scenes as oneself cooking, the meal being ready, and oneself eating, and allow the child to autonomously notice whether they are hungry—parents enter the child' s image world and confirm the child' s feelings. This

The message conveyed is: "Your image is important, and your feelings can be seen."

Returning and guiding: placing the child, the toy, and the meal simultaneously within the child' s visible field, and guiding the child to choose independently whether to play with the toy or eat: "Baby, Mommy is going to cook now. We' ll eat together in a little while. When the food is ready, after we finish eating, shall we play again?"—the parents help the child interpret the image and provide a new, safer image of possible choices.

(4) The developmental pathway of insecure attachment: the example of coercive prohibition

Common starting point: coercive prohibition and the frustration of agency

Before entering into a differentiated analysis of the anxious type and the avoidant type, it must first be made clear that these two pathways of insecure attachment share the same developmental starting point—the event of coercive prohibition.

The structure of a coercive-prohibition event:

The child is immersed in his or her own experience of agency (playing with toys, playing games, concentrating on exploration)

The parent, on the basis of external rules (mealtime, study time), intervenes directly and deprives the child of the activity

The mode of deprivation is sudden, non-negotiable, and not anticipated in advance

The consequence of deprivation may be temporary, or it may be permanent (the toy is put away and not returned)

The child' s emotional response (grievance, anger, incomprehension) is not received or processed

The images and bodily feelings retained by the child in this event:

Contextual image: the parent's facial expression and posture when approaching; the command heard ("Stop playing, it' s time to eat!")

Process image: the parent reaching out; the moment the toy is taken away; the scene in which one is powerless to stop it

Result image: empty hands; the toy disappears; the parent' s receding back

Bodily feeling: the sense of losing control when being deprived; bodily tension or helplessness; unreleased grievance

The core characteristics of this image:

Traumatic quality: what it records is the painful instant in which "agency is interrupted by an external force"

Predictive quality: it becomes an "early-warning signal" for similar situations in the future—when a similar scene appears, the body prepares in advance to respond

Non-closure: the event has not been repaired (the parent did not explain, did not apologize, did not provide an alternative plan), and the image cannot be integrated

This is the common starting point in the formation of insecure attachment. All subsequent differentiation is built upon the cruel fact to which the child must adapt: "My agency can be taken away by an external force at any time."Different adaptive strategies,

This depends on what the child discovers in subsequent interactions with the parents after the coercive prohibition.

Formation of anxious attachment: compromise is effective, and needs are met

Conditions of occurrence: After an incident of coercive prohibition, in certain situations the child discovers that—if they can anticipate the parents' inten-

tions in advance and proactively compromise, they can avoid the pain of being deprived, and may even preserve some degree of need satisfaction.

Specific pathway:

1. **After the first coercive prohibition,** the child retains an image of being deprived. When a similar situation arises the next time, the image is triggered, and the body enters a state of alert.
2. **The child attempts a new strategy:** before the parent intervenes, the child proactively puts down the toy/phone.
3. **The parent' s response:** satisfaction; the parent no longer takes it away, and may even praise the child for being "so sensible." Afterward, the child can continue playing or obtain some other form of satisfaction.
4. **Formation of an image-schema linkage:**
    - The new image retained by the child: anticipation ("I guessed what they were going to do") + proactive compromise ("I stopped by myself") + outcome ("my need was met")
    - The rule remembered by the body: "If I can anticipate and compromise in advance, I can preserve my needs."

Consolidation of the strategy:

- When the next situation arises: automatic reappearance of the image → generation of a prediction ("If I do not stop, I will be deprived; if I stop proactively, I can keep it") → activation of the bodily schema (alertness, advance compromise) → validation of the outcome (the need is met) → strengthening of the model

The internal model formed:

- **About the self:** "I can control the situation through anticipation and compromise, but only if I remain constantly alert."
- **About others:** "Others can be predicted, and they can also be controlled through my compromise."
- **About relationships:** "I need to keep making an effort in order to maintain relationships and ensure that my needs are met."

Emotional cost:

- Each compromise means proactively relinquishing one's immediate agentic investment (being interrupted when one is having fun)
- Grievance and unwillingness are suppressed and cannot be expressed
- These unprocessed emotions accumulate in the body, become part of the image, and keep the alert system from ever fully relaxing.

This is the prototype of anxious attachment: **hypervigilance + premature accommodation + inner accumulation of pressure**. What the child learns is not "I do not need," but rather "I must rely on sustained effort and vigilance in order to ensure that I am satisfied."

Manifestation in the AAI: the preoccupied type—remaining persistently entangled in past relationships, still striving to "understand" the parents, attempting through understanding to obtain the confirmation that has never been received.

The formation of avoidant attachment: accommodation is ineffective, needs are still deprived

Conditions of occurrence: After an event of forced prohibition, in subsequent similar situations, the child discovers that—even if they **anticipate in advance** and **actively accommodate**—the result is still deprivation. The parents still put away the toy, or do not return it, or ignore the child' s accommodation and continue criticizing.

Specific pathway:

1. **After the first forced prohibition**, the child retains the image of being deprived. When a similar situation arises the next time, the image is triggered and the body enters a state of vigilance.
2. **The child tries a new strategy:** before the parent intervenes, the child voluntarily puts down the toy/phone.
3. **The parent' s response:** still putting away the toy, or not returning it, or continuing to criticize ("Now you know to listen? Too late!").
4. **The prediction error persists:**
    - The child attempts to establish the linkage "anticipation + accommodation → needs being satisfied"
    - The actual outcome is "anticipation + accommodation → still being deprived"
    - The prediction error cannot be eliminated through any action

Direction of model updating: After repeated occurrences, the brain adopts another pathway: **lower expectations and suppress signals**.

- The image is still preserved, but it no longer activates the impulse to "make an effort"
- The predictive model is updated as: "No matter what I do, the result is the same—my needs will not be satisfied"
- The bodily schema shifts toward: non-investment, no expectation, no expression

Internal model formed:

- **About the self:** "My efforts are useless; my needs do not matter. It is best not to invest, not to care—then I will not be disappointed."
- **About others:** "Others cannot be changed. Do not expect them to satisfy me."
- **About relationships:** "In relationships I am passive, but I no longer care."

Emotional cost:

- The outward appearance of being "sensible" and "independent"—not crying or making a fuss, and voluntarily letting go
- Inner emotional isolation—no longer investing, no longer expecting
- Even when playing, the child is not truly engaged, because they know they may be interrupted at any time
- This is an inhibition of "investment" itself, in order to avoid the pain of being deprived

This is the prototype of avoidant attachment: **not "I don' t need it," but "I once needed it, but my efforts were futile, so I no longer need it."**

Its manifestation in the AAI: the dismissing type—idealizing or devaluing attachment relationships, claiming "I don' t remember" or "everything was fine," and using empty symbols to cover over an inner void.

For a comparison of the differentiation conditions of the two pathways, see Table 11.

Table 11. Differentiation pathways of anxious and avoidant attachment: a comparison based on "whether compromise is effective"

Differentiation condition	Anxious-type pathway	Avoidant-type pathway
Outcome after compromise	The need is satisfied (the toy is kept / can be played with later)	The need is still deprived (the toy is still taken away)
Prediction error	Can be eliminated (compromise is effective)	Cannot be eliminated (any strategy is ineffective)
The brain' s response	Strengthens the alert system; continues efforts	Lowers expectations; inhibits signals
Handling of "agency"	Preserves partial agency through alertness	Gives up agency; no longer invests
Emotional state	Pent-up, anxious, unexpressed	Isolated, numb, outwardly calm
Internal narrative	Entangled, repetitive, striving to understand	Empty, idealizing, denying needs

Why it is necessary to emphasize "coercive prohibition" as the example

This point is emphasized because this example is sufficiently clean, and because it helps avoid misunderstandings about insecure attachment:

Anxious attachment is not "innate clinginess"; rather, because satisfaction was once obtained after compromise, the child learns to remain continuously vigilant and to keep trying.

Avoidant attachment is not "innate independence"; rather, because previous efforts proved ineffective, the child learns not to invest and not to care.

Both are post-traumatic adaptations—different survival strategies developed after "agency has been stripped away by external forces."

This also explains why different children within the same family, or the same child when facing different situations, may develop different attachment patterns. The key to this differentiation lies in whether, after compromise, the parent fulfills the need.

Resonance with classical attachment theory

Classical attachment theory describes the characteristics of anxious and avoidant attachment, but it has not been able to explain why, within the same category of "insecure" attachment, two utterly different strategies differentiate.

This framework reveals that:

Anxious attachment is a strategy of "still holding on to hope"—believing that through one's own efforts (vigilance, compromise, amplifying signals), one can obtain a response.

Avoidant attachment is a strategy of "giving up hope"—no longer believing that any effort will bring a response.

The point at which these two strategies diverge is precisely the child's experiential judgment, after an event of enforced prohibition, as to "whether compromise is effective." This also explains why, in clinical observation, anxious and avoidant patterns sometimes alternate within the same person—depending on which adaptive strategy is triggered by the current relational situation.

(5) From Image to Symbol: The Consolidation of Internal Narrative

As language ability develops, children begin to use symbols (language) to name and narrate their internal images. This process transforms images remembered by the body into tellable stories, solidifying attachment patterns at the symbolic level.

Secure pathway: The image is seen and confirmed by the parents; the child learns to express the image in language, forming a coherent and open narrative. For example: "That time when Mom took away my toy, I was very upset. Later Mom apologized, and we agreed that she would remind me five minutes in advance."

Insecure pathway:

Anxious type: The child repeatedly recounts and asks questions in language, but cannot obtain repair, forming an entangled narrative (such as the "preoccupied type" in the AAI).

Avoidant type: The child uses hollow symbols ("Everything is fine," "I don' t remember") to cover over an inner emptiness, forming an idealizing or devaluing narrative.

Disorganized type: In subsequent adaptive behaviors, the parents' responses show ruptures and contradictions—sometimes satisfying the child' s needs, sometimes not—as in the "unresolved" type in the AAI.

(6) Summary: A Model of the Formation of Insecure Attachment from an Ontogenetic Perspective

This section, from an ontogenetic perspective, reveals the mechanism by which insecure attachment forms in the preoperational stage:

Cognitive foundation: Children develop the capacity for image-based cognition, enabling them to preserve, reproduce, and elaborate interpersonal experience.

Key event: In concrete parent-child interactions, children experience moments in which their agency is interrupted by external force and the image is solidified by subsequent behavior.

Image preservation: These moments are preserved as images and become highly sensitive situational triggers.

Situational triggering: Later, similar situations automatically activate the images, triggering corresponding sensorimotor schemas and adaptive behaviors.

Adaptive consolidation: Repeated triggering and adaptation form stable internal models—that is, the embryonic form of attachment types.

Symbolization: As language develops, these images become difficult to retrieve through mentalization, causing the attachment pattern to become further consolidated.

This model not only explains the origin of attachment but also provides a pathway for clinical intervention: the key to change lies in helping clients come into contact with those images that have been repressed or split off, and in enabling them to acquire new image experiences within a safe relationship, thereby updating old situational triggers. This is precisely the core work of psychotherapy.

It should be noted that this article takes the "coercive prohibition event" as the common starting point for the formation of insecure attachment, but it does not claim that this is the only possible type of trauma. Rather, coercive prohibition has the clearest causal structure: the child is engaged in an agentic activity; an external force suddenly intervenes and interrupts it; the outcome is explicit; and the emotional reaction is intense. This "clean" structure is best suited to demonstrating how the core mechanism of "image preservation—situational

triggering—adaptive consolidation" operates. Other forms of trauma—such as neglect, emotional abuse, and unpredictable responses—differ in their outward manifestations, but at the mechanistic level they all follow the same logic: they are all images and adaptive strategies formed after "agency/signals are blocked by external force." Readers may regard coercive prohibition as a prototypical case for understanding this mechanism, and then transfer its logic to the analysis of other types of trauma.

4.1 reveals the general mechanism of schema updating (**prediction error → surprise → exploration → new schema**), while **4.2** specifically demonstrates how, at the key stage of attachment development, this mechanism operates within "image preservation—

operates at the level of "situational triggering," and how, when prediction error cannot be resolved, it leads to the solidification of schemas.

4.3 The Formation Pathway of Secure Attachment: Taking Everyday Bidirectional Respectful Interaction as an Example

(1) Raising the Question: The Leap from "Not Being Harmed" to "Being Respected"

The preceding discussion (Section 4.2) systematically explained the formation mechanism of insecure attachment in traumatic events such as coercive prohibition and neglect. Yet a logically unavoidable question remains: how, exactly, is secure attachment generated in everyday interaction?

Classical attachment theory attributes secure attachment to the caregiver' s "sensitive responsiveness," but "sensitivity" itself is a black box waiting to be opened. This section will argue: **the formation of secure attachment depends on the caregiver completing a full cycle of "seeing-confirming-returning" in key everyday interactions. The core of this process is not "avoiding harm," but "allowing respect to be remembered by the body."**

We will take an extremely common everyday scenario as an example to demonstrate concretely how this mechanism operates.

(2) Case Scenario: A Child' s Curiosity About a Parent' s Belonging

A child of about four develops intense curiosity about a parent' s mobile phone (or another personal belonging) and reaches out, wanting to pick it up and play with it.

At this moment, this is a natural expression of the child' s subjectivity—as an explorer and understander. It does not in itself carry any attribute of "right" or "wrong,"yet it becomes a watershed between two entirely different developmental pathways—depending on how the parents respond.

(3) Path A: A Non-Subjective Response—A Possible Starting Point of Trauma

Parental response: directly stopping the child, scolding ("Don' t touch that! That's not yours!"), or even accompanied by punitive behaviors such as snatching the object away, frowning, or slapping the child' s hand.

The child' s experience:

Expectation: I want to explore → reach out

Rupture: being stopped, being scolded, being punished

Image preservation: I reach out → am treated harshly → fear, grievance, confusion (bodily sensations: tension, fear)

Solidified schema: "Wanting other people's things is dangerous"; "my curiosity will bring punishment" ; "I must read adults' facial expressions before I can act."

Subsequent impact: What the child learns is not "respecting others," but "fearing punishment." When similar [[unclear: text continues beyond the visible page]]

When the situation recurs—for example, when he wants to play with another person' s toy or use another person' s belongings—he will automatically activate the image of being scolded, displaying behaviors such as withdrawal, watching others' expressions, and compromising in advance. If such interactions occur repeatedly, they may solidify into the prototype of anxious attachment: a fear-driven survival strategy marked by excessive vigilance toward external evaluation.

The essence of this pathway is this: the child is placed on the "opposite side of the rules," forced to obey, yet never truly understands the meaning of the rules.

(4) Path B: Subjectivity Response—the Formation of Secure Attachment

Parental response: Seeing the child' s interest, the parent squats down to accompany the child and communicates gently: "Baby, are you interested in this? This is Mommy' s phone. You can take a look, but please be gentle. Come, Mommy will teach you how to press this button···" (demonstration, guidance, joint exploration).

More importantly, when parents later need to use the child' s belongings, they will also take the initiative to ask the child: "Baby, may Mommy use your crayon for a moment?"

The child' s experience:

First interaction (the child explores the parents' belongings):

My curiosity is seen and accepted → My parents play with me → Happiness, satisfaction

Image stored: I explore → I am accompanied and guided → Safety, pleasure (bodily feelings: relaxation, warmth)

Internalized schemas: "Exploration is allowed" ; "If I want someone else' s things, I can ask" ; "Adults will help me understand the rules"

Second interaction (the parents take the initiative to ask the child):

When my parents use my things, they ask me → My consent matters → My boundaries are respected

Image stored: My parents ask me → I can say "okay" or "wait a moment" → I have rights

Internalized schemas: "Rules are reciprocal" ; "Adults also have an inner world" ; "My wishes are worth considering"

Subsequent impact: After repeatedly experiencing interactions of this kind, the child gradually forms a stable expectation in the body: the world—other people—is communicable and negotiable; my feelings are seen and respected. When he himself wants to use another person' s belongings, he will naturally ask (because he has been treated this way), but at this point his asking does not arise from fear; rather, it arises from a genuine understanding of the rules —he has internalized "respect" itself. When he occasionally forgets to ask, he can also calmly face the consequences, because he knows that the relationship is safe and will not be destroyed by punishment.

(5) How This Path Leads to Secure Attachment: The Deep Mechanism of Returning

The essence of secure attachment is that the individual is able to move flexibly from the position of the "understander" back to the position of the "one being understood," thereby maintaining ease and safety within the relationship (see 3.2.1). In Path B described above, the child has gone through a complete cycle of "being seen-confirmation-returning" :

Being seen: The parents notice the child' s need to explore and do not ignore or stop it. This is an acknowledgment of the child' s agency.

Confirmation: Through companionship and communication, the parents confirm that the child' s curiosity is legitimate and valuable. This is an affirmation of the child' s inner world.

Returning: When the parents need to use the child' s belongings, they take the initiative to ask, returning the responsibility of respect to the child and allowing the child to experience that "my boundaries deserve respect." This act of returning also demonstrates "how to respect others" —because the child sees with his or her own eyes how the parents respect themselves.

The deeper meaning of returning lies in this: it is not merely "modeling," but an "invitation." The parents are not telling the child, "You should respect others,"but are applying to the child to be respected. What the child experiences in that moment is not being educated, but being needed—being treated as an independent person with decision-making power. Thus, a natural question will arise in the child' s mind (though not necessarily in verbal form): "Mom and Dad ask me; does that mean they also have their own thoughts? Do they also have things they do not want to be used casually?" This question is precisely the starting point of mentalization—he begins to realize that other people also have inner worlds.

When, in the future, he develops mature mentalizing capacity and is able to reflect on his own growth experience, he will naturally discover: "My parents treated me this way, so I also want to treat them this way." This is not a moral doctrine that has been instilled, but a genuine willingness that has grown out of the body.

(6) Essential Comparison of the Two Paths

Table 12. Comparison of the Pathways of Non-Agentic Response and Agentic Response: From Core Experience to the Consolidation of Attachment Type

Dimension	Path A (Non-Agentic Response)	Path B (Agentic Response)
Child' s core experience	Fear, submission, powerlessness	Being seen, being respected, having strength

Fixed schema

"The world is dangerous; I must read others' expressions."

"The world can be communicated with; I can negotiate."

Understanding of rules

Rules mean "you must not do this," otherwise there will be consequences.

Rules mean "this is how it can be done," because it is reasonable.

Mode of internalizing rules

Forced obedience (external control)

Experiential understanding (bodily memory)

Subsequent interpersonal pattern

Hypervigilance, inner depletion, withdrawal, or people-pleasing

Active communication, clear boundaries, able both to depend on others and to be independent

Formation of secure attachment?

No (solidifying into the embryonic form of an anxious/avoidant type)

Yes (solidifying into a secure schema)

(7) Summary: The Formation Mechanism of Secure Attachment

Through an analysis of the everyday scene in which "a child is curious about a parent's belongings," this section has revealed the concrete mechanism by which secure attachment is formed:

The formation of secure attachment depends on a complete cycle of "seeing-confirming-returning." The core of this cycle is not "avoiding harm," but allowing respect to be bodily remembered through interaction.

The return mechanism has a dual function: it allows the child to experience that "my boundaries are respected," while also demonstrating "how to respect others." From the experience of "being respected," the child naturally develops the capacity to "respect others."

The true internalization of rules occurs through "experience," not through "instruction." What the child on Path B learns is not "I must be obedient," but rather that "rules are bidirectional and negotiable." This understanding gives him, when he faces complex social rules in the future, a flexible capacity for adaptation rather than rigid obedience or resistance.

