

Attachment Theory

Attachment theory and research have continued to gain popularity and empirical support since the pioneering work of Bowlby, Ainsworth and the Robertsons. I think the following short paper (written in 2002) is still a useful starting point. Research had already demonstrated that what Bowlby observed for the mother-child bond applied to other primary care giver-child attachment, but for simplicity of style I used the term "he" to refer to the child and the term "mother" and the pronoun "she" for the attachment figure.

John Bowlby's formulation of attachment theory contested the established understandings of human behaviour that had been put forward by learning theorists and by psychoanalytical schools. It was, unusually at the time for a psychodynamic approach, based on evidence and repeatable observations.

Bowlby's thinking was greatly influenced by the theory of evolution and the adaptive nature of animal and human behaviour to the environment put forward by Charles Darwin, and the work of the ethnologist, Konrad Lorenz. Lorenz demonstrated that young birds and mammals learn the characteristics of a moving object soon after birth and then follow that object around. Since the first moving object encountered by the new born is usually the mother this imprinting has obvious survival benefits. He demonstrated that this imprinting happened during a brief initial period, termed the critical period.

Bowlby argued that the mother-child bond is not based on operant conditioning, as was the widely held view at the time, but on instinct; infants bond to their mothers because they are innately programmed to do so from birth, in much the same way as the young of other species were programmed to imprint on their mothers. Although learning plays an important role in the process, it proceeds on the basis of instinct. The mother-child attachment bond is a direct expression of the genetic heritage of our species.

By concentrating on behaviours that were observable and comparable to other species, he identified readily apparent features of every child's developing repertoire of behaviours; bond formation, separation protests, stranger anxiety and exploratory activities. He demonstrated that infants are powerfully motivated to seek physical contact with their mothers and not to relinquish that contact once it has been obtained. The purpose of this fundamental behaviour is simple: survival.

The satisfaction of this primary need to be cuddled forms the foundation of the child's basic trust. When we are held we experience security, protection and comfort. This is a need that persists into adult life.

The child's physical orientation to his mother is soon augmented by sight and sound. Within hours of birth, babies begin to single out the human voice, especially the higher pitched female voice, from other sounds in the environment. Similarly, their visual apparatus appears to be programmed to respond to human faces. The most effective way of quietening a new-born infant is combining the human face and voice with the physical experience of being rocked and held.

A young infant has two important social assets, his innate ability to cry and to smile. Crying corresponds to the "lost call" of young mammals and releases retrieval behaviours in parents. Smiling is at first indiscriminate, but by approximately four weeks of age, the infant starts to recognize his mother as a person in her own right. The time he spends gazing and smiling at her has a profound impact on his mother's emotional state and contributes to a complex behavioural chain of mutual responsiveness through which each individual mother and child work out their own variation on the ancient, biological theme of mother-infant bonding. This process leaves the securely attached child with the experience that life, people and society can be relied upon and that they are worthy of trust and basic collaboration. Gradually, the child becomes capable of moving around and uses his mother as a secure base from which to explore the world.

The primal strength of this mother-child bond is vividly illustrated by the loud protests and dreadful despair seen when a young animal or child is forcibly separated from his mother. Bowlby established that the extent of suffering and damage caused by separation is broadly related to the duration. A brief separation is bad enough, but protracted periods of separation can be quite devastating. He collaborated with James and Joyce Robertson to film the experiences of children isolated in hospital (the practice at the time was for long stays in hospital and restricted visiting). Bowlby showed three distinct phases that followed this enforced separation; protest, despair and detachment.

Mary Ainsworth furthered our understanding of attachment by her pioneering work using the 'strange situation' experiment. The 'strange situation' is a playroom with a one-way mirror through which observations can be made. The subjects of the experiment are a mother and her one-year-old daughter who enter the room with an unknown experimenter. After enough time to settle the child and for him to begin playing with the toys the mother leaves the room and the child is left with the stranger. After three minutes, the mother returns and is reunited with the child. Then both mother and experimenter leave the room and the child is left alone for three minutes after which the mother and child are reunited. Observations of the