An individual with secure attachment will ultimately become "the master of rules" rather than "a slave to rules." Such individuals are not without fear; rather, they are able to digest fear within secure relationships. They are not people who do not need to follow rules; rather, they are able to understand the meaning of rules and make autonomous choices according to the situation.

This case reveals a deeper proposition: **how we treat others derives from how we once**

to be treated. Only those who are respected can naturally extend respect to others; only those who have been seen can see others; only those who grow up in safety can provide safety for others. This is precisely how the "subjectivity-response" model deepens attachment theory—it not only explains "how insecurity is formed," but also reveals "how security becomes possible."

4.4 The Instability of Secure Attachment in Adulthood and the Specific Mechanism by Which Countertransference Forms

(1) The Problem: The "Insecure Turn" of Secure Individuals

Classical attachment theory holds that, once secure attachment is formed, it possesses cross-situational stability (Bowlby, 1973). Yet in clinical observation and everyday experience, many securely attached individuals, in intimate relationships after adulthood, gradually come to display insecure behavioral patterns, and may even develop strategies resembling those of anxious or avoidant attachment.

This phenomenon cannot be explained by the "stability of the internal working model." The "subjectivity–response" framework proposed in this article can provide a new explanatory path: **the "insecure turn" of securely attached individuals may stem from being in a state of "one-way understanding" over a long period within a specific relationship, leading to depletion of subjectivity, alienation of understanding, and ultimately the solidification of schemas.**

(2) One-Way Understanding: The Structural Predicament of Secure Individuals in Specific Relationships

The core capacity of securely attached individuals is this: they are able to begin from the position of the "understander," inviting, empathizing with, analyzing, and helping the other person; then, after understanding has been completed, they return to the position of the "understood," gaining relaxation and a sense of security (see [3.2.1]). The maintenance of this capacity depends on a crucial condition: **there must be a "return" mechanism in the relationship**—one' s own understanding can be seen and affirmed by the other person, and one has the opportunity to become the understood again.

Yet in some intimate relationships, this condition cannot be met:

The other person lacks the capacity to return: If the other person is themselves insecurely attached (for example, anxious or avoidant), they may be unable to see and return your understanding. They may either be immersed in their own needs (anxious type) or avoid emotional interaction (avoidant type).

The relational structure becomes imbalanced: You become the "sole understander," and the other person becomes the "sole understood." The relationship deteriorates from "bidirectional interaction" into "one-way output."

This is precisely the predicament of some securely attached individuals in romantic experience: through their own mentalizing and analytic capacities, securely attached individuals continuously understand, analyze, and wish to share, discuss, and reflect with their other half; yet the partner' s capacity to return has

been deprived by her developmental experiences. The partner is not unwilling to return; rather, she does not know how.

(3) The Formation of Situational Avoidance and Situational Anxiety

The preceding text pointed out that, in relationships characterized by long-term one-way understanding, securely attached individuals experience depletion of subjectivity. But what happens after this "depletion"? This section will argue that when the sense of security is continuously consumed, the mentalizing capacity of securely attached individuals may temporarily shut down or become distorted, and the cognitive system regresses to an image-based cognitive state of the preoperational stage.

The "situational avoidance" and "situational anxiety" formed at this point are products of the solidification of schemas at the image level, and have nothing to do with mentalizing capacity.

Mentalizing Requires a Sense of Security as Its Foundation

As elaborated in 3.2.2, the essence of "why"-understanding is a natural overflow that occurs once the sense of security is sufficient. Healthy mentalizing capacity —that is, the ability to understand one's own and others' mental states, motives, and emotions—must presuppose a sufficient sense of security. When individuals feel safe, the mentalizing system operates smoothly: they can think from the other person's perspective, understand the reasons behind the other person's behavior, and at the same time not lose their own boundaries.

Individuals with insecure attachment may also possess mentalizing capacity, but it is often distorted. For example, an individual who repeatedly experienced neglect in childhood may form a cognitive framework such as: "Everyone is selfish, so love and giving in this world are all fake." Although this kind of mentalizing also involves attributing psychological states to others, its motivational source is defense rather than curiosity, and its conclusions are rigid rather than open. Therefore, the fundamental difference between healthy mentalizing and distorted mentalizing lies in the underlying foundation of security.

Depletion of Security: The Shutdown and Distortion of Mentalizing

When a securely attached individual enters a long-term relationship characterized by one-way understanding, what they initially mobilize is healthy mentalizing capacity: they try to understand the partner's insecurity (when facing the anxious type) or distance (when facing the avoidant type), and use explanation, reassurance, and tolerance to maintain the relationship. However, because the partner is unable to return this understanding—the anxious type repeatedly questions, and the avoidant type continues to withdraw—the securely attached individual's understanding is never seen or confirmed.

This continuous experience of "understanding not being returned" gradually

depletes the individual' s reserve of security. When the sense of security is depleted to a certain critical point, the mentalizing system begins to fail:

Mild depletion: mentalizing becomes effortful and tense, and the originally easy process of understanding begins to take on a defensive coloration (for example, "I must understand him; otherwise the relationship will get out of control"); that is, understanding begins to become distorted.

Severe depletion: when the sense of security falls below the threshold, the mentalizing system shuts down. The individual is no longer able to "think about" the other person's motives, but is instead dominated by directly triggered images and bodily sensations.

At this point, the individual retreats to a more primitive, deeper-level cognitive system—the image-based cognitive state of the preoperational stage (see Section 4.2). They no longer ask "why,"but instead directly "see"the association between the situation and the body; they can no longer analyze relational patterns, but are instead automatically triggered into reactions by stored images.

Schema Solidification in the Image-Based Cognitive State

When mentalizing shuts down and the individual retreats to an image-based cognitive state, their mode of cognition undergoes a fundamental change:

Image preservation: Scenes in which countless past explanations proved futile, moments of waiting for a response only to encounter silence, and situations in which one was exhausted yet still interrogated are stored as images of high emotional intensity.

Situational triggering: When similar conflicts reappear—such as the partner again raising doubts or again becoming distant—these images are automatically activated.

Activation of bodily schemas: The rules directly remembered by the body are awakened, such as "communication is useless; explaining will only make things more exhausting,"or "I must understand him; otherwise he will disappear."

Automatic response: The individual no longer makes a mentalized choice, but directly manifests avoidance—silence or pulling away—or anxiety, such as excessive concern and incessant guessing.

This response is **situational**: it appears only within relational situations connected to that partner and has not yet generalized into a stable personality trait. Yet the mechanism by which it forms is entirely homologous with the formation of insecure attachment in childhood: both are the result of image preservation, situational triggering, and the consolidation of schemas.

Specific manifestations of the two pathways

(1) Facing an anxious partner: from "explanation and reassurance" to "situational avoidance" (as an example)

The core feature of anxious attachment is excessive vigilance toward threat signals in the relationship and persistent insecurity about the partner's accessibility; it often verifies the other person' s presence by magnifying needs and creating conflict (Ainsworth et al., 1978). In intimate relationships, this pattern may manifest as strong control over the partner' s social boundaries—for example, demanding that the other person delete friends of the opposite sex or report their whereabouts at all times.

The core feature of an anxious partner is an excessive demand for reassurance: repeatedly questioning the partner' s loyalty and testing the other through threats of breaking up. A secure individual initially mobilizes mentalization, patiently explaining, reassuring, negotiating, and attempting to eliminate the other person' s insecurity. However, the anxious person' s insecurity cannot be reassured through logical reasoning or through observing the other person' s genuine actions. As a result, the same doubts recur repeatedly, and the secure person' s understanding is never reciprocated.

When the sense of security is continuously depleted, mentalization becomes distorted and closes down. The individual returns to an image-based cognitive state:

Preserved images: stopping what one is doing, yet after accompanying and explaining countless times, the other person still remains suspicious; scenes in which one is exhausted yet still interrogated; moments of attempting to draw close but encountering cold emotional violence.

Situational triggering: When the partner again raises doubts or threatens a breakup, these images are automatically activated.

Activation of bodily schemas: The rules remembered by the body—"communication is ineffective; explaining will only make things more exhausting; only by pulling away can I protect myself."

Automatic response: avoidance, silence, refusal to meet.

This is the essence of **situational avoidance**: it is not "I do not want to communicate," but rather "my body has already remembered that communication is ineffective, mentalizing has shut down, and I can only protect myself through avoidance." This avoidance is a solidification of schemas formed in an image-based cognitive state; it is the same as the avoidant attachment mechanism formed in childhood, but its scope is limited to the current relational situation.

(2) Facing an avoidant partner: the formation of situational anxiety (as an example)

The core features of avoidant attachment are excessive suppression of attachment needs, maintaining distance from intimacy, and often using detachment and coldness to defend against the fear of abandonment (Ainsworth et al., 1978). When interacting with an avoidant partner, securely attached individuals face

another kind of challenge: the other person rarely expresses emotions proactively, tends to evade conflict, and has an inner world that is difficult to grasp.

The core features of an avoidant partner are excessive emotional detachment, withdrawal in conflict, and an inner world that is difficult to grasp. At first, securely attached individuals mobilize their capacity for mentalizing, attempting to understand why the other person is distant and responding with tolerance and waiting. However, the avoidant partner' s persistent withdrawal means that the secure individual' s understanding is never received or returned.

When the sense of security is continuously depleted, mentalizing shuts down and becomes distorted. The individual retreats into an image-based cognitive state:

Stored images: scenes of oneself waiting for a response yet being met with unending silence; moments of trying to draw closer but being pushed away;

Only by trying harder to understand and compromise can one obtain attention and companionship in return (key point).

Situational trigger: when the partner once again becomes distant or silent, these images are automatically activated.

Activation of the bodily schema: the rule remembered by the body— "I must try harder to understand him; otherwise, he will disappear."

Automatic response: excessive attention to the other person' s every move; repeated guessing about the other person' s intentions; falling into unease when the other person is silent; being unable to stop thinking about every detail of the relationship.

This is the essence of **situational anxiety**: it is not "I need confirmation that you love me," but rather "my body and distorted capacity for mentalizing have already remembered that only continuous understanding can sustain the relationship; mentalizing has been distorted, and I can only use 'understanding without being able to stop' to defend against the fear of abandonment." This anxiety is a solidification of schemas formed in an image-based cognitive state; it is the same as the anxious attachment mechanism formed in childhood, but its scope is limited to the current relational situation.

The key distinction between the two pathways: whether effort has "brought about" attention

By comparing the two pathways, the key conditions for distinguishing them can be extracted; see Table 13.

Table 13. Situational Differentiation in Secure Individuals: A Comparison of Facing Anxious versus Avoidant Partners

Dimension	When Facing an Anxious Partner	When Facing an Avoidant Partner
Outcome after effort	No matter how hard one tries to explain, the other party still does not trust; the relationship remains turbulent (effort is ineffective).	After making greater efforts to understand and accommodate, one can occasionally obtain the other party' s attention and companionship (effort is effective).
Rule remembered by the body	"Communication is useless; only by staying away can I be safe."	"I must try harder in order to gain companionship."
Situational trait formed	Situational avoidance	Situational anxiety

This distinction is crucial: **the formation of situational anxiety depends on the individual having had intermittent reinforcement experiences in the relationship in which "effort brings reward."** It is precisely these occasional successes that make the body remember the necessity of "continuing to make an effort," thereby forming an anxious schema. If effort is always ineffective, the individual will move toward avoidance.

This is entirely consistent with the differentiation logic of childhood insecure attachment in Section 4.2.4: the anxious type preserves some needs through compromise after a coercive prohibition event (effort is effective); the avoidant type, by contrast, is still deprived after compromise (effort is ineffective). Situational solidification in adulthood repeats the same differentiation mechanism.

The clinical value of this distinction lies in the following:

This analysis has important clinical value:

For the individual: It helps secure individuals understand that the avoidance or anxiety they exhibit in the later stages of a relationship is not because "I was originally this kind of person," but rather because "in a specific situation, my capacities are such that I have no right to choose." This understanding itself can alleviate self-negation.

For therapy: When working with secure individuals who present because of relational trauma, therapists should help them:

- identify the critical point at which mentalization shuts down ("From what point onward were you no longer able to think about your own motives, no longer able to attend to yourself, but instead directly dominated by emotion?")
- distinguish between the two kinds of historical experience– "effort is effective" and "effort is ineffective" –so as to understand why what they

formed was anxiety rather than avoidance.

- Reconstruct the experience of having understanding returned within a secure relationship, re- "ignite" healthy mentalizing capacity, and enable the client once again to use mentalizing capacity to analyze and express the overall process.

Correspondence with Section 4.2: The mechanism revealed in this section is completely isomorphic with the formation of insecure attachment in childhood:

- **Section 4.2:** Children preserve images in coercive-prohibitive events, and, depending on "whether accommodation is effective," differentiate into anxiety or avoidance.
- **Section 4.4:** Secure individuals preserve images amid relational depletion, and, depending on "whether effort can bring attention," differentiate into situational anxiety or situational avoidance.

The two share the same underlying mechanism: image preservation → situational triggering → activation of the bodily schema → automatic response. This is precisely where the unity of the theoretical system of this paper lies—whether formed in childhood or in adulthood, whether as a personality trait or a situational response, the underlying logic of psychological solidification is the same.

(4) Countertransference: The Depletion of the Therapist' s Subjectivity and Situational Responses

Countertransference was initially regarded in the psychoanalytic tradition as an interference arising from the therapist' s unconscious responses to the client, something that needed to be eliminated (Freud, 1910). Contemporary relational psychoanalysis, by contrast, regards it as the product of co-construction between therapist and client, and as a valuable tool for understanding the client' s inner world (Renik, 1993; Orange et al., 1997). However, from either the traditional or the contemporary perspective, the mechanism by which countertransference occurs has never been fully clarified—why do even highly experienced therapists fall into intense, hard-to-control emotional reactions? Why has occupational depletion become a common phenomenon in the mental-health profession?

This section will argue: **Countertransference and occupational depletion are the result of the closure of mentalizing and the solidification of imagistic cognition caused by the therapist' s long-term placement, within a professional relationship, in a state of "unidirectional understanding," in which subjectivity is not returned. Its mechanism is completely isomorphic with the depletion of secure individuals in intimate relationships.**

Structural feature of the counseling relationship: the professional setting of unidirectional understanding

The counseling relationship is, in essence, a professional relationship of "unidirectional understanding": the therapist, as the understander, continuously performs mentalizing processing on the client's psychological state, providing interpretation, naming, and connection for the client's emotions and behaviors; the client, as the one being understood, receives the therapist's understanding but does not need to return an equivalent concern for the therapist's inner world (at least this is so within the counseling setting). This structure itself is a condition for therapeutic efficacy—the client needs to be seen and accepted unconditionally in order gradually to develop their own mentalizing capacity (Fonagy et al., 2002).

However, this unidirectionality also constitutes a potential risk to the therapist's subjectivity: **the therapist's understanding needs to be**

reciprocation, but this reciprocation cannot be obtained from the client. In a healthy working state, therapists obtain reciprocation through other channels: discussion in supervision, exchanges among peers, self-exploration in personal experience, professional recognition, and academic contribution. These channels of reciprocation help therapists temporarily free themselves from the position of "the one who understands" and return to the position of "the one who is understood," thereby maintaining the balance of subjectivity.

The Absence of Channels of Reciprocation and the Depletion of Subjectivity

When therapists' channels of reciprocation are insufficient or ineffective—such as when supervision becomes merely formal, peer support is scarce, or personal experience is interrupted—their long-term state of one-way understanding begins to consume their reserves of security. Similar to the depletion experienced by securely attached individuals in intimate relationships, this consumption follows the same pathway:

Initial stage: The therapist draws on healthy mentalizing capacities, enjoys the process of understanding the client, and experiences professional value.

Depletion stage: In the face of the client's repeated trauma narratives, intense negative transference, or stagnation in therapeutic progress, the therapist continues to output understanding but receives no effective reciprocation in return—the client is unable to "see" the therapist's efforts; supervision fails to provide genuine understanding and support. The sense of security is gradually depleted.

Mentalization shutdown/distortion: When the sense of security falls below a critical threshold, healthy mentalizing capacities shut down or become distorted. The therapist can no longer easily maintain a reflective stance, but instead begins to be overwhelmed by the client's emotions, or develops a defensive, distorted mentalizing cognitive framework—for example, "See, he is like this every time; this client is simply resistant to therapy," or "After I understood him last time, the other person responded to me; perhaps my previous method

was wrong." At this point, the therapist regresses into an image-cognition state and is dominated by the images of therapeutic scenes preserved within the self.

The Isomorphism Between Countertransference and Situationally Insecure Traits

Placing countertransference within the framework of this paper makes it possible to clearly see its intrinsic isomorphism with situationally insecure traits:

Table 14. Cross-situational isomorphism of subjectivity depletion: securely attached individuals in intimate relationships and therapists in professional relationships

Dimension	Securely Attached Individuals in Intimate Relationships	Therapists in Professional Relationships
Structural predicament	One-way understanding; the partner is unable to reciprocate	One-way understanding; the client is unable to reciprocate
Channels of reciprocation	The partner' s reciprocation (absent)	Reciprocation from supervi-sion/peers/personal experience (possibly absent)

Source of depletion of the sense of security	Repeatedly not being seen in one' s understanding	Sustained understanding not being effectively returned
After the threshold is crossed	Mentalization shuts down/is distorted; retreat into image-based cognition	Mentalization shuts down/is distorted; retreat into image-based cognition
Situational qualities formed	Situational avoidance or anxiety	Countertransference or occupational burnout
Solidified schema content	The body remembers "communication is ineffective" or "I must try harder"	The body remembers "I must rescue" or "I can only defend"

This homology reveals the essence of countertransference: **it is not a simple projection of the therapist's own unresolved issues, but rather, within the professional structure of one-way understanding,** the therapist' s depletion of subjectivity and solidification of images resulting from the absence of return. The therapist' s personal developmental history will of course influence

their susceptibility; however, the mechanism by which countertransference occurs is itself structural—any therapist, if long situated in a state where return is absent, may experience a shutdown of mentalization, retreat into image-based cognition, and manifest situational countertransference responses.

Clinical Implications: Pathways for Protecting the Therapist' s Subjectivity

Understanding the mechanism by which countertransference arises provides a clear direction for protecting the therapist' s subjectivity:

Establish stable channels of return: Supervision should not be merely technical guidance; it should also become a space that returns the therapist' s understanding— "I hear the effort you have made in this case; your feelings matter." Peer-support groups, personal experiential work, and the establishment of professional identification are all return mechanisms that help therapists be temporarily released from the position of "the understander."

Recognize the critical point at which mentalization shuts down: Therapists need to learn to observe their own level of felt security—when understanding becomes effortful, when emotional responses become difficult to regulate, and when automatic reactions begin to appear in treatment, these are signals that mentalization is about to shut down. At such moments, one should actively seek return rather than force oneself to "understand more diligently."

Distinguish between "personality traits" and "situational reactions" : The anxiety or avoidance that therapists display in countertransference is often a situational solidification of images rather than a stable personality defect. This distinction can reduce therapists' self-negation and leave room for rebuilding healthy mentalization.

(5) Summary: The "Insecure Turn" of Secure Individuals and the Protection of Subjectivity

The maintenance of secure attachment depends on the mechanism of "return" The core capacity of secure individuals lies in their ability to shift flexibly from being the "understander"back to being the "one who is understood," thereby maintaining ease and security within the relationship. The maintenance of this capacity depends on the presence of "return" within the relationship—that is, one' s understanding can be seen and affirmed by the other, and one has the opportunity to become the one who is understood again. When return is absent, the secure individual' s sense of security begins to be depleted.

The absence of return leads to the shutdown/distortion of mentalization and a regression to image-based cognition Long-term one-way understanding—that is, understanding that is not returned—continually depletes the individual' s reserves of security. When the sense of security falls below a

critical threshold, healthy mentalizing capacities temporarily shut down or become distorted, and the individual regresses to the image-based cognitive state of the preoperational stage. At this point, they are no longer able to "think about" the other person's motives; instead, they are automatically triggered into reactions by stored images.

The solidification of images forms situational insecurity traits In the state of image-based cognition, the individual stores new images according to concrete experiences within the relationship, forming new situational triggers:

If efforts prove ineffective—no matter how one explains or compromises, the other party still does not trust, and the relationship remains turbulent—the rule remembered by the body is: "Communication is ineffective; only avoidance is safe," forming situational avoidance.

If efforts are occasionally effective—greater understanding and compromise can sometimes win the other person's attention and companionship—the rule remembered by the body is: "I must try harder in order to maintain the relationship," forming situational anxiety.

The solidification mechanism of these two situational traits is fully homologous with the formation of insecure attachment in childhood. The difference lies only in the stage of formation and the scope of generalization: schemas formed in childhood become stable personality structures, whereas situational schemas are limited to specific relationships.

Countertransference and occupational burnout are professional manifestations of the same mechanism Counselors likewise face the structural predicament of "one-way understanding"within professional relationships. When channels of return—supervision, peers, and personal experience—are absent, the therapist's sense of security is depleted, mentalization shuts down or becomes distorted, and the therapist regresses to image-based cognition, manifesting countertransference and occupational burnout. This mechanism is fully homologous with the depletion experienced by secure individuals in intimate relationships, revealing that "understanding not being returned," as the core mechanism of the depletion of subjectivity, has trans-situational universality.

The key to protecting subjectivity lies in establishing channels of return Whether in intimate relationships or professional relationships, the core of protecting an individual's subjectivity lies in ensuring that "understanding can be returned." For secure individuals, this means:

Choosing relational partners who have the capacity to return understanding, or helping the other party develop that capacity;

Establishing channels for the return of understanding outside the relationship—friends, support groups, and personal experiential work;

Identifying the threshold at which mentalization shuts down, and actively seeking the return of understanding before exhaustion sets in.

For therapists, this means regarding supervision, peer support, and personal experiential work as indispensable components of professional practice, rather than as optional supplements.

The analysis in this chapter further consolidates the core proposition of this article: whether subjectivity is seen, affirmed, and returned is the fundamental regulatory mechanism of human psychological development, relational maintenance, and personality health. Whether it is the formation of schemas in infants during the sensorimotor stage, the shift of secure individuals in adult relationships, the consolidation of insecure attachment in childhood, or therapists' countertransference and exhaustion, the underlying logic is one and the same: when the expression of subjectivity is seen and returned, individuals can gain a sense of security in relationships and develop healthy mentalizing capacities; when the expression of subjectivity is ignored, distorted, or exploited, individuals retreat into an imagistic cognitive state and form rigidified, defensive adaptive strategies.

This is precisely the critical inheritance and deepening of attachment theory offered by the theoretical model of "subjectivity response": it not only explains the formation of secure attachment, but also explains the "insecure turn" of secure individuals; it not only covers childhood development, but also extends to adult relationships and professional practice. Within this framework, attachment, mentalization, and clinical phenomena are unified under the same underlying mechanism, providing a more universal explanatory foundation for understanding the complex landscape of the human mind.

5. Dialogue with Mentalization Theory: From "the Experience of Being Understood" to "the Capacity to Understand"

Mentalization Theory was systematically developed by Fonagy and his colleagues from the 1990s to the early twenty-first century, and has now become one of the core frameworks for understanding psychological development, attachment relationships, and psychotherapy. Mentalization is defined as "the capacity to understand one's own and others' mental states"—that is, the capacity to see the intentions, emotions, beliefs, and desires behind behavior, and to understand how these mental states shape behavior (Fonagy, Gergely, Jurist & Target, 2002).

This chapter aims to develop an in-depth dialogue between the theoretical model of subjectivity response and mentalization theory. We will argue that:

The emergence and development of mentalizing capacity is, in essence, the internalization of "the experience of being understood" into "the capacity to understand."

the process. Subjective response (seeing, confirming, and returning) provides the necessary external conditions for the emergence of mentalization; and the maturation of mentalizing capacity enables the individual, when external support is lacking, to autonomously complete the transformation from "image → symbol," thereby maintaining the equilibrium of subjectivity. This perspective both carries forward the core insights of mentalization theory and provides it with a more developmentally continuous mechanistic foundation.

5.1 Contributions and Unresolved Issues of Mentalization Theory

(1) Core Contributions of Mentalization Theory

The construction of mentalization theory can be summarized as comprising three interrelated levels:

First, it reveals the intrinsic connection between attachment and mentalization. Fonagy et al. (2002), through longitudinal research, found that secure attachment can promote the development of children' s mentalizing capacity. The explanatory pathway is as follows: in secure attachment, parents are able to "treat the child as an individual with a mind"—parents' mentalization (for example, "Is the baby crying because he or she is hungry?" and so on) is transmitted to the child through everyday interactions, and the child learns to mentalize self and others through the experience of "being mentalized."

Second, it clarifies the central position of mentalization in psychopathology. Severe psychological disorders such as borderline personality disorder are reinterpreted as products of "mentalization failure" —when emotionally aroused, the individual loses mentalizing capacity and regresses to pre-mentalizing cognitive modes. Fonagy et al. distinguish three pre-mentalizing modes (Fonagy et al., 2002):

Psychic equivalence mode: internal experience and external reality are treated as equivalent: "I feel abandoned, therefore I have been abandoned" ;

Pretend mode: mental states are detached from reality; one can talk about feelings, yet without genuine emotional connection;

Teleological mode: only physically visible outcomes can prove psychological states, such as using self-injury to prove suffering.

The core task of psychotherapy is thus redefined as restoring and reconstructing mentalizing capacity, helping visitors move out of these pre-mentalizing modes and enter an integrated mentalizing mode.

Third, it provides an operable goal for psychotherapy. The development of mentalization-based treatment (MBT) enables therapists to focus on the visitor' s mentalizing process itself, rather than attending only to behav-

ior or symptoms. Through the technique of "marking-validation-exploration," therapists help visitors regain, within the relationship, the experience of "being mentalized," thereby developing stable mentalizing capacity (Bateman & Fonagy, 2004).

(2) Unresolved Problems in Mentalization Theory

However, while mentalization theory has achieved major accomplishments, it has also left a number of questions insufficiently answered:

Question 1: What is the "ontogenetic pathway" of mentalization?

Fonagy and others have pointed out that mentalization develops within secure attachment, but they have not explained in detail the concrete pathway of this development—what cognitive capacities it begins from, what stages it passes through, and under what conditions qualitative leaps occur. Mentalization is described as a kind of "capacity," but the underlying ontogenetic mechanisms have not yet been sufficiently opened up.

Question 2: How is the experience of "being mentalized" transformed into the capacity for "mentalizing"?

This is the core proposition of mentalization theory, yet the mechanism of transformation itself remains a black box. How is parental mentalization "internalized" by the child? Is "internalization" here a metaphor, or an operable mechanism? If a detailed account of this transformation process is lacking, the development of mentalization will still retain an air of mystery.

Question 3: What is the relationship between mentalization and language?

Mentalization theory acknowledges the existence of precursors of mentalization in the preverbal period—such as joint attention and social referencing—but what is the relationship between mentalization after the emergence of language and mentalization before it? Does mentalization require language? If it does, how exactly does language participate in the process of mentalization? These questions have not yet been adequately answered.

Question 4: What are the "maintenance conditions" of the capacity for mentalization?

Even when individuals have developed a stable capacity for mentalization, under certain conditions—such as high emotional arousal, relational conflict, or long-term loneliness—they may still temporarily lose that capacity. Mentalization theory has described this phenomenon, but it has not systematically explained the "maintenance conditions" of mentalization—that is, what kind of relational environment can support the continued operation of mentalization, and what kind of environment will lead to its shutdown.

Question 5: What is the "mentalization" of insecurely attached individuals?

Mentalization theory describes severe psychological disorders such as borderline personality disorder as "failures of mentalization," and classifies their cognitive patterns as "pre-mentalizing modes." Yet this description obscures an important fact: **these individuals do not lack the capacity for mentalization; rather, their mentalization is distorted.** Defense mechanisms such as rationalization and external attribution are, in essence, products of mentalization—they all involve the attribution and interpretation of mental states, but their function is defensive rather than exploratory. To go one step further, **defense mechanisms such as rationalization and external attribution are precisely the basis on which pre-mentalizing modes—such as psychic equivalence mode, pretend mode, and teleological mode—are able to operate.** This distinction is crucial for understanding psychopathology and for guiding clinical intervention.

These questions are precisely the points of entry at which the theoretical framework of subjectivity-response can provide supplementation and deeper development.

5.2 The Subjectivity-Response Theoretical Framework as a Reliability Supplement to Mentalization Theory

(1) The developmental path of mentalization: from image cognition to symbolic labels

The subjectivity-response theoretical model provides a concrete cognitive foundation for the development of mentalization: the starting point of mentalization is the capacity for image cognition in the preoperational stage, and the key to its development lies in crossing over from "understanding at the image level and individual feeling" to "naming at the symbolic level."

Image cognition, as the developmental starting point of mentalization (see Section 4.2): before the emergence of language, children are already able to preserve, reproduce, and enact the interpersonal images they have experienced. When a child sees the mother crying, what he preserves is not the abstract concept "mother is sad," but a concrete image that includes facial expression, bodily posture, and situational cues. When a similar situation appears again, this image is automatically activated, and the child feels a certain "indescribable" unease —this is understanding at the image level, a precursor of mentalization, but it has not yet reached mentalization at the symbolic level.

"Why" as the transformative juncture from image to symbol (see 3.2.2): when a child begins to ask, "Mom, why are you crying?" , what he is in effect saying is: "I have two images here that need to be connected—the image of Mom crying and the image of a certain prior event; I need a symbol to connect them." This "why" marks the fact that image cognition is seeking the intervention of symbols;

it is the critical point at which mentalization leaps from the "image layer" to the "symbolic layer."

The intervention and return of linguistic labels: if parents can use language to provide labels and authentic images for the child's image experience ("Mom is sad because work did not go smoothly, just like when you couldn't stack the blocks well at first"), the child completes the first transformation from "image → symbol"—he learns to use the symbol "sad" to mark and connect his own image experience. More importantly, if parents subsequently return to the child the right to apply labels ("Then what made you happy today?"), the child is invited to independently complete the symbolic process of images and feelings. Through repeated cycles of "image externalization → linguistic intervention → symbolic return," the child gradually acquires the capacity to independently complete the transformation from images and feelings to symbols—this is precisely the origin, at the level of individual development, of the capacity for mentalization.

(2) The mechanism by which "being mentalized" is transformed into "mentalizing": the perspective of return

The core proposition of mentalization theory— "the experience of being mentalized is transformed into the capacity for mentalization" —is concretized in the subjectivity-response theoretical model as an operable mechanism:

The experience of being mentalized = the process in which subjectivity is seen, affirmed, and returned

Being seen: Parents recognize that the child is expressing an image—whether through crying, movement, drawing, or language;

Affirmation: Parents acknowledge that the child's image is meaningful ("Are you thinking about why Mom was sad yesterday?");

Return: Parents use their own mentalization to provide symbolic links for the child's image, and then return the authority to label it to the child ("Mom was sad because work wasn't going well, just like when you couldn't build the blocks well at first. What about you? How do you feel today?").

The internal transformation mechanism of this process:

Symbolic modeling: By using their own mentalization ("Mom was sad because work wasn't going well, just like when you couldn't build the blocks well at first"), parents demonstrate for the child how to connect images through language. What the child receives is not merely an explanation, but an operational model that can be imitated.

Returning labeling authority: When parents return the topic to the child ("What about you?"), the child is required to actively call upon their own image-based experience and try to mark it with language. This is a "compelled" process of practice—but it is precisely through this repeated practice that the

child gradually masters the capacity to complete the transformation from image → symbol on their own.

Bodily affirmation: Each successful act of symbolization brings with it the bodily feeling of "being seen" —relaxation, being held, and returning to dependence. This bodily feeling strengthens the motivation for symbolization: because symbolization can bring me back to safety.

Therefore, **the essence of the transformation from "being mentalized" into "mentalizing" is:** from the experience of "being provided with symbolic links," the individual learns the method of "establishing symbolic links for oneself," and, under the reinforcement of bodily affirmation, consolidates this method into a psychological capacity that can be autonomously called upon.

(3) The relationship between mentalization and language: from "symbolic labels" to "symbolic operations"

The theoretical model of subjectivity and response provides a more precise positioning of the relationship between mentalization and language:

The precursor of mentalization in the prelinguistic period: Image cognition itself is a kind of "pre-mentalization" —children can preserve, reproduce, and enact interpersonal images, and can "feel" others' emotions at the level of images, but they cannot use language to mark and operate on these images. This is precisely why infants and young children are able to engage in interactions such as social referencing, joint attention, and emotional contagion, yet are unable to "talk about" mental states.

The intervention of language: The function of language is not to "create" mentalization, but to provide an operable symbolic interface for already existing image cognition. Language enables images to be:

Labeling ("This is sadness");

Linking ("Because A, therefore B");

Transmitting ("I am telling you what I just experienced");

Reflecting ("Why did I do that just now?").

The internalization of symbolic operations: As language ability matures, the individual gradually becomes able to complete within the mind the transformation from image → symbol, without external intervention. They can switch freely between images and individual feelings—symbols—thinking of the corresponding language when seeing a picture or experiencing a feeling, and evoking the corresponding picture and individual feeling when hearing language. This is precisely the essence of mature mentalization: **the ability to shuttle flexibly among the image layer, the feeling layer, and the symbolic layer, using symbols to operate on images and feelings, and using images and feelings to nourish symbols.**

5.3 Two Kinds of Mentalization: A Reinterpretation of Healthy Mentalization and Distorted Mentalization

Mentalization theory has already distinguished different forms of mentalization failure—the psychic equivalence mode, pretend mode, and teleological mode—but it has not explained the mechanisms by which these failure modes are formed, nor has it clarified a key fact: insecurely attached individuals, and even those with severe psychological disorders, likewise possess the capacity for mentalization; only its form is distorted. This section will demonstrate that distorted mentalization is a defensive image-symbol linking mode formed under conditions of a long-term absence of felt security. Its operational basis is precisely such classic defense mechanisms as rationalization and external attribution; and the long-term use of these defense mechanisms becomes consolidated into pre-mentalizing cognitive modes such as the psychic equivalence mode, pretend mode, and teleological mode.

(1) A Premise That Must Be Clarified: The Universality of Mentalization

First, it must be made clear that **the capacity for mentalization is a cognitive tendency universally possessed by human beings.** So long as an individual is able to attribute and explain the psychological states of others or of the self, that individual is engaging in mentalization—regardless of whether the explanation is accurate or distorted, open or rigid, oriented toward connection or toward defense.

Insecurely attached individuals, patients with borderline personality disorder, and patients with narcissistic personality disorder are not "without the capacity for mentalization." Quite the contrary: they often display **highly active but rigid mentalization**:

the borderline patient' s excessive vigilance toward others' intentions and rapid attribution ("He must be going to abandon me");

the narcissistic patient' s continual speculation about others' evaluations and meticulous maintenance of the perfection of the self;

the paranoid patient' s complex conspiratorial constructions regarding others' motives;

the rationalization, external attribution, and self-serving bias of everyday life.

All of these are products of mentalization—they all involve attributing and explaining psychological states. But they are related to

The distinction between healthy mentalization does not lie in whether it is "mentalization present"or "mentalization absent,"but rather in the **motivational source, functional orientation, and cognitive features of mentalization**.

(2) Comparison of the Two Forms of Mentalization: From Function to Mechanism

Table 15. Fundamental distinctions between healthy mentalization and distorted mentalization: a comparative analysis based on motivation, cognition, and function

Dimension	Healthy Mentalization	Distorted Mentalization
Motivational source	Curiosity and exploration after a sufficient sense of security has been achieved	A need for control after the loss of a sense of security
Affective tone	Relaxed, open, able to stop	Tense, compelled, unable to stop
Cognitive features	Hypothesis-driven and revisable	Conclusion-driven, rigid, and closed
Function	Promotes understanding and connection	Defends against pain and controls relationships
Typical expression	"He may have done this because···; I need to understand."	"He must have done this because···; I know!"
Nature of symbolic connection	Open and revisable hypotheses	Closed and unshakable conclusions

(3) The Hierarchical Structure of Distorted Mentalization: From Defense Mechanisms to Pre-Mentalizing Modes

To understand the formation and operation of distorted mentalization, it is necessary to distinguish two interrelated levels:

First level: basic defense mechanisms—rationalization and external attribution

Rationalization and external attribution of responsibility are classic concepts in psychoanalysis and attribution theory.

Rationalization was proposed by Sigmund Freud and was later systematically elaborated by his daughter Anna Freud (Anna Freud, 1936) in *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defense*. Its core feature is that the individual, when faced with something difficult to accep—

feelings, behaviors, or motives, seeking an explanation that appears reasonable and logical on the surface, so as to replace their true but unsettling causes. The essence of rationalization is a process of self-deception, intended to reduce cognitive dissonance, protect self-esteem, and maintain self-consistency. Its function

is to relieve anxiety, guilt, or shame in the short term and to maintain psychological equilibrium; however, because it avoids facing real problems or motives, in the long run it may hinder the individual' s self-knowledge and personality growth.

External attribution is a core concept in attribution theory. Heider (1958) first systematically expounded attribution theory in *The Psychology of Interpersonal Relations*, which was later developed by Weiner (1974, 1986) into a three-dimensional attribution model. The dimension of "locus of control" corresponds directly to internal/external attribution—external attribution means attributing the outcomes of behaviors or events to external, situational factors rather than to factors internal to the individual. The **self-serving bias** in motivational attribution bias is a common manifestation of external attribution: individuals tend to attribute success to internal factors, such as their own ability and effort, while attributing failure to external factors, such as others' mistakes, bad luck, or unfavorable environments.

The intrinsic connection between rationalization and external attribution: External attribution is the most common and most central cognitive-operational tool of rationalization. When individuals need to find a "reasonable" explanation for their own failures, improper behavior, or negative emotions, attributing responsibility to external factors— "it was all because of ···that I ··· " —is the most direct and effective strategy, avoiding painful self-examination. Rationalization, in turn, weaves a self-consistent and seemingly objective logical narrative around simple external attribution, making it appear more credible and more "rational" both in the individual' s own mind and even before others. Together, the two serve to maintain a positive self-image and reduce emotional distress.

Second Level: Pre-mentalizing Modes–Psychic Equivalence, Pretend, and Teleological Modes

The three pre-mentalizing modes proposed by Fonagy et al. (2002) are, in effect, the solidified and patterned manifestations of defense mechanisms such as rationalization and external attribution in specific contexts:

Psychic equivalence mode: the "absolutized" version of rationalization and external attribution. When defense mechanisms operate over the long term, the individual gradually loses the reflective capacity to recognize that "this is only my interpretation," equating inner interpretations with external reality. "I feel abandoned, therefore I have been abandoned" —this is essentially a rationalization of the "feeling of being abandoned," and this rationalization has solidified into an unshakable belief.

Pretend mode: the "suspended"version of rationalization and external attribution. The individual can talk about mental states, but such talk is disconnected from real emotions—because once it connects with real emotions, it will trigger pain that needs to be rationalized. The pretend mode is an extension of rationalization at the emotional level: using language to construct a "seemingly"

emotional world

the boundary, so as to defend against the impact of authentic emotions.

Teleological mode: the "acted-out" version after the shutdown of mentalizing capacity. When rationalization at the level of language is insufficient to ward off pain, the individual retreats to the physical level, using visible actions to prove invisible mental states. Self-injurious behavior is, in essence, an acted-out regression to the preoperational stage— "my suffering must be proven through the body; otherwise, it does not exist."

The logical relation between the two levels is:

Basic defense mechanisms (rationalization, external attribution)

↓

Long-term operation and consolidation

↓

Pre-mentalizing modes (psychic equivalence, pretend mode, teleological mode)

↓

Activated in specific situations (such as emotional arousal)

↓

Manifesting as clinical phenomena of "mentalizing failure"

In other words, psychic equivalence, pretend mode, and teleological mode are the manifestations of defense mechanisms such as rationalization and external attribution after they have become consolidated as stable cognitive patterns under conditions of a prolonged absence of felt security. They are not "pre-mentalizing" states unrelated to mentalization, but rather distorted and closed forms after mentalization has been "captured" —captured by defensive interpretive frameworks formed in early trauma.

(4) The formation mechanism of distorted mentalization: from image consolidation to symbolic consolidation

Integrating the analysis in Section 4.2, the complete developmental pathway of distorted mentalization can be outlined as follows:

First stage: image consolidation—the preservation of traumatic images

In traumatic events such as coercive prohibition, persistent neglect, and emotional abuse, children preserve highly intense traumatic images(see 4.2.4). These images include:

situational cues (such as a parent's expression when approaching) ;

process scenes (the moment of being deprived) ;

outcome images (empty hands, a vanished toy) ;

bodily sensations (a sense of loss of control, humiliation, anger) .

These images, because of their high emotional intensity and because they have not been repaired—have not been seen, validated, and returned—solidify into highly sensitive situational triggers.

Stage Two: Symbolic Defense—Seeking Explanations for Images That Cannot Be Endured

Because of the lack of healthy external symbolic intervention—the parents' failure to provide safe verbal labels and return them—the child is forced to seek explanations for these images on his or her own. Yet these explanations must accomplish two seemingly contradictory tasks at the same time:

Explaining suffering— "Why is this happening to me?"

Sustaining hope— "How can I still go on living?"

At this point, **rationalization and external attribution** are invoked as the most basic cognitive tools. For example, an anxiously attached child may form the explanation, "As long as I am good enough, Mom will love me" (rationalization: interpreting the parents' neglect as "I am still not good enough"). This symbolic connection both explains the present suffering and preserves hope. But it is a **defensive explanation**—it allows the child, when unable to change the external environment, to obtain a false sense of control.

Stage Three: Symbolic Solidification—Explanations Become Unshakable Conclusions

Once an effective defensive explanation has formed, the child clings tightly to it, because it is the sole support for maintaining psychological survival. This explanation is used repeatedly and verified repeatedly—even if the mode of verification is distorted—and ultimately solidifies into an unshakable symbolic connection.

At this point, the defensive mechanism begins to transform toward **prementalizing modes**:

The explanation is no longer a "possible" hypothesis, but a fact that "is just so" —the **psychic equivalence mode** begins to form;

When discussing these explanations, the person gradually becomes detached from real emotion—the **pretend mode** begins to form;

When linguistic explanation is insufficient to ward off suffering, there may be regression to the level of action—the **teleological mode** begins to form.

Stage Four: Generalized Application—Rigid Mentalizing Modes Become Personality Traits

With development, this rigid mode of symbolic connection is generalized to other relational situations. The individual enters every relationship with the certainty of "I know what you are thinking," continually applying an existing explanatory

framework to new experiences, rather than revising the explanatory framework in light of new experiences.

This is the essence of distorted mentalizing: it is not "a failure of mentalizing," but "mentalizing being captured"

—being captured by the defensive symbolic connections formed in early trauma. Rationalization and external attribution are tools in this process of capture, while the modes of psychic equivalence, pretend, and teleology are the solidified results of the long-term use of these tools.

(5) Clinical Implications: The Temporal Logic of Corrective Emotional Experience

Understanding the formation mechanisms of distorted mentalization and its hierarchical structure has fundamental guiding significance for clinical intervention:

First, one must not attempt to "correct" distorted mentalization at the very beginning.

If the therapist prematurely tries to "correct" the visitor's distorted interpretations—such as "What you think in this way is not right" or "The facts may not be like this" —this will often encounter strong resistance. For the visitor, these distorted interpretations are not "errors," but life-saving straw grasped in despair. To take them away is equivalent to forcing the visitor to face once again the unbearable original pain. More importantly, behind these distorted interpretations lie layers of solidified defense mechanisms and pre-mentalizing modes; they need to be understood rather than attacked.

Second, a safe base must first be provided—that is, a corrective emotional experience.

The first task of therapy is to make the visitor feel safe. Only within a sufficiently safe relationship can the visitor gradually relax defenses and allow those repressed primordial images to emerge. This safety must be established through real and perceptible experience—not by the therapist "saying" it is safe, but by being seen, confirmed, and returned in interaction as **bodily sensations**. This is precisely the essence of the corrective emotional experience: to re-create, within the therapeutic relationship, the cycle of "seeing-confirmation-returning" found in healthy early interaction, thereby providing new, non-defensive symbolic connections for solidified traumatic images.

Third, there must be a gradual loosening from defense mechanisms to pre-mentalizing modes.

As the sense of safety is gradually restored, therapy can begin to loosen the hierarchical structure of distorted mentalization:

First, allow the visitor to notice that they are using rationalization or external attribution, without rushing to "correct" them;

Then, help the visitor understand how these defense mechanisms once protected them;

Next, within a safe relationship, invite the visitor to try different possible interpretations;

Finally, after the original traumatic images have obtained sufficiently many new symbolic connections, the psychic-equivalence mode begins to loosen, the pretend mode begins to integrate, and the teleological mode begins to be replaced by language.

Fourth, this is a question of temporal sequence.

Safety → emergence of images → new symbolic connections → loosening of defense mechanisms → pre-mentalizing modes

Integration → return to mentalization

Any intervention that attempts to skip the first step may be futile, or may even cause secondary harm. This is precisely why mentalization-based therapy (MBT) emphasizes the sequence "marking-validating-exploring": one must first mark and validate—be seen and confirmed—and only then can one explore, or return.

5.4 Clinical Implications: A New Perspective and the True Principles of Mentalization-Based Therapy

The subjectivity-response theoretical model provides a new theoretical perspective and operational direction for mentalization-based therapy (MBT).

(1) Repositioning the therapeutic goal: from "cultivating mentalization" to "repairing the return loop"

The core goal of MBT has been described as "helping visitors develop or restore the capacity for mentalization."From the standpoint of the subjectivity-response theoretical model, this goal can be restated as: **helping visitors repair the interrupted return loop and rebuild the flexible capacity to transform images into symbols.**

This means that what the therapist needs to attend to is not only whether the visitor "can understand," but, more importantly, under what conditions the visitor "can obtain an experience of return." The therapeutic process can be understood as follows: within the therapeutic relationship, the therapist provides the visitor with a safe experience of return, enabling the visitor to learn to complete the transformation from image to symbol on their own.

(2) Reinterpreting therapeutic techniques: seeing, confirming, and returning as core mechanisms

The techniques developed in MBT—marking, validating, and exploring—correspond closely to the three dimensions of subjectivity response:

MBT technique	Subjectivity-response dimension	Psychological function
Marking	Seeing	Confirms that the visitor' s expression is worthy of attention
Validating	Confirming	Affirms the legitimacy of the visitor' s feelings
Exploring	Returning	Returns the responsibility for understanding to the visitor and invites the visitor to mentalize actively

This correspondence suggests that the effectiveness of MBT may not lie in its "teaching" mentalization, but in its re-enactment, within the therapeutic relationship, of the "seeing-confirming-returning"loop characteristic of healthy early interaction. Through the experience of being "mentalized" by the therapist, the visitor once again obtains the feeling of being seen, and thereby develops their own capacity for mentalization.

(3) A mechanistic understanding of corrective emotional experience

Corrective emotional experience is a traditional concept in psychotherapy, proposed by Alexander & French (1946), but its mechanism has never been fully clarified. From

Starting from the subjectivity-response theoretical model, the essence of the corrective emotional experience can be re-understood as follows:

Corrective emotional experience = the process by which traumatic images acquire new symbolic connections within a safe relationship

Specifically:

The therapeutic relationship provides a sufficient sense of safety, allowing the client' s repressed primitive images to emerge;

The therapist' s "seeing-confirming-returning" provides these images with new, non-defensive symbolic connections;

At the bodily level, the client feels the relaxation and confirmation of "being seen";

The new image–symbol connections are preserved, gradually replacing old defensive interpretations (rationalization, external attribution)

and their solidified pre-mentalizing patterns.

This process is not cognitive "persuasion," but an experience that grows anew within the relationship. This is precisely why corrective emotional experience must be real and must be felt—because it must be remembered at the bodily level.

(4) Re-emphasizing the protection of the therapist's subjectivity

The analysis of countertransference in Section 4.4.4 shows that therapists likewise face the subjectivity risk of "understanding that is not returned." From the perspective of mentalization theory, this analysis can be further deepened:

The therapist's mentalization likewise needs to be returned. If a therapist remains for a long time in a state of one-way understanding (the client cannot return it, supervision becomes formalistic, peer support is lacking), the therapist's mentalizing capacity will also gradually shut down or become distorted, manifesting as countertransference or occupational burnout. Therefore, **protecting the therapist's mentalizing capacity is as important as promoting the client's mentalizing capacity.** This means that:

- Supervision should be understood as a space for "returning the therapist's understanding," rather than merely as technical guidance;
- Peer support groups should become an important channel through which therapists obtain experiences of return;
- Therapists need to learn to identify the critical points at which their own mentalization is shutting down, and actively seek return.

(5) An exception: high-functioning defensive individuals—the paradox of openness and closure

After discussing the distinction between healthy mentalization and distorted mentalization, it is necessary to address a special exceptional case: **high-functioning defensive individuals**.

Such individuals are not uncommon in clinical observation and everyday life—they may possess extremely high cognitive ability, outstanding social functioning, and may even display extraordinary creativity in certain domains. They are able to carry out complex mentalizing operations, deeply understand others' motives, and construct sophisticated theoretical interpretations. On the surface, they seem to possess all the characteristics of healthy mentalization.

However, closer observation reveals a fundamental paradox: **their understanding is open, and also closed**

...

The open side: When high-functioning defenders face setbacks, failure, and suffering, they display an astonishing capacity to learn. They repeatedly reflect, analyze in depth, and continually revise their own understanding. This openness arises from their core motivation—**never again to return to that state of knowing nothing and being unable to control anything**. Every setback is an alarm: if I do not understand, I will lose control. Therefore, they mobilize all their cognitive resources to understand, to learn, and to revise.

The closed side: When everything is going smoothly and there are no setbacks, their thinking becomes rigid. Because they do not need to face the threat of "not understanding," they also do not need to revise themselves. In this state, they exhibit typical features of distorted mentalization—rigid explanatory frameworks, defensive attributional patterns, and rejection of information that does not fit their cognitive framework. Their understanding is not for exploration, but for control; not for connection, but for defense.

What is the essence of this paradox?

From the framework of this article, high-functioning defenders are still the product of a lack of security. Their over-understanding is rooted in a fundamental fear formed in early experience: not being able to understand means not being able to control; not being able to control means being harmed, abandoned, and destroyed. This fear drives them to continuously develop their capacity for understanding, bringing it to an extremely high level.

But the fundamental difference between them and healthy mentalizers lies in this: **the understanding of healthy mentalizers is "exploration that starts from security," whereas the understanding of high-functioning defenders is "control that starts from fear."** The former can relax after understanding and return to dependence; the latter can never truly relax, because once they relax, it means they may once again fall into the dangerous situation of "not understanding anything."

This explains the coexistence of openness and closure:

Openness is due to fear—if they are not open, they will fall behind and lose control again;

Closure is also due to fear—once a certain framework of understanding has proven effective, they must cling to it, because change means the unknown, and the unknown means danger.

High-functioning defenders therefore fall into an eternal predicament: they may be the most acute observers and the most profound thinkers, yet they can never enjoy the freedom of understanding itself. Their understanding is a double-edged sword—it is both the weapon by which they transcend their predicament and the cage in which they imprison themselves.

Clinical implications:

This exception has important implications for psychotherapy. High-functioning defenders are often "good patients": they can quickly understand the therapist's interpretations and construct profound self-insights. But therapists need to remain vigilant: "Has this understanding truly brought about an increase in felt safety?" "Or is it merely another upgrade of the defense system?" Genuine healing does not lie in understanding itself, but in being able, after understanding, to put understanding down and return to a dependent state in which one "does not need to understand."

For high-functioning defenders, the ultimate goal of therapy is not to help them "understand more," but to help them experience that **"not understanding is also safe"** —to allow them, within a safe relationship, for the first time to permit themselves "not to know," for the first time to permit themselves to "lose control," and for the first time to discover that even if they do not understand, even if they lose control, they will not be abandoned and will not be destroyed. This is the core of corrective emotional experience.

Correspondence with the framework of this article:

The existence of high-functioning defenders does not negate this article's distinction between healthy mentalization and distorted mentalization; rather, it enriches our understanding of the form of "distorted mentalization." It reminds us: **there is no necessary linear relationship between the functional level of mentalization and the state of inner felt safety.** A person may possess an extremely high level of mentalizing function while being, at the same time, extremely lacking in inner security; another person may possess ordinary mentalizing capacities, yet be able truly to relax after understanding.

True health does not lie in "being able to understand," but in "being able, after understanding, not to need understanding." This is precisely what section 3.2.1 states: the essence of felt safety is the certainty that one can be received even without understanding at every moment, without independently controlling everything. High-functioning defenders spend their entire lives "understanding," yet have never truly experienced the feeling of being "received."

Thus, they are a **key test case** for our theoretical framework: if our explanation can accommodate this exception, if it can explain why, among people who similarly possess highly developed mentalizing capacities, some can relax (the healthy type) while others can never stop (high-functioning defenders), then our theory gains stronger explanatory power. This is precisely what the agency-response theoretical model reveals: **the difference does not lie in the "quantity" of mentalizing ability, but in the "quality" of its motivational source—whether it comes from secure curiosity or from fearful control; whether one can return to dependence, or remains forever trapped in the position of the understander.**

5.5 Summary: Mentalization as the "Legacy of Being Understood" and as "Repairable Trauma"

Through an in-depth dialogue with mentalization theory, this chapter has completed the following demonstrations:

1. The developmental pathway of mentalization has been opened up: the starting point of mentalization is image cognition, and the key to its development is

from "understanding at the image level" to "naming at the symbolic level." This transition depends on the linguistic labels and invitations to return provided by parents at key nodes.

2. The mechanism by which "being mentalized" is transformed into "mentalizing" is clarified: the return mechanism—seeing, confirming, and returning—concretizes the experience of being mentalized into an operable process. The individual learns, from "being provided with symbolic connections," to "establish symbolic connections for oneself," and, through the reinforcement of bodily confirmation, this becomes consolidated as an autonomous capacity.

3. The relationship between mentalizing and language is specified with greater precision: language provides an operable symbolic interface for image cognition, enabling images to be marked, connected, transmitted, and reflected upon. Mature mentalizing is the capacity to switch flexibly between the image level and the symbolic level.

4. Two kinds of mentalizing are distinguished: healthy mentalizing and distorted mentalizing share the same cognitive foundation, but differ sharply in their sources of motivation, functional orientation, and cognitive characteristics. Distorted mentalizing is a defensive symbolic connection formed under conditions of a long-term absence of felt security.

5. The hierarchical structure of distorted mentalizing is clarified:

Foundational level: rationalization (Freud, 1936) and external attribution (Heider, 1958; Weiner, 1974) serve as the most basic defensive cognitive tools;

Consolidated level: after these defense mechanisms operate over a long period, they become consolidated into pre-mentalizing modes such as psychic equivalence mode, pretend mode, and teleological mode (Fonagy et al., 2002);

Formation pathway: from the consolidation of images (the preservation of traumatic images), to symbolic defense (rationalization/external attribution), then to symbolic consolidation (pre-mentalizing modes), and finally to generalization into a rigid mentalizing mode.

This pathway reveals that psychic equivalence, pretend, and teleological modes are not "pre-mentalizing" states unrelated to mentalizing; rather, they are the result of the consolidation of defensive mechanisms such as rationalization and external attribution under conditions of a long-term absence of felt security.

They are not the absence of mentalizing, but distorted forms of mentalizing—mentalizing is "captured" by the defensive interpretive framework formed in early trauma.

6. The temporal logic of clinical intervention is revealed: distorted mentalizing cannot be directly "corrected" ; instead, a secure base must first be provided (a corrective emotional experience), allowing the client to accumulate a sufficient sense of security. Only when felt security is restored can the original traumatic images acquire new, non-defensive symbolic connections; only then can defense mechanisms gradually loosen, pre-mentalizing modes be progressively integrated, and mentalizing "return to normal." This is a matter of temporal sequence: security takes precedence over mentalizing.

7. Clinical practice is repositioned: the core of mentalization-based therapy is to re-enact within the therapeutic relationship "seeing

the return cycle of "seeing–confirming–returning." The essence of corrective emotional experience is that, within a safe relationship, it provides new symbolic connections for traumatic images. Therapists need to recognize that their own mentalization likewise needs to be returned; protecting the therapist' s subjectivity is a necessary condition of professional work.

Within this framework, mentalization can be understood as a **"legacy of being understood"** —the result of childhood experiences of being seen, confirmed, and returned, which are then internalized and consolidated. At the same time, mentalization is also a **"repairable trauma"** : even if distorted patterns of mentalization developed early on—from rationalization and external attribution to consolidated pre-mentalizing modes—healthy capacities for mentalization can still regrow within a safe relationship through new experiences of returning.

This is precisely how the subjectivity-response theoretical model deepens mentalization theory: it explains not only how mentalization "grows," but also how mentalization becomes "distorted" when a sense of safety is absent—from defense mechanisms becoming consolidated into pre-mentalizing modes—and how it can be "repaired" within a safe relationship—from symbolic consolidation back to flexible connection. Mentalization is no longer an ability suspended in midair; rather, it is a dynamic process rooted in bodily experience and embedded in relational history. It is both the trace left by the ways in which we have been treated and the locus of hope that we can be treated anew.

6. Discussion

6.1 Review of Core Propositions

The subjectivity-response theoretical model proposed in this paper aims to provide attachment theory with a more developmentally continuous underlying mechanism, in order to demonstrate the reliability of sensitive responsiveness and internal working models.

We have argued that:

Scope of applicability of the survival-dependence hypothesis: Classical attachment theory takes "survival and safety" as the universal premise for the formation of attachment, but this premise holds only in extreme families where survival resources are explicitly used as means of reward and punishment. In the vast majority of ordinary families, infants cannot, through embodied experience, establish the awareness that "I depend on my parents for survival." The rudiments of attachment types have already formed during the sensorimotor stage, while infants at this stage do not yet possess a reflective awareness of survival dependence.

Core mechanism of subjectivity response: The true starting point of insecure attachment formation is whether caregivers respond appropriately to the child' s emerging subjectivity—as an "agent" and an "understander." This mechanism runs through two key developmental stages:

- **Sensorimotor stage:** modes of responding to primordial signals such as "crying" (autonomous / substitutionary / neglectful)

shaping the infant' s experience of agency and solidifying it into different sensorimotor schemas.

- **Preoperational stage:** Responses to children' s "why" questions and to their sharing of understanding—being seen, affirmed, and returned—determine whether children can be liberated from the position of the "understander" and return to the dependent state of "being understood," thereby preventing understanding from becoming alienated into defense.

The emergence of image-based cognition and mentalization: In the preoperational stage, children develop the capacity for image-based cognition and are able to preserve, reproduce, and enact interpersonal experience. The essence of mentalization is the transition from "understanding at the level of images" to "naming at the level of symbols." This transition depends on the linguistic labels and invitations to return provided by parents at key moments. Healthy mentalization and distorted mentalization share the same cognitive foundation, but the latter is a defensive symbolic connection formed under conditions of deficient security. Its basis lies in defense mechanisms such as rationalization and external attribution; when these mechanisms become solidified over time, they manifest as pre-mentalizing modes such as psychic equivalence, pretend mode, and teleological stance.

The formation of situational insecurity traits: In a relationship characterized by long-term, one-way understanding, securely attached individuals may deplete their sense of security because their understanding is not returned. When the sense of security falls below a critical threshold, healthy mentalization shuts down or becomes distorted, and the individual regresses to a state of image-based cognition. Depending on the differentiating condition of "whether effort is effective," situational avoidance is formed when effort is ineffective, whereas

situational anxiety is formed when effort is occasionally effective. This mechanism is isomorphic with the formation of insecure attachment in childhood and has the same structure as the therapist' s countertransference.

This chapter will provide an integrated discussion of this theoretical framework, respond to possible questions, clarify its theoretical significance and practical implications, and indicate directions for future research.

6.2 Possible Questions and Answers

(1) The Exemplary Nature of the "Forced-Prohibition Event" as a Common Starting Point

Some readers may ask: Is the formation of insecure attachment limited to the single pathway of "forced prohibition" ? Could neglect, emotional abuse, unpredictable responses, and the like also lead to insecure attachment?

It should be clarified that this article takes the "forced-prohibition event" as the common starting point for the formation of insecure attachment out of methodological considerations. Forced prohibition has the clearest causal structure: the child is engaged in an agentic activity; an external force suddenly intervenes and interrupts it; the outcome is explicit; and the emotional response is intense. This "clean" structure is best suited to demonstrating how the core mechanism of "image preservation–situational triggering–adaptive solidification" operates (see 4.2.4).

Other forms of trauma—such as neglect, emotional abuse, and unpredictable responses—differ phenomenologically, but at the level of mechanism they follow the same logic: all are images formed after "agency/signals are blocked by external forces"

images and adaptive strategies. For example:

Neglect: After the child sends out signals, there is repeatedly no response; the stored image becomes "my signals are ineffective," and this solidifies into an avoidant schema;

Emotional abuse: After the child expresses feelings, the child is belittled; the stored image becomes "my expression of feelings will be met with blame," and this solidifies into an avoidant schema;

Unpredictable responses: The child is unable to establish stable expectations; the stored image becomes "the world has no regularity," and this solidifies into a disorganized schema.

Therefore, the "forced-prohibition event" should be understood as a **prototypical case** for understanding this mechanism, and its logic can be transferred to the analysis of other types of trauma.

(2) The Position of Biological Factors: Temperament as a Catalyst, Not a Determinant

Some researchers may argue: Behavioral-genetic studies show that the heritability of attachment type is approximately 30–50% (Fearon et al., 2006). Does this not demonstrate the role of biological factors such as temperament?

This paper does not intend to deny the role of biological factors. The key, however, is that **the mode of action of biological factors is "modulation" rather than "determination."** To borrow the metaphor of a catalyst:

[Environment (whether agency is returned) = the main reaction in a chemical reaction]

[Biological factors (temperament/sensitivity) = catalyst]

A catalyst can accelerate the rate of reaction, but **it does not change the direction of the reaction' s products**. Highly sensitive children perceive environmental responses more sharply—if the environment is "returning," they form secure schemas more quickly; if the environment is "neglectful," they also form defensive schemas more quickly. Less sensitive children require a longer period of time, or stronger environmental input, before they can form stable schemas.

This understanding is highly consistent with the contemporary differential susceptibility theory (Ellis et al., 2011; Belsky & Pluess, 2009): some individuals are more open to environmental influence, and may both benefit more from positive environments and suffer more deeply from negative environments. Yet the direction of the influence is still determined by the quality of the environment —by whether agency is returned—and not by temperament itself determining attachment type.

"What needs to be further clarified is that the heritability of attachment reported in behavioral genetics does not necessarily mean that there exists an 'attachment gene' that directly determines attachment type. A more reasonable explanation is 'gene-environment correlation' : parents' attachment patterns (influenced by their own genes and developmental histories) shape the way they respond to agency, thereby providing the child with a particular attachment-shaping environment. In this [[unclear: sentence continues off page]]

In this sense, what is transmitted through "heredity" is not the attachment type itself, but the environmental conditions that affect attachment formation, mediated through parental behavior. This is precisely consistent with the core position emphasized in this paper: the mechanism of environmental response."

(3) The coexistence of multiple schemas and the explanation of individual differences

A common question is: if attachment types are shaped by environmental responses, why do children who are similarly neglected develop different attach-

ment types? Does this not indicate the role of innate temperament?

This paper' s answer is: **multiple, even mutually contradictory, sensorimotor schemas can coexist within a single person**. This is because:

Schemas are context-dependent: children accumulate different interactive experiences in different relationships (such as with the mother, the father, and grandparents) and preserve different images. These images are activated in their corresponding contexts and manifest as different behavioral patterns.

Schemas are historically layered: schemas formed early are not "replaced," but "overlaid." New experiences form new schemas, while old schemas remain stored in bodily memory and may be reactivated under specific conditions.

Schemas are competitive: in a given concrete situation, which schema is activated depends on the degree of match between contextual cues and the schema.

Therefore, the same individual may display different attachment patterns in different relationships (such as the parent–child relationship vs. adult partnership), precisely because different relationships have accumulated different schema histories. Siblings developing different patterns within the same family is due to subtle differences in the way they "bodily encode" the same environmental events (for example, parents' ways of responding to two children may contain critical differences; the two children may interpret or bodily feel the same event differently; the same child may develop different response patterns toward the parents, being anxious toward the mother and avoidant toward the father).

Within this framework, the true role of temperament is to influence the "speed" and "intensity" with which schemas are formed, rather than the **content** of the schemas. The content of a schema (whether it is avoidance, anxiety, or security) is still determined by the pattern of environmental response.

(4) Clarifying the relationship between distorted mentalization and defense mechanisms

Some readers may be puzzled: mentalization theory refers to psychological equivalence, pretend, and teleological modes as "pre-mentalizing modes,"whereas this paper regards them as "distorted mentalization." Are these two understandings contradictory?

What needs to be clarified is: **psychological equivalence, pretend, and teleological modes are not unrelated to mentalization; rather, they are the solidified results of long-term operation of defense mechanisms such as rationalization and external attribution**. The relationship between the two is hierarchical:

Foundational level: rationalization (Freud, 1936) and external attribution (Heider, 1958; Weiner, 1974)

as the most basic defensive cognitive tools, they are the inevitable product of children' s search, under conditions of deficient security, for explanations of images that they cannot bear. They themselves already involve the attribution of mental states, and are therefore **a primary form of mentalization**, except that their function is defensive.

Level of consolidation: When these defensive explanations are used repeatedly and become unshakable "conclusions," the individual gradually loses the capacity for reflection and enters the psychic-equivalence mode (inner explanation is equated with external reality); or becomes disconnected from genuine emotion and enters the pretend mode; or, when verbal explanation is insufficient to defend against suffering, regresses to the level of action and enters the teleological mode. These modes are **the result of the consolidation of rationalization and external attribution**, distorted forms that emerge after mentalization has been "captured."

Therefore, the understanding proposed in this article is not in conflict with mentalization theory; rather, it provides a developmental supplement: it explains how "pre-mentalizing modes" evolve from more basic defensive mechanisms. In clinical intervention, this means that one cannot directly "correct" the psychic-equivalence mode. Instead, one must first provide the client with a secure base, allowing the defensive mechanisms gradually to loosen, so that primitive traumatic images can acquire new symbolic connections and pre-mentalizing modes can gradually be integrated into healthy mentalization.

(5) Response to Questions Concerning Cultural Universality

Some readers may raise the following question: this model is, to a considerable extent, based on a cultural perspective that is individualistic and that emphasizes autonomy and psychological introspection. In some collectivist cultures, the construction of the "self" depends more on relational roles and social obligations, and children' s expressions of "subjectivity" (such as directly asking "why") may not be encouraged, or may take different forms. Then is the "subjectivity-response" model a culturally specific theory?

This question touches on a fundamental issue: is the "subjectivity-response" framework we propose the product of a particular culture, or does it reveal a universal mechanism in the formation of the human psyche?

My answer is: **this framework is, in essence, a kind of "methodology" —a "method for understanding how a human being becomes human." What it abstracts is the underlying operational logic of human psychological formation, rather than the concrete manifestations of any particular culture.**

The distinction between mechanism and manifestation

To respond to this question, we must first distinguish between two levels: **underlying mechanism and cultural manifestation**.

Underlying mechanism refers to the processes shared in the formation of the human psyche that are universal across cultures. The core claim of this article is: regardless of culture, individuals must construct an understanding of the self and the world through interaction with others—especially early caregivers; this constructive process always involves "image preservation-situational triggering-schema consolidation"

the path; the subjectivity of the individual—whether as an "agent" or as an "understander" —must be "seen, affirmed, and returned" in order to develop healthily. These are propositions at the level of mechanism.

Cultural manifestation refers to the concrete forms in which these universal mechanisms are realized in different cultures. Different cultures exert a profound influence on how "subjectivity" is expressed, on the social expectations surrounding "understanding," and on the practical forms taken by "returning." For example:

In an individualistic culture that emphasizes autonomy, children may be encouraged to ask directly "why," and parents may patiently explain;

In a collectivist culture that emphasizes relational harmony, children may come to "understand" through observation, imitation, and sensitivity to others' emotions rather than by asking directly; parents' "returning" may not take the form of verbal explanation, but may instead be realized through behavioral modeling and relational adjustment;

In some cultures, "seeing" may take the form of keen sensitivity to children' s needs rather than verbal acknowledgment; "affirmation" may be expressed through bodily contact such as hugging and stroking rather than verbal praise; "returning" may take place by giving children more family responsibilities rather than by asking questions.

But the key point is this: although the forms of expression differ, the core function of "seeing, affirming, and returning" still exists. In any culture, if children' s expressions of subjectivity are chronically ignored, distorted, or exploited, their psychological development will be hindered; if they are seen, affirmed, and returned, they can develop healthily. This is precisely the universality at the level of mechanism.

The "cases" in Chapter Four are "clean cases"

The concrete processes described in Chapter Four of this article—such as the "incident of coercive prohibition," "no one responds after crying," and "whether compromise is effective" —are, in essence, "clean cases" : abstracted "prototypes" intended to demonstrate the operation of a mechanism, rather than complete descriptions of actual events occurring within a particular culture.

Just as physicists use a "frictionless plane"to demonstrate principles of mechanics —although absolutely smooth surfaces are rare in reality, through this abstract model we can understand the general laws by which friction operates—so too the

cases in Chapter Four are meant to demonstrate the operational logic of the core mechanism of "image preservation–situational triggering–schema solidification," rather than to assert that insecure attachment in all cultures must necessarily appear in exactly the same form.

In these "clean cases,"I have deliberately stripped away culturally specific details and retained only the necessary elements of the mechanism' s operation. This is done precisely in order to make the mechanism itself clearly discernible, leaving room for the subsequent "concrete analysis of concrete problems."

(6) The Two Levels of Image Cognition: Embodied Images and Cognitive Images

In the discussion above, I used the concept of "image cognition" to describe children' s capacity to preserve, reproduce, and interpret experience through internal images. What needs to be further clarified here is that, within my framework, "image cognition" contains two levels. In occurrence they are the same process, but in state they can be distinguished. This distinction is crucial for understanding the relation between children' s automated responses in interaction and their reflectable tendencies of attribution.

The first level I call "embodied image." This is the level of image cognition at which, at the very moment an interaction occurs, the child' s body is directly presented—not a "picture that comes to mind,"but the body's direct apprehension of the situation. When a child sees a familiar friend approaching, what is directly presented at the level of embodied image is the feeling that "I can draw near" ; when a child who has once experienced rejection faces a peer again, what is directly presented at the level of embodied image is the feeling that "I need to be careful." This process operates simultaneously with the sensorimotor schema and is inseparable from it; it is the automated response of the entire bodily system at that moment. The function of embodied image is consistent with the feeling of the sensorimotor schema—they are both pre-reflective, automated, and drive present action.

The second level I call "cognitive image." This is the level of image cognition at which the child uses internal images to carry out logical inference, interpretation, and modeling. Here, images are not objects to be "extracted," but components of thinking itself. A classic example is a child saying, "The sun has probably gone to sleep too." The child observes that at night other people are no longer visible (interpreted as "having gone to sleep"), and also observes that at night the sun is no longer visible. He uses an existing image ("disappearance → sleep") as an inferential component, logically interpreting the new phenomenon and arriving at the conclusion: the sun has also gone to sleep. This conclusion is not extracted; it is inferred through images. The function of cognitive image is consistent with the logical inference of symbolic cognition—the difference is only that symbolic cognition reasons with language, whereas cognitive image reasons with images.

The relation between the two: embodied image and cognitive image are not two different capacities, but rather two states in which the same capacity of "image cognition" is presented. Embodied image is the state of image cognition in operation—automated, pre-reflective, and driving the child' s present action; cognitive image is the state of image cognition when it is being invoked—the child actively uses it to think, infer, and understand the world. The child' s present actions (such as responses during interaction with peers) are driven by embodied image; whereas the child' s ability to understand the world and interpret ambiguous situations relies on cognitive image.

This distinction is important for understanding the core question of this paper. A child' s interpretive tendency toward a peer' s behavior (whether the child tends to regard the other as friendly, or tends to regard the other as hostile) is precisely the long-term

the result of this operation: some children use the image "others are friendly" to interpret ambiguous situations; some children use the image "others are hostile" to interpret them. These images come from the entirety of their past interactive experience, and they are activated and reinforced in every new interaction. When these images are repeatedly activated, they gradually sink down into embodied images—that is, conclusions that originally required active inference come to be feelings directly grasped by the body. This is precisely why children' s interpretive tendencies can drive their behavior in an automated way and can continue to influence subsequent interactions: for some children, the body has already directly grasped that "others are approachable" ; for some children, the body has already directly grasped that "others must be treated with vigilance."

The Unity of Universality and Diversity

In the process by which a human becomes a person, there are both similarities and differences. **The similarities lie in the mechanisms of formation; the differences lie in concrete experience, cultural background, and environmental conditions.** This is precisely what my framework seeks to capture:

Similarity: Regardless of the culture in which one grows up, human beings predict the world through sensorimotor schemas; they update schemas under the drive of "surprise" (prediction error); and they all need to "be seen" within relationships in order to maintain the balance of subjectivity.

Difference: The content of the "images" that are preserved varies by culture (for example, in collectivist cultures, images of relational roles are more likely to be preserved); the mode in which "subjectivity" is expressed varies according to cultural norms (whether through direct questioning or indirect attunement); and the practical form of "returning" varies according to cultural customs (whether through verbal explanation or behavioral demonstration).

Therefore, my framework is not intended to erase cultural differences. Quite the opposite—**it provides an analytic tool for understanding cultural**

differences. It enables us to pose more precise questions:

In a particular culture, through what means is "being seen" primarily realized?

What are the typical signals of "confirmation"?

How is "returning" embodied in local childrearing practices?

When cultural norms conflict with individual subjectivity, how do schemas become solidified?

These questions can be systematically raised and explored only within this "methodological" framework.

The Nature of the Methodology: How to View the Process by Which a Human Becomes a Person

For precisely this reason, we tend to position this framework as a "methodology" rather than a "theory"—or at least not merely as a theory in the traditional sense. What it provides is not a set of concrete rules that hold universally everywhere, but **a set of analytic tools**: a method for "how to view the process by which a human becomes a person."

The core of this methodology is: **when examining the formation of persons in any culture, one should attend to the following questions:**

1. **Image layer:** What key interpersonal images has the individual retained? How were these images formed? Under what circumstances are they triggered?
2. **Symbolic layer:** How does the individual endow these images with meaning? Is it through direct linguistic labeling, or through the indirect interpretation of actions, rituals, and relationships?
3. **Restitution layer:** Is the individual's expression of subjectivity—whether through crying, action, drawing, or language— "seen"? Is it "recognized"? Has it received "restitution" (that is, has the individual been invited to complete understanding independently)?
4. **Layer of security:** What is the individual's reserve of security like? Is it sufficient to support healthy mentalized functioning?
5. These questions can cut across cultural differences and be asked in any society. They are not meant to provide "standard answers," but to open up "pathways for understanding the human being."

Specific problems require specific analysis.

What finally needs to be emphasized is this: this methodology must be combined with "specific analysis of specific problems."

When we use this framework to analyze psychological phenomena in a particular culture, we must enter deeply into that culture's concrete context and understand its distinctive:

Child-rearing practices (how children' s expressions are responded to)

Emotional norms (which emotional expressions are encouraged/prohibited)

Relational expectations (the balance between the individual and the collective)

Systems of meaning (how "self," "other," and "relationship" are understood)

Only in this way can we avoid mistaking the concrete manifestations of individualistic cultures for universal mechanisms, and also avoid overlooking deep commonalities because of surface differences.

Conclusion

Thus, the question of cultural universality has precisely helped me clarify the fundamental nature of this framework:

It is not a set of dogmas that "apply everywhere under heaven," but rather an analytical key that "can be carried into any culture." It is not meant to tell you that "people in all cultures ought to be this way," but rather to ask you: "In your culture, how is the human being seen?"

The value of this key does not lie in its ability, by itself, to open every lock; it lies in enabling us to ask the right questions, and thereby truly understand —within each concrete culture and in each concrete person—how, after all, a human being becomes human.

(7) Relationship with SIP Theory: An Integrative Perspective from "Subjectivity Response" to "Social Information Processing"

Social Information Processing theory (Social Information Processing, SIP), systematically developed by Crick and Dodge (1994), has become one of the leading cognitive models for understanding children' s social adaptation. This theory decomposes children' s behavioral decision-making in specific social situations into six progressive processing steps: cue encoding, cue interpretation, clarification of goals, response generation, response decision, and behavioral enactment. The core contribution of SIP theory lies in its refined depiction of how "hostile attribution" drives aggressive behavior and forms a vicious cycle—when children interpret ambiguous cues (such as being glanced at or not receiving the ball) as hostile, they generate negative emotions and aggressive responses; the other party' s natural counterattack then "confirms" their initial conjecture, and the cycle continues to intensify.

This paper has no intention of denying the profound insights of SIP theory. On the contrary, we acknowledge its outstanding contribution in revealing cognitive processing mechanisms at the level of micro-situations. However, a fundamental question deserves to be asked: where exactly do the "cognitive subject" capable of information processing, as described by SIP theory, and its "attribution filter" come from?

It is worth noting that, before engaging with SIP theory, the framework of this paper had already independently derived a cyclical mechanism highly isomorphic with SIP. This fact suggests that the "hostile attribution cycle" described by SIP can be understood as a refined manifestation, in specific social situations, of this paper's mechanism of "image solidification–situational triggering." The following clarifies the relationship between the two theories from three levels.

Table 16 Mechanistic Comparison between Subjectivity-Response Theory and SIP Theory

Level of analysis	Core steps in SIP theory	Core mechanisms in subjectivity-response theory
Step 1	A need or situation forces contact to occur	The child approaches peers with a "desire to play" (driven by subjectivity)
Step 2	Cue encoding (receiving social cues)	Problems exist in behavioral expression: the mode of expression is clumsy, overly direct, or accompanied by vigilant body language
Step 3	Cue interpretation (activation of the hostile-attribution filter)	Feedback from others: peers feel that "this person is strange" or "seems unfriendly," and distance themselves or reject the child

Step 4

Goal clarification

The child interprets the present experience through an existing cognitive image ("others are dangerous").

Step 5

Response generation

Intentional attribution is formed: "See, sure enough, they won't play with me; they are hostile."

Step 6

Response decision

Defense at the symbolic level: using the explanation that "it is all their fault" to avoid facing the pain of "perhaps there is a problem with the way I express myself."

Step 7

Behavioral enactment

At the next encounter, the body directly produces the feeling that one "needs to be careful" (activation of an embodied image).

Cycle

Behavioral outcomes reinforce the initial belief

The complete experience is remembered by the body, and the hostility schema is further consolidated.

This comparison reveals that the cycle of "cue interpretation → response generation → behavioral enactment → outcome feedback"finely depicted by SIP theory is precisely the micro-level unfolding, within concrete social interactions, of the mechanism proposed in this article: "image preservation → situational triggering → activation of bodily schemas → automatic response." The two theories reach a high degree of theoretical consensus in explaining the core phenomenon of "how an individual falls into and becomes fixed within a hostile attributional pattern."

Although the two theories are highly isomorphic at the level of mechanism, there is a fundamental difference in their levels of explanation. This difference can be clarified by analogy with levels of theory in physics:

- **SIP theory is equivalent to Newtonian mechanics:** it is precise and effective under the "weak-field approximation" (concrete social situations), describing in detail how information is processed and how behavior is enacted. But it implicitly assumes a cognitive subject capable of information processing, and fails to ask where this subject' s cognitive tendencies come from.
- **Subjectivity-response theory is equivalent to relativity:** it explains the nature of the "gravitational field" (attachment dynamics and cognitive tendencies)—that is, the curvature of spacetime shaped by whether subjectivity is seen, confirmed, and returned. It provides the underlying developmental explanation for the "laws of motion" described by Newtonian mechanics (SIP).

Specifically, this hierarchical difference is reflected in three dimensions:

First, at the level of genesis. SIP theory explains how information is processed given a cognitive filter, such as hostile attribution. But it does not explain how this filter itself is formed. The framework of this paper precisely fills this gap: the hostile-attribution filter—in the terminology of this paper, the cognitive image that "others are dangerous" —is formed through early experiences

in which "subjectivity was not returned." Children are not born with a hostile filter; rather, after repeatedly experiencing that "understanding was not seen, expression was not confirmed, and needs were not returned," the body remembers that "others are unpredictable," "my signals are ineffective," and "approach is dangerous." Only then does there emerge the later "subject" described by SIP, who processes information through such a filter.

Second, at the level of dynamics. SIP theory is a situational model—it explains how information is processed in real time within a specific social event. The framework of this paper is a developmental model—it explains where the cognitive structures on which such situational processing depends come from, how they become consolidated, and how they are activated, strengthened, or loosened in new situations. Each cycle described by SIP is a micro-level realization of the larger process described in this paper as "image triggering–schema reinforcement."

Third, at the level of integration. Placing SIP within the framework of this paper yields a more complete explanatory chain:

- **Image preservation:** past experiences in which "subjectivity was not returned" are preserved as the cognitive image that "others are hostile"
- **Situational triggering:** ambiguous behavior, such as being glanced at, triggers this image
- **Activation of bodily schema:** the body directly produces feelings of vigilance/hostility, corresponding to SIP' s interpretation of cues
- **Automatic response:** aggressive/avoidant behavior is displayed, corresponding to SIP' s behavioral enactment
- **Outcome feedback:** others' negative responses reinforce the original image, corresponding to SIP' s cycle

In this sense, SIP is indeed a concrete situational application model under the broader framework of this paper—it finely depicts the micro-level cognitive process of information processing after an "image has been triggered."

Once the two theories are placed within the same framework, two fundamental questions that SIP theory itself is unable to answer come to the surface:

Question 1: Why do some children form hostile attributions, while others form benevolent attributions?

SIP theory can describe how hostile attribution operates, but it cannot explain the origin of hostile attribution. Section 4.2 of this paper takes an incident of coercive prohibition as a prototypical case and reveals the pathway by which cognitive images are formed: when, after coercive prohibition, a child "preserves" part of his needs through compromise, he forms the image that "relationships can be controlled through vigilance" (anxiety

type prototype); when, even after compromise, the need is still deprived, he will form an image of "effort is futile; no longer expect anything" (the prototype of the avoidant type). These images formed through the success or failure of

"subjective response" are precisely the "attribution filters" that will later be carried into social situations.

Question 2: Why are some children able to adjust their attributions after repeated failures, while others fall into an increasingly rigid vicious cycle?

SIP theory describes how the cycle intensifies, but it cannot explain why some people are able to break the cycle. Sections 3.2 and 5.3 of this paper provide an answer: the key lies in whether the individual possesses the safe experience of "being returned" as a psychological resource. A child whose subjectivity was returned in early life, even if he later forms a temporary hostile attribution because of a particular setback, will still remember in his body the feeling of "being seen." When a friendly interaction occurs, this embodied experience can generate tension with the solidified hostile image, making it possible for the schema to loosen. For children who have never been returned, however, every negative experience merely further confirms the embodied image that "others are dangerous." Because there is no contrary experience to counterbalance it, the cycle will only intensify and cannot be broken spontaneously.

In sum, the framework of this paper and SIP theory are not in competition, but are complementary models at different levels of explanation. At the micro-situational level, SIP theory profoundly reveals the processing mechanism and cyclical logic of hostile attribution; it is the "Newtonian mechanics" for understanding children' s social adaptation. The framework of this paper, at the developmental level, reveals the origin, solidification, and loosening conditions of these cognitive filters, providing a deeper explanatory basis for the phenomena described by SIP; it is a "theory of relativity."

By integrating the two, we can obtain a more complete map of understanding: **in the success or failure of early "subjective response," children form basic images of the world (safety/hostility/hopelessness); these images are automatically triggered in each later social situation and, through the micro-processing procedures described by SIP, influence behavior, shape feedback, and thereby reinforce—or, under conditions of safe return, loosen—the original images.** This integrated framework both preserves SIP' s fine-grained explanatory power at the situational level and finds developmental roots for it, pushing our understanding of "how a person becomes a person" one step further.

6.3 Theoretical Significance

(1) Deepening Attachment Theory

1. The core contribution of this paper to attachment theory lies in:
2. **Opening the black box of the "internal working model":** The internal working model proposed by Bowlby (1973) is a metaphorical concept. This paper transforms it into an operable mechanism—the internal

The working model is the sensorimotor schema remembered by the body. Its formation depends on patterns of response to primal signals such as "crying" ; its updating depends on the repair of "surprise" (prediction error); and its consolidation depends on image preservation and contextual triggering.

3. **It clarifies the meaning of "sensitive responsiveness" :** Ainsworth et al. (1978) regarded sensitive responsiveness as a predictive indicator of secure attachment, but its specific meaning has remained vague. This article shows that the core of sensitive responsiveness is not "satisfying needs," but rather **satisfying needs in a way that supports agency** (the sensorimotor stage) and **seeing, confirming, and returning understanding itself** (the preoperational stage). This distinction turns sensitive responsiveness from a vague concept into an actionable guide for behavior.

4. **It expands the explanatory scope of attachment theory:** The framework of this article can explain not only the formation of attachment in childhood, but also such phenomena as the "insecure turn" of securely attached individuals in adult relationships, therapists' countertransference and occupational burnout, and the loss of a sense of security among children raised by non-biological caregivers. It thus extends attachment theory from a "childhood trait" to a "lifelong dynamic."

(2) Supplementing Theories of Cognitive Development

The contribution of this article to Piagetian theory lies in the following:

It proposes, on the basis of cognitive science, the "lifelong operation of sensorimotor schemas" : This corrects the misunderstanding that treats the sensorimotor stage as a "capacity from ages 0–2," and points out that sensorimotor schemas constitute the foundational cognitive system operating throughout life, while symbolic cognition is only an "upper-level architecture" that intervenes when schemas fail.

It proposes "image cognition" as the essence of the preoperational stage: It concretizes Piaget' s "symbolic function" as the process of transformation from image to symbol, thereby providing a developmental foundation for symbolic cognition. The capacity for image cognition—preserving, reproducing, and interpreting images—is the precursor of mentalization and also a unified framework for understanding such phenomena as imitation, pretend play, and divergent thinking.

It integrates Piaget with contemporary cognitive science: It equates "surprise" with the "prediction error" of predictive-processing theory, and equates schema updating with model correction, thereby providing a response, at the level of neuroscience, to Piaget' s constructivism.

(3) Advancing Theories of Mentalization

The core advance this article makes for theories of mentalization lies in the following:

It clarifies the developmental pathway of mentalization: by tracing mentalization back to image cognition, it reveals the turning point from "understanding at the image level" to "naming at the symbolic level" (the "why" question), as well as how this transformation occurs through

the interactive realization of "seeing-confirming-returning."

It distinguishes healthy mentalization from distorted mentalization: it points out that the two share the same cognitive foundation, but differ fundamentally in their sources of motivation, functional orientation, and cognitive characteristics. Distorted mentalization is a defensive symbolic connection formed under conditions of a lack of security. Its basis lies in defensive mechanisms such as rationalization and external attribution; once these mechanisms become chronically solidified, they manifest as pre-mentalizing modes such as psychic equivalence, pretend mode, and teleology.

It reveals the conditions that maintain mentalization: it points out that mentalization requires a sense of security as its "fuel," and requires an expectation of return as a sustaining condition. When channels of return are absent over the long term, even mature mentalizing capacity may shut down or become distorted —this finding explains why securely attached individuals may lose their capacity for mentalization in depleting relationships, and also provides a theoretical basis for protecting the therapist' s subjectivity.

It provides a mechanistic explanation for mentalization-based treatment: it maps MBT' s "marking-validation-exploration" technique onto the "seeing-confirming-returning" of subjectivity response, and redefines corrective emotional experience as "providing new symbolic connections for traumatic images within a secure relationship," thereby giving the effectiveness of MBT an explanation at the level of genesis.

(4) Integration with Clinical Psychology

This paper provides a unified explanatory framework for clinical psychology:

Countertransference and occupational burnout: Countertransference is not a simple projection of the therapist' s personal issues; rather, it is the therapist' s subjectivity depletion and image solidification, experienced because of the absence of return within a professional structure of one-way understanding. This explanation relocates countertransference from a "personal problem" to a "structural problem," thereby indicating a direction for therapists' self-protection.

The mechanism of psychotherapy: The effectiveness of psychotherapy does not lie in "teaching" some capacity, but in re-creating, within the therapeutic relationship, the return cycle of "seeing-confirming-returning," helping the client

repair interrupted image–symbol connections, allowing solidified defensive interpretations to loosen, and enabling original traumatic images to acquire new, non-defensive symbolic connections.

The continuous spectrum of personality disorders: The analysis in Section [4.2] of avoidant, anxious, borderline, narcissistic, and other disorders (see the notes on *From Normal Person to Personality Disorder: A Spectrum of Psychodynamic Forces and Manifest Symptoms*) shows that these personality disorders can be understood as solidified image–symbol connection patterns formed in early traumatic events such as "coercive prohibition." They are not discrete "diseases," but rather a continuous spectrum of adaptive strategies formed under different conditions.

(5) Dialogue with Cognitive Science

1. This article deeply integrates the predictive-processing framework of cognitive science with theories of psychological development:
2. **Surprise as prediction error:** It equates "surprise"with the core concept of predictive-processing theory, "prediction error," thereby providing a neuroscientific foundation for psychological development.
3. **Sensorimotor schemas as predictive models:** It understands the "if ···then···" rules retained by the body as the brain' s predictive models; schema updating is thus model correction.
4. **The particularity of social prediction error:** It points out that prediction in the social world is more complex than prediction in the physical world, because it involves the intentions and responses of others. The essence of an agency-based response is to help the other person resolve social prediction error—enabling the other to understand "why you respond in this way," thereby updating their schema and returning to a predictable state.
5. **Image cognition as a "situational trigger" of prediction error:** By incorporating image storage and situational triggering mechanisms into the predictive-processing framework, it explains why past experiences can automatically activate bodily responses in similar situations.

6.4 Practical Implications

(1) Child-Rearing: From "Meeting Needs" to "Returning Agency" The framework of this article provides parents with a clear direction for action:

Sensorimotor stage (0–2 years): Meet needs in a way that supports agency. Place bottles, toys, and other objects within the infant' s range of autonomous touch, and encourage the infant to obtain satisfaction through their own efforts (see 3.1.2 on "autonomous response"). When an infant emits primordial signals such as "crying," respond with action (holding, guiding) rather than directly

doing it for the infant—because a substitutive response will solidify the passive expectation that "the world completes it for me,"rather than the active, mastery-oriented expectation that "I can complete it myself."

Representational-thinking-dominant period (2–4 years): Use sensorimotor responses to help the child establish links between images and actions (see 4.2.2). When the child externalizes internal images through actions and play, parents should "take the child to experience it" —for example, pick the child up so that they can get something high up by themselves, while accompanying the process with language. At this point, the agency-based response still needs to return to the logic of the sensorimotor stage: meeting needs in a way that supports agency, and connecting the child's perception with images.

Language-intervention period (4–7 years): Return understanding through the combination of symbols and behavior (see 3.1.2).

For a child's repeated "why" questions, first confirm verbally ("Are you asking whether ···?"), then coordinate behaviorally (for example, putting down what one is doing and truly accompanying the child), and finally return the topic to the child ("What about you? How do you feel today?"), inviting the child to independently complete the transformation from image → symbol. This is the key through which the capacity for mentalization is activated at the level of individual development (see 5.2.1).

At any stage: when parents are unable to respond immediately for objective reasons, they should acknowledge the child's expression, give a clear promise of delayed response ("Mom and Dad are busy right now; we'll listen to you later"), and keep that promise (see 3.2.4). The core message conveyed by such a response is: "I see what you want to express. I cannot hold it for you right now, but I will come back—your expression has not been discarded; it has only been deferred." This is precisely the core mechanism of secure attachment: the child does not need the parents to be present at every moment, but only needs to be certain that he or she is within a relationship of being seen.

(2) Education: Cultivating the Autonomous Capacity for "Image → Symbol" Transformation

The core task of education should shift from "transmitting standardized knowledge"to "cultivating the individual's capacity to name his or her own experience" :

Curriculum design: while teaching symbolic systems (language, mathematics, scientific concepts), education must preserve their connection with image cognition. For example, before introducing abstract concepts, students should first be allowed to fully encounter concrete phenomena and should be encouraged to "explore" through their own senses and intuitions, forming a pre-linguistic "knowing" of their own (see 3.2.2 for the discussion of "image cognition").

Evaluation system: assessment should shift from testing standard answers to evaluating students' capacity to pose questions, their critical scrutiny of AI

outputs, and their capacity to provide reasons for their own choices in ambiguous situations. This corresponds to the mechanism of "returning" —handing the responsibility for understanding back to the learner, rather than having it performed on the learner's behalf by external standards.

Teacher's role: the teacher should shift from being "a projector of authority" to being "a guardian of experience" and "a midwife of thought." The teacher's main task is no longer to transmit ready-made answers, but to help learners name their own distinctive experiences, and defend their legitimacy, through questions such as: "What do you think about this phenomenon?" and "What does your intuition tell you?"This is precisely the practice of "seeing-confirming-returning" in educational settings.

(3) Psychotherapy: Repairing the Interrupted "Return Loop"

Therapeutic goal: to help clients repair the interrupted return loop and reconstruct the flexible capacity to transform image into symbol (see 5.4.1). This means that the core of therapy is not to "teach" mentalization, but to enable clients to regain the experience of "being seen" within a safe relationship.

Therapeutic technique: to concretize "marking-validating-exploring" as the "seeing-confirming-returning" proposed in this article (see

see 5.4.2):

Seeing: identify the image the client is expressing (whether through language, emotion, or bodily symptoms);

Validation: acknowledge the legitimacy of the client's feelings ("What you felt at the time was important");

Returning: return the responsibility for understanding to the client ("What do you think?" "What did you feel at the time?"),

inviting the client to actively complete the transformation from image → symbol.

Temporal logic: safety precedes mentalization (see 5.3.5). Therapy must first provide a corrective emotional experience, allowing the client to accumulate sufficient felt safety within the relationship; only then can repressed primitive images emerge, and new, non-defensive symbolic connections be established. Any premature intervention that attempts to "correct" the client's distorted interpretations may encounter resistance because of the client's lack of safety.

Therapist self-protection: therapists need to recognize that their own mentalization likewise requires "returning" (see 4.4.4). Long-term involvement in a professional relationship of one-way understanding—where the client is unable to return, supervision becomes merely formal, and peer support is scarce—will deplete the therapist's sense of safety, leading to the shutdown or distortion of mentalization, manifested as countertransference or professional burnout. Therefore, establishing stable channels of return—supervision, peer support, and

personal experience—recognizing the critical point at which one's own mentalization begins to shut down, and actively seeking return are necessary conditions for maintaining professional competence.

(4) Social Level: Understanding the Collective Symptoms of "Understanding Not Being Returned"

The framework of this paper provides a psychological foundation for analyzing social phenomena. For example, analyses of phenomena such as "feminism," "lying flat," and "patriarchy" may reveal the mechanisms of "safety depletion" and "image solidification" among the many individuals behind them:

Individuals who grow up in a social environment where their "understanding" has long not been returned—their real feelings ignored, their autonomy interrupted, and their questions about relationships left unanswered—may have their repressed primitive images (scenes of being defined and bullied, moments of being ignored) triggered in similar situations. Because many individuals have long lacked experiences of safe return, their capacity for mentalization has already become distorted; they regress to a state of image-based cognition, manifested as rigid and defensive patterns of attribution (such as indiscriminate criticism of "patriarchy," or criticism of contemporary modes of work in society). The essence of this "collective symptom" is the collective activation, under particular social conditions, of historical trauma in which the "understanding" of large numbers of individuals was not returned.

Understanding this mechanism helps move beyond simple moral judgment and toward empathy and support for transformations in individuals' modes of existence. This is not to deny the legitimacy of critique, but rather to understand how the image solidification behind critique is formed, and how repair can be promoted through genuine "seeing" and "returning."

6.5 Future Research Directions

The theoretical model of subjectivity response proposed in this paper opens up a broad field of research. However, all future research must follow a fundamental ethical principle: **researchers must not in any way intervene in or alter the natural living conditions of the research participants**. The value of our research lies in "seeing"how life unfolds naturally, rather than in "changing"or "intervening in" that process. The following outlines future research directions from multiple dimensions; all methods are based on the analysis of existing natural archives.

(1) Field Operationalization of Core Concepts: "Seeing" Mechanisms in Natural Archives

The core concepts of this paper— "subjectivity response" ("seeing," confirmation, return), "image fixation," "alienation of understanding," and so forth—need to

be identified and coded within **authentic natural-life archives that have not been disturbed by research behavior**. The operationalization of these concepts is not the application of a framework preset by the researcher, but rather a morphological description that "grows" out of massive amounts of natural data.

Lawful acquisition of data sources:

Family settings: In cooperation with families, researchers may apply to access home surveillance recordings that already existed prior to the present. These cameras may have been installed for non-research purposes such as security, childcare records, or remote caregiving, and the recording process is entirely unaffected by the research. Researchers only obtain historical archives; they do not install any new equipment or alter any family routines.

Nursery/school settings: In cooperation with kindergartens and schools, researchers may apply to access past routine surveillance recordings. These recordings are routinely made by the institutions for purposes such as safety management and teaching records. Researchers only obtain historical archives and conduct no on-site observation or intervention of any kind.

Family video materials: With family consent, researchers may collect growth-related videos filmed by families themselves, such as birthday gatherings, holiday celebrations, and daily records. These videos were themselves filmed for family memory rather than for research purposes.

Public-space records: Under the premise of compliance with ethics and law, existing surveillance materials from public venues—such as community activity centers, parks, and children' s playgrounds—may be used to observe interactions between children and caregivers in natural states. It must be ensured that all identifiable information about individuals is fully protected.

Core points of ethical review:

Prior existence of data: All research materials must be records that already existed before the study began. Researchers must not, in the name of research, require any family or institution to install new equipment, change daily routines, or conduct any form of cooperative recording.

Informed consent: The full informed consent of the data owners (families and institutions) must be obtained. The purposes for which the data will be used, the mode of storage, and the form of publication must be clearly explained, so as to ensure that the use of the data does not infringe personal privacy. For individuals in historical images who cannot be traced, thorough de-identification must be carried out.

De-identification of data: Technical processing must be applied to all faces, names, specific locations, and identifiable features that appear, ensuring that no specific individual can be traced in the research outputs.

Boundary delimitation of data: Only data within the authorized scope may be used; no additional information may be obtained beyond that scope, and the data may not be used for any purpose outside the authorized scope.

Right to withdraw: Data owners have the right to withdraw consent at any stage, and researchers must unconditionally destroy the relevant data.

Method for establishing the coding system:

The coding system cannot proceed from theoretical presuppositions; rather, it must grow out of the data. Within a large body of naturalistic archives, researchers need, through repeated viewing, comparison, and induction, to gradually identify the natural behavioral forms of "seeing-confirming-returning" :

First stage: Immersive viewing. The research team collectively views a large number of naturalistic archives without making any presuppositions, simply "seeing" what has occurred.

Second stage: Phenomenon clustering. During the viewing process, researchers begin to notice that certain behavioral patterns recur—some caregivers' modes of response seem to make children more relaxed, while other modes of response seem to make children more withdrawn. These phenomena are recorded to form an initial "set of phenomena."

Third stage: Morphological description. Each set of phenomena is described in fine detail: What is the sequence of behavior? What are the contextual features? What are the subsequent developments? These descriptions must be phenomenological and must not be mixed with theoretical interpretation.

Fourth stage: Cross-archive validation. The initially described forms are taken into new archives for examination: Can the same forms still be observed? Are there exceptions? What do the exceptions suggest?

Fifth stage: Conceptual refinement. On the basis of sufficient validation, core concepts are refined from the phenomenological forms—for example, in some cultures, "seeing" manifests as gaze-following plus verbal response, while in other cultures it may manifest as silence accompanied by bodily proximity. These concepts are names given to the phenomena, not presuppositions imposed upon them.

The logic of longitudinal tracking:

Because what researchers obtain are historical archives, in theory it is possible to trace the same family over several years or even longer

records. This enables researchers to:

Observe the natural developmental trajectory of children from the sensorimotor stage to the preoperational stage, and record how "image preservation-situational triggering-schema solidification" unfolds in real life.

Identify the natural frequency of occurrence, situational features, and subsequent effects of "non-agentic responses" (neglect, taking over, distortion) and "agentic responses" (seeing, confirming, returning).

See, under the premise of complete non-intervention, how a human being becomes human—how those children who are seen grow up, and how those children who are not seen grow up.

The position of the researcher:

The researcher is not an "observer" —because "observation" itself implies being present, and being present changes the behavior of the observed. The researcher is an interpreter of archives—facing historical records that have already occurred, cannot be altered, and are entirely unaffected by the research. This position ensures the purely "witnessing" nature of the study, and realizes the greatest possible respect for the natural unfolding of life.

(2) Longitudinal Tracking Study: Seeing "How a Human Being Becomes Human" in Natural Archives

Research design: By obtaining natural archives of the same family and the same child at different ages—for example, family videos from infancy to adolescence—the study traces the natural trajectory of children' s development. Researchers conduct no form of follow-up visit, interview, or testing; all analysis is based solely on existing archives.

Content of observation:

The natural evolution of caregivers' response patterns: In long-term archives, record whether caregivers' response patterns change. Are these changes related to the child' s developmental stage? How stable are the response patterns?

The natural development of children' s signal expression: From crying, reaching out, and grasping in the sensorimotor stage, to persistent "why" questions, sharing understanding, and animistic play in the preoperational stage—how do these signals of agency appear, evolve, and fade under natural conditions?

The natural process of image solidification: Through long-term archives, observe whether children' s behavioral patterns gradually become fixed when they face similar situations. For example, does a child who was once forcibly prohibited later display automated avoidance or anxiety responses in similar situations? How do these responses "grow" out of specific events?

Naturally occurring "returning" and "non-returning" : Record those naturally occurring moments of "returning" —the moments when a child is seen, confirmed, and returned to; and also record those moments of "non-returning" —the moments when a child' s signals are ignored, taken over, or distorted. How does the accumulation of these moments shape the child' s behavioral trajec

description?

Research ethics:

All archives must be natural records that already existed before the research began.

No follow-up, interview, or testing of any kind is to be conducted.

Do not contact the owners of the data to ask "what happened later" —that in itself would constitute an intervention.

Protect all identifiable information and ensure that the research findings cannot be traced back to specific individuals.

(3) Cross-cultural comparative research: the universality of mechanisms and the diversity of their manifestations

Research design: Through collaboration with families and institutions from different cultural backgrounds, obtain their existing natural archives—such as family videos and institutional surveillance recordings—and conduct cross-cultural comparative analysis.

Research questions:

Universality at the level of mechanisms: Across different cultures, can the core functions of "seeing-confirming-returning" all be observed? When these functions are absent, do children in all cultures exhibit similar patterns of developmental obstruction?

Diversity at the level of manifestation: How is "seeing" realized in different cultures? Is it through gaze-following and verbal response, or through bodily proximity and coordinated action? Is "confirmation" achieved through verbal praise and emotional resonance, or through caressing, embracing, and participation in rituals? Is "returning" carried out through direct questioning, or through taking half a step back and assigning responsibility?

Preservation of culturally specific images: Do the contents of the "images" preserved by children differ across cultures? Are children in individualistic cultures more likely to preserve images of "I accomplished it by myself" ? Are children in collectivist cultures more likely to preserve images of "I am within a relationship" ?

Research methods:

Obtain existing natural archives from each cultural background.

Use the same coding system, while allowing the coding system to "grow" different morphological descriptions in different cultures.

Compare commonalities at the level of mechanisms with differences at the level of manifestation.

Research ethics:

Respect each culture' s concepts of privacy and ethical norms.

Ensure that the methods of data acquisition comply with local laws and cultural customs.

Do not conduct any form of cross-cultural comparison of superiority or inferiority —difference does not mean superiority or inferiority.

(4) Cross-Species Comparative Research: Inferring Cognitive Stages from Natural Behavior The present framework provides an analytical tool for understanding the cognitive stages of different species in the natural world. Future comparative-cognition research can, on the basis of observing animals' natural behavior, infer the cognitive developmental stages at which different species may be situated.

Research method: By obtaining existing archives of animal-behavior studies, materials from nature documentaries, and long-term field-observation records, researchers can analyze animals' behavioral patterns under natural conditions.

Content of observation:

The existence of bodily schemas: Do animals exhibit fixed "if···then···" behavioral rules? Are these rules adjusted through experience? For example, the fixed action patterns of certain insects can be understood as the operation of bodily schemas.

Traces of image cognition: Do animals exhibit the capacity to preserve and reproduce experiential images? For example:

- When young birds are capable of flying independently, mother birds demonstrate and "force" their offspring to learn to fly—Is this behavior based on an image-based judgment of the "young bird' s ability" ? Can it be understood as an "autonomy-type response" of "encouraging independence within the range of ability" ?
- Do primates' social learning, tool use, and deceptive behaviors imply that they are able to preserve and enact images of social interaction?
- Are mammals' emotional responses—such as pets' responses to their owners' emotions—based on the reproduction of images of past interactions?
- Do migratory birds' route memory and food-storing animals' location memory involve the preservation and reproduction of images?

Research ethics:

Only existing observational records and natural archives are used; no animal experiments are conducted.

Animals' natural ways of life are respected, and their habitats and conditions of survival are not disturbed.

All observations must be conducted under natural conditions in which animals are completely unaffected by the research.

Theoretical significance:

Through cross-species comparison, a theoretical model of the natural ladder of cognitive development can be proposed:

Organisms possessing only bodily schemas: most lower animals, whose behavior is governed by fixed schemas and who lack the capacity to preserve and reproduce images.

Organisms with image-based cognition: higher mammals, birds, and the like, which are able to preserve and reproduce images of experience, but lack a symbolic system.

Organisms with symbolic cognition: human beings, who are able to transform images into symbols for transmission and reflection.

This ladder is a functional theoretical model, not a judgment of evolutionary rank. It merely suggests that different forms of cognitive organization may correspond to different strategies of survival adaptation. A mother bird' s "forcing flight" and human parents' "returning understanding" may have a certain isomorphism at the mechanistic level—they both encourage the child to complete something independently within the scope of the child' s abilities. The difference lies in the fact that human beings have the additional dimension of symbols.

(5) Embodied-Cognition Robot Simulation Research: Actively Constructing Attachment Patterns in the Sensorimotor Stage

Unlike the preceding types of research, robot simulation studies can carry out active experimental manipulation. This is an important path for verifying the core theoretical model of this article—because we can "manufacture" different response patterns and observe their influence on the robot' s "schema formation," without being constrained by the "non-intervention"limits in the ethics of human research.

Research design: Design an embodied robot with sensorimotor capacities to simulate the developmental process of a human infant in the sensorimotor stage. The robot possesses basic signal-sending abilities—such as "seeking help"through sounds or movements—and learning abilities, enabling it to adjust expectations according to feedback.

Experimental operations:

Autonomous-response group: When the robot sends a signal, the "caregiver" (an algorithm or a human) guides the robot to solve the problem on its own—for example, by placing the target object within the range that the robot can autonomously reach, and encouraging it to obtain satisfaction through its own efforts.

Substitutive-response group: When the robot sends a signal, the "caregiver" directly completes the task for the robot, and the robot' s own attempts at effort are bypassed.

Neglectful-response group: When the robot sends a signal, the "caregiver" gives no response at all, or responds in an extremely unstable and unpredictable manner.

Mixed-response group: Simulating the complex conditions of reality, different types of responses are given in different contexts.

Measurement indicators:

Agentic expectation: Whether, in subsequent tasks, the robot displays an active exploratory tendency of "I can complete it myself," a passive tendency of "waiting to be satisfied," or a withdrawn tendency of "giving up trying."

Schema consolidation: Whether the robot' s behavioral patterns gradually become fixed, forming embryonic "attachment types" similar to the "secure type," "anxious type," and "avoidant type."

Prediction-error response: When the robot' s expectations do not match reality, what is its response pattern? Does it show signals similar to "surprise" ? Can it update its schema through new learning?

Validation objectives:

Falsifiability: If, regardless of the response pattern, the robot is unable to form differentiated "attachment types," this would indicate that the core mechanism proposed in this paper may apply only to living organisms, or that other key factors in humans have not been captured—that is, the theory would be falsified with respect to attachment types at the sensorimotor stage.

Mechanism validation: If the robot, under different response patterns, does indeed exhibit differentiated "agentic expectations" and "schema consolidation," this would provide strong computational support for the present framework—showing that the mechanism by which "response patterns shape expectations" has cross-entity generality.

Research ethics:

Research on robots does not involve real humans or animals and entails no ethical risk.

However, it is necessary to ensure that the research findings are not misused to manipulate or control human behavior.

The research process should remain transparent, and algorithmic design should be open to review.

Theoretical significance:

Robot simulation research provides a unique path of validation: under fully controlled conditions, it can test the core propositions of the theoretical model of "subjectivity-response." If the simulation results are consistent with observations in natural human records, the two research paths corroborate each other, greatly strengthening the credibility of the theory. If they are inconsistent, this will prompt theoretical reflection: Is the robot lacking certain key elements, such as bodily sensation or image cognition, or does human development involve other, more complex mechanisms?

(6) A Sense of Loss of Control: An Integrative Perspective on Emotional Dynamics

The "subjectivity-response" model constructed in this paper primarily explains the formation pathway of insecure attachment at the level of interaction. If we attempt to start from the individual's subjective experience and review the key developmental cases discussed in the text, a common emotional thread can be identified: a "sense of loss of control" over relationships or over one's own actions. This paper proposes that this feeling may be a key emotional dynamic driving the formation of subsequent adaptive strategies, although it is difficult to infer directly from overt exploratory behavior in the way that a "sense of security" can be.

Case review: two potential origins of the sense of loss of control

By re-examining typical cases at different stages, it may be possible to propose two distinct origins of the sense of loss of control:

The first is **relational loss of control**. In the sensorimotor stage, when an infant's crying is met with neglect or erratic responses,

Its experience may go beyond simple frustration of need and contain a primordial relational loss of control—that is, "I cannot reliably influence the caregiver through my own actions." In the preoperational stage, when a child's exploration (such as touching a parent's belongings) is met with scolding, the experience may likewise be an escalated form of relational loss of control—that is, "My intention to understand the world instead brings danger to the relationship." The source of this sense of loss of control can be understood as lying primarily in the unpredictability of the other's responses.

The second is **competence-related loss of control**. In healthy interactive contexts—for example, when a caregiver places an object within an infant's reach to guide grasping—the sense of failure the infant experiences in attempting the action is closer to a form of competence-related loss of control: "My intention temporarily exceeds my bodily capacities." The object of this feeling is mainly the gap between task difficulty and one's own abilities.

The Hypothesis of the "Buffering" and "Transformation" Effects of the Secure Base

The divergent subsequent pathways of these two senses of loss of control provide an explanatory perspective for understanding healthy development and insecure development.

This article proposes that, within a secure relationship capable of providing "agency-responsive" care, the caregiver's accompaniment and support in the face of "competence-related loss of control" may play a "buffering" and "transformative" role. The experience internalized by the child is: "Frustration is bearable, and the relational background in which I stand is safe." This makes competence-related challenges less likely to generalize into relational threats.

Conversely, in an insecure relationship, if "competence-related loss of control" is met with negation, it may become confused and layered with experiences of relational loss of control. More importantly, if relational loss of control directly triggered by interaction is not resolved, it may directly constitute the basic expectation of the world within the attachment schema—namely, "Relationships are uncontrollable and dangerous." Subsequent anxiety or avoidance strategies can be understood as coping methods developed by the individual to defend against or avoid this intolerable sense of loss of control.

Theoretical Significance and Future Directions: An Integrative Concept Awaiting Verification

Exploring the "sense of loss of control" as an integrative concept is not intended to replace the "agency-responsive" model, but rather to supplement it with an explanatory dimension at the level of emotional dynamics. One of the core psychological effects of interactions in which "agency is not returned" is precisely that they induce in the individual some form of loss-of-control experience. All insecure attachment strategies can be viewed as different attempts to manage this experience.

It should be noted that, unlike "security," which can be studied indirectly through indicators such as exploratory behavior, the "sense of loss of control," as an intense yet possibly fleeting subjective state, presents significant chall—

challenges. Future research may proceed along the following paths:

First, **neuroscience-related research**. It may be explored whether, when individuals with insecure attachment face social setbacks or ambiguous signals, the neural circuits associated with expectancy violation and emotion regulation (such as circuits involving the anterior insula and the amygdala) exhibit distinctive activation patterns. This may provide clues to the neural correlates of the "sense of loss of control."

Second, **fine-grained process research**. Through microanalysis of minor ruptures in interaction within naturalistic contexts, combined with real-time emo-

tion coding, it may be possible to capture more closely the "moments of loss of control" and their subsequent effects.

Third, **clinical and narrative analysis**. In therapeutic settings, clients' descriptions and processing of experiences of "loss of control" can provide rich descriptive evidence for this concept at the phenomenological level.

In summary, in the discussion section this paper proposes the "sense of loss of control" as a possible integrative concept, intended to offer a coherent interpretation, at the level of subjective experience, of different cases of interactional failure from infancy to childhood. It helps link external patterns of interaction more closely with internal psychological strategies, and provides a theoretical point of entry—one that remains to be further tested—for connecting developmental observation with neuroscience and clinical practice.

(7) Inspirations from Research on Major Accidents and Trauma

One direction worth exploring is this: when people face major accidents or events (such as natural disasters, violent harm, or sudden loss), are their psychological responses isomorphic with the consequences of early "non-subjective responses"?

Theoretical hypothesis:

Major accidents undermine the individual's basic belief in the predictability of the world; this is similar to the schema of "the world is unpredictable" formed by infants in "neglectful responses."

After trauma, individuals often cannot understand "why this happened to me"; their capacity for mentalization is submerged by emotion and fails—this is precisely an extreme form of "understanding not being returned": there is no "other" able to provide symbolic connection for this unbearable image.

The traumatic scene is preserved as a high-intensity image and becomes a permanently sensitive situational trigger, automatically activating bodily responses (flashbacks, panic) when similar cues appear.

From this perspective, the essence of psychological trauma is "understanding that cannot be returned."The individual is thrown into an experience that cannot be symbolized, unable to find an "other" who can "see" and "confirm" this experience, and is therefore trapped at the level of images, unable to complete the transformation from image → symbol.

Research path:

By analyzing trauma survivors' records in natural states (such as diaries, social media, and follow-up interviews),

Observe the process by which its "image becomes fixed."

Study the relationship between different types of post-traumatic support—whether someone "sees" and "confirms" the person's experience—and trajectories of recovery.

Explore the reparative mechanism of the "return loop" in trauma therapy—helping clients transform traumatic images into narratable stories, and, before a safe other, obtain the experience of "being seen."

Ethical warning:

Such research must be conducted with extreme caution, so as to avoid causing secondary harm to survivors. All analysis should be based on materials that have already been made public or on materials obtained with fully informed consent; researchers should always approach traumatic experience with respect.

(8) Advancing the understanding of the human being itself: returning from "pathological labels" to "survival strategies"

In the final analysis, the fundamental aim of the framework proposed in this paper is to advance psychology's understanding of "how a human being becomes human." The core of this understanding is to reinterpret every psychological behavior that appears "abnormal" as a strategy of survival adaptation formed under specific conditions.

Research pathways for advancing this understanding:

Archival research: By analyzing a large number of natural archives, show how "non-subjective responses" and "subjective responses" leave traces in the developmental trajectories of different individuals. Let the data speak for themselves, revealing the natural sources of individual differences.

Phenomenological description: In presenting research findings, give priority to the phenomena themselves rather than hastily applying theoretical labels. Let readers "see" those overlooked moments, attempts that were taken over by others, and grievances that came to be seen, thereby understanding the real process by which "a human being becomes human."

Case presentation: On the premise of protecting privacy, present the natural developmental trajectories of individuals—not as "cases," but as "life stories." Let readers sense the survival wisdom behind every behavioral pattern.

The ultimate significance of understanding:

This transformation in understanding is not meant to abolish diagnosis or deny pathology, but rather to preserve, beyond diagnosis, a reverence for the individual's history of survival. When researchers "see" the developmental trajectory of an avoidant individual—those signals that were ignored, those efforts that proved ineffective, those moments of eventual giving up—they will no longer simplify it with labels such as "indifference." Researchers will see: this is not a defect; it is wisdom after trauma.

(9) A direction worth exploring: the potential connection between image cognition and expressive therapy

The image-cognition framework proposed in this paper (see 4.2) may provide a way to understand certain forms of psychotherapy.

one perspective.

Expressive therapeutic forms such as sandplay therapy, drawing therapy, and scenario-enactment therapy are widely used in clinical practice. A question worth considering is: Is the effectiveness of these therapeutic forms related to their action upon the underlying system of "image cognition"?

As argued above, the predicament of traumatic experience lies in the fact that it is often solidified in the form of images—unbearable events are preserved as high-intensity, unsymbolized images, automatically activated in similar situations, while the person concerned is unable to "narrate" them (see 4.2.4 and 5.3.4). The common feature of expressive therapies is precisely that they allow clients to externalize inner images into perceptible forms: scenes in the sand tray, drawings on paper, and actions in enactment. Such externalization gives physical existence to images that were originally invisible, making them objects that therapist and client can "see together."

This observation suggests a possibility: the effective mechanism of expressive therapies may lie in the fact that they provide solidified traumatic images with a new opportunity to be "seen-confirmed," thereby potentially initiating the process by which images are transformed into symbols. But this is only an initial direction for thought.

The following questions may be worth exploring in subsequent research:

Do differences among different types of expressive therapy (sandplay/drawing/enactment) in their modes of "image externalization" affect the results of image transformation?

Among therapists' ways of responding to clients' works, which are more conducive to the integration of images? Is there also an interactive structure analogous to "seeing-confirming-returning"?

Can the framework of image cognition provide a unified theoretical explanation for "why expressive therapies are effective"?

These questions exceed the scope of the present article' s argument. They are proposed only as a line of thought extended from the framework of this article, for further exploration by interested scholars.

(10) Boundaries and Reflections of the Theory Itself

Every theory has its scope of applicability, and the framework of this article is no exception. Future research needs to continually reflect upon and define these boundaries:

Boundary of developmental stages: This article is mainly based on observations from infancy to early adulthood, and offers insufficient discussion of the mechanisms of schema change in middle age and old age. Future natural-archive research could be extended to the entire life course.

Boundary of mental health: This article focuses primarily on the normal and pathological domains of attachment and personality formation; with regard to

The applicability of this framework to severe mental disorders (such as schizophrenia and bipolar disorder) requires dedicated examination. Such disorders may involve more complex neurobiological factors and cannot be addressed by simply applying the present framework.

The boundary of species comparison: Cross-species comparison is only a functional theoretical model and cannot be used for direct analogy. The language and symbolic systems unique to human beings give the mechanism of "return" its particular specificity. The "autonomous responses" of other species may be functionally similar, but this does not mean that the underlying mechanisms are the same.

The boundary of cultural interpretation: The framework proposed in this paper reveals a general mechanism, but it cannot exhaust the concrete manifestations found in all cultures. Any cross-cultural application must respect the interpretive system of the local culture itself and avoid using this framework to "colonize" other cultures' understandings of the "human."

The boundary of robot simulation: A robot' s "attachment type" is only a functional analogy and does not involve emotion or existential meaning. Conclusions drawn from simulation studies should be extended to human beings with caution.

6.6 Conclusion: From "Being Seen" to "Seeing Others"

Finally, the framework of this paper points to a deeper proposition: how we treat others arises from how we ourselves were once treated.

Only those who have been seen can see others; only those whose understanding has been returned can return understanding; only those who have grown up in safety can provide safety for others. This is precisely the intergenerational transmission mechanism of "subjective response" —it is not inherited genetically, but is remembered by the body in each interaction of "seeing-confirming-returning," and is then reactivated in future encounters with others.

The development of psychology, cognitive science, artificial intelligence, education, parenting, and other fields ultimately serves the same goal: to allow more people, at an earlier time, to experience being seen. For only in being seen can a person become human; and only after becoming human can one see others.

This is the deepest significance of the theoretical framework proposed in this paper—it is not only an academic theoretical model, but also an ethical commitment concerning "how to treat persons." The fundamental mission of future research, therefore, is to witness and understand this process of "becoming human" on the premise of fully respecting the natural unfolding of life. For research on robots, the corresponding task is to explore, within actively constructed simulations, another possible path of "becoming intelligent." These two paths jointly serve the same ultimate questions: What is a human being? How does a human being become human? And how can we enable human beings to become human in a better way?

Conclusion: Subjectivity Response—the Underlying Logic of Individual Attachment Formation and Human Psychological Development

Beginning from a critical examination of the core premises of attachment theory, this article has proposed and demonstrated a theoretical model of subjectivity response. We asked a fundamental question: in most ordinary families, can infants truly establish the awareness that "I depend on my parents for survival" through embodied experience? By introducing research on embodied cognition and Piaget's sensorimotor stage, we revealed that the awareness of survival dependence can be constructed only in extreme situations involving punitive behavior or threatening expression; in the overwhelming majority of everyday contexts, the infant's experience is that "the world is operating as usual," not that "parents are providing services." This finding compels us to search for a more universal proximate mechanism for the formation of attachment.

We argue that this mechanism is precisely "subjectivity response"—the caregiver's seeing, confirming, and returning of the child's subjectivity as it emerges in development (as agent and understander). This process spans two key developmental stages: at the sensorimotor stage, modes of responding to primitive signals such as "crying" (autonomous / substitutive / neglectful) shape the infant's experience of agency and become consolidated into different sensorimotor schemas; at the preoperational stage, when the child begins to ask "why" and to share understanding, whether the parents return this understanding (seeing, confirming, and returning to the child the responsibility for understanding) determines whether the child can be released from the position of "understander" and return to the dependent state of "being understood," thereby preventing understanding from becoming alienated into defense.

The core contribution of this theoretical model lies in opening three black boxes in attachment theory:

First, the mechanization of the internal working model. We have transformed Bowlby's metaphorical concept into an operable process: the internal

working model is a sensorimotor schema remembered by the body; its formation depends on the mode of response to attachment signals, its updating depends on the repair of "surprise" (prediction error), and its consolidation depends on attachment images' preservation and contextual triggering.

Second, the concretization of sensitive responsiveness. We have decomposed Ainsworth' s general concept into precise operations by stage: at the sensorimotor stage, sensitive responsiveness means satisfying needs in a way that supports autonomy; at the preoperational stage, sensitive responsiveness means seeing, confirming, and returning understanding itself.

Third, the developmental elucidation of the pathways through which insecure attachment forms. Taking coercive prohibition events as prototypical cases, we have revealed how anxious and avoidant attachment form under the differentiating condition of "whether negotiation is effective," and have elucidated the complete mechanism of image preservation, contextual triggering, and schema consolidation.

More importantly, this theoretical model integrates attachment theory, cognitive development theory, mentalization theory, and clinical psychology under the same underlying logic. We have demonstrated that the essence of mentalization is the movement from image cognition to

the transcendence of symbolic labels depends, in its occurrence, on the return mechanism within subjectivity response; in a long-term relationship of one-way understanding, secure individuals lose their sense of security because understanding is not returned to them. When the sense of security falls below a critical threshold, healthy mentalizing shuts down or becomes distorted, and the individual retreats into a state of image-based cognition, forming situational avoidance or situational anxiety—this mechanism is homologous with the formation of insecure attachment in childhood, and has the same structure as the therapist' s countertransference.

This paper has no intention of overturning attachment theory. Quite the contrary: we inherit and deepen its core insight—the key role of parental response. We merely detach this insight from the fragile foundation of "survival and safety" and place it within an interpretive framework that is more universal and closer to the infant' s real experience. This revision makes the explanatory edifice of attachment theory stand more firmly and cover more broadly: it not only explains the formation of attachment in childhood, but also explains the "insecure turn" of secure individuals; it applies not only to parent-child relationships, but also extends to adult intimate relationships and professional therapeutic relationships; it not only reveals the path of healthy development, but also clarifies the mechanism of pathological fixation.

At the same time, this framework opens dialogue and future research across multiple fields: developmental psychology may use it to re-understand the continuity of cognitive development; clinical psychology may use it to relocate the core mechanism of therapy (repairing the cycle of return); cognitive science

may use it to embody and socialize predictive-processing theory; research on artificial intelligence may use it to explore new pathways by which robots can become "person-like" —testing the universality of "response shaping agency" by simulating attachment patterns at the sensorimotor stage.

Ultimately, the theoretical model of subjectivity response points to a fundamental ethical commitment: **how we treat others derives from how we ourselves were once treated.** Only those who have been seen can see others; only those whose understanding has been returned can return understanding; only those who have grown up in safety can provide safety for others. The development of psychology, and even of the human sciences as a whole, is ultimately for the same goal: to allow more people, at an earlier time, to obtain the experience of being seen. For only in being seen can a person become a person; and only after becoming a person can one see others.

This is the deepest conviction that we seek to convey through this theoretical system.

Author Contribution Statement:

Yin Zaixi: Proposed the research ideas, constructed the theoretical framework, and drafted and revised the full manuscript.

References:

[1] AINSWORTH M. D. S., BLEHAR M. C., WATERS E., & WALL S. *Patterns of attachment: A psychological study of the strange situation* [M]. Hillsdale: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1978.

[2] ALEXANDER F., & FRENCH T. M. *Psychoanalytic therapy: Principles and application* [M]. New York: Ronald Press, 1946.

[3] BATEMAN A., & FONAGY P. *Psychotherapy for borderline personality disorder: Mentalization-based treatment* [M]. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.

[4] BELSKY J., & PLUESS M. Beyond diathesis stress: Differential susceptibility to environmental influences [J]. *Psychological Bulletin*, 2009, 135(6): 885–908.

[5] BOWLBY J. *Attachment and loss: Vol. 1. Attachment* [M]. New York: Basic Books, 1969.

[6] BOWLBY J. *Attachment and loss: Vol. 2. Separation: Anxiety and anger* [M]. New York: Basic Books, 1973.

[7] BOWLBY J. *Attachment and Loss: Vol. 3. Loss: Sadness and Depression*[M]. New York: Basic Books, 1980. (BOWLBY J. Attachment and loss: Vol. 3. Loss: Sadness and depression[M]. New York: Basic Books, 1980.)

[8] ELLIS B. J., BOYCE W. T., BELSKY J., BAKERMANS-KRANENBURG M. J., & VAN IJZENDOORN M. H. Differential susceptibility to the environment: An evolutionary–neurodevelopmental theory[J]. *Development and Psychopathology*, 2011, 23(1): 7–28. (ELLIS B. J., BOYCE W. T., BELSKY J., BAKERMANS-KRANENBURG M. J., & VAN IJZENDOORN M. H. Differential susceptibility to the environment: An evolutionary–neurodevelopmental theory[J]. Development and Psychopathology, 2011, 23(1): 7–28.)

[9] FEARON R. M. P., VAN IJZENDOORN M. H., FONAGY P., BAKERMANS-KRANENBURG M. J., SCHUENGEL C., & BOKHORST C. L. In search of shared and nonshared environmental factors in security of attachment: A behavior-genetic study of the association between sensitivity and attachment security[J]. *Developmental Psychology*, 2006, 42(6): 1026–1040. (FEARON R. M. P., VAN IJZENDOORN M. H., FONAGY P., BAKERMANS-KRANENBURG M. J., SCHUENGEL C., & BOKHORST C. L. In search of shared and nonshared environmental factors in security of attachment: A behavior-genetic study of the association between sensitivity and attachment security[J]. Developmental Psychology, 2006, 42(6): 1026–1040.)

[10] FIVUSH R., & NELSON K. Culture and language in the emergence of autobiographical memory[J]. *Psychological Science*, 2004, 15(9): 573–577. (FIVUSH R., & NELSON K. Culture and language in the emergence of autobiographical memory[J]. Psychological Science, 2004, 15(9): 573–577.)

[11] FONAGY P., GERGELY G., JURIST E. L., & TARGET M. *Affect Regulation, Mentalization, and the Development of the Self*[M]. New York: Other Press, 2002. (FONAGY P., GERGELY G., JURIST E. L., & TARGET M. Affect regulation, mentalization, and the development of the self[M]. New York: Other Press, 2002.)

[12] FREUD A. *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defence*[M]. New York: International Universities Press, 1936. (FREUD A. The ego and the mechanisms of defence[M]. New York: International Universities Press, 1936.)

[13] Freud S. Future Prospects of Psychoanalytic Therapy [M] // Strachey J. (Ed. & Trans.). *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (Vol. 11). London: Hogarth Press, 1910: 139–151. (FREUD S. The future prospects of psycho-analytic therapy[M]// STRACHEY J. (Ed. & Trans.). The standard edition of the complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud (Vol. 11). London: Hogarth Press, 1910: 139–151.)

[14] Harlow H. F. The Nature of Love [J]. *American Psychologist*, 1958, 13(12): 673–685. (HARLOW H. F. The nature of love[J]. American Psychologist, 1958, 13(12): 673–685.)

[15] Heider F. *The Psychology of Interpersonal Relations* [M]. New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1958. (HEIDER F. The psychology of interpersonal relations[M]. New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1958.)

[16] Karmiloff-Smith A. *Beyond Modularity: A Developmental Perspective on Cognitive Science* [M]. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992. (KARMILOFF-SMITH A. Beyond modularity: A developmental perspective on cognitive science[M]. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992.)

[17] Kaufman I. C., Rosenblum L. A. The Reaction to Separation in Infant Monkeys: Anaclitic Depression and Conservation-Withdrawal [J]. *Psychosomatic Medicine*, 1967, 29(6): 648-675. (KAUFMAN I. C., & ROSENBLUM L. A. The reaction to separation in infant monkeys: Anaclitic depression and conservation-withdrawal[J]. Psychosomatic Medicine, 1967, 29(6): 648-675.)

[18] Lorenz K. Companionship in the Avian Environment [J]. *Journal of Ornithology*, 1935, 83: 137-213. (LORENZ K. Der Kumpan in der Umwelt des Vogels. [The companion in the bird' s world][J]. Journal für Ornithologie, 1935, 83: 137-213.)

[19] Main M., Solomon J. Discovery of an Insecure-Disorganized/Disoriented Attachment Pattern [M] // Brazelton T. B., Yogman M. W. (Eds.). *Affective Development in Infancy*. Norwood: Ablex Publishing, 1986: 95-124. (MAIN M., & SOLOMON J. Discovery of an insecure-disorganized/disoriented attachment pattern[M]// BRAZELTON T. B., & YOGMAN M. W. (Eds.). Affective development in infancy. Norwood: Ablex Publishing, 1986: 95-124.)

[20] Merleau-Ponty M. *Phenomenology of Perception* [M]. Paris: Gallimard, 1945. (English translation:

Phenomenology of Perception (SMITH C., Trans.). London: Routledge, 1962.)

(MERLEAU-PONTY M. *Phénoménologie de la perception*[M]. Paris: Gallimard, 1945. (English translation: *Phenomenology of perception* (SMITH C., Trans.). London: Routledge, 1962.))

[21] ORANGE D. M., ATWOOD G. E., & STOLOROW R. D. *Working Intersubjectively: Contextualism in Psychoanalytic Practice*[M]. Hillsdale: Analytic Press, 1997. (ORANGE D. M., ATWOOD G. E., & STOLOROW R. D. *Working intersubjectively: Contextualism in psychoanalytic practice*[M]. Hillsdale: Analytic Press, 1997.)

[22] PIAGET J. *The Origins of Intelligence in Children* (COOK M., Trans.)[M]. New York: International Universities Press, 1952. (Original work published in 1936). (PIAGET J. *The origins of intelligence in children* (COOK M., Trans.)[M]. New York: International Universities Press, 1952. (Original work published 1936).)

[23] PIAGET J. *Children' s Play, Dreams, and Imitation* (GATTEGNO C., & HODGSON F. M., Trans.)[M]. New York: W. W. Norton Company, 1962. (Original work published in 1945). (PIAGET J. *Play, dreams and imitation in childhood* (GATTEGNO C., & HODGSON F. M., Trans.)[M]. New York: W. W. Norton, 1962. (Original work published 1945).)

[24] PIAGET J., & INHELDER B. *Mental Imagery in the Child: A Study of the Development of Imaginal Representation* (CHILTON P. A., Trans.)[M]. New York: Basic Books, 1971. (Original work published in 1966). (PIAGET J., & INHELDER B. *Mental imagery in the child: A study of the development of imaginal representation* (CHILTON P. A., Trans.)[M]. New York: Basic Books, 1971. (Original work published 1966).)

[25] RENIK O. Analytic interaction: Conceptualizing technique in light of the analyst's irreducible subjectivity[J]. *Psychoanalytic Quarterly*, 1993, 62(4): 553-571. (RENIK O. Analytic interaction: Conceptualizing technique in light of the analyst's irreducible subjectivity[J]. *Psychoanalytic Quarterly*, 1993, 62(4): 553-571.)

[26] SELIGMAN M. E. P., & MAIER S. F. Failure to escape traumatic shock[J]. *Journal of Experimental Psychology*, 1967, 74(1): 1-9. (SELIGMAN M. E. P., & MAIER S. F. Failure to escape traumatic shock[J]. *Journal of Experimental Psychology*, 1967, 74(1): 1-9.)

[27] THELEN E., SMITH L. B. *A Dynamic Systems Approach to the Development of Cognition and Action*[M]. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994. (THELEN E., & SMITH L. B. *A dynamic systems approach to the development of cognition and action*[M]. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994.)

[28] VARELA F. J., THOMPSON E., ROSCH E. *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience*[M]. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991. (VARELA F. J., THOMPSON E., & ROSCH E. *The embodied mind: Cognitive science and human experience*[M]. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991.)

[29] WEINER B. *Achievement Motivation and Attribution Theory*[M]. Morristown: General Learning Press, 1974. (WEINER B. *Achievement motivation and attribution theory*[M]. Morristown: General Learning Press, 1974.)

[30] WEINER B. *An Attributional Theory of Motivation and Emotion*[M]. New York: Springer-Verlag, 1986. (WEINER B. *An attributional theory of motivation and emotion*[M]. New York: Springer-Verlag, 1986.)

[31] CRICK N. R., DODGE K. A. A review and reformulation of social information-processing mechanisms in children' s social adjustment[J]. *Psychological Bulletin*, 1994, 115(1): 74-101. (CRICK N. R., & DODGE K. A. A review and reformulation of social information-processing mechanisms in children' s social adjustment[J]. *Psychological Bulletin*, 1994, 115(1): 74-101.)

Note: Figure translations are in progress. See original paper for figures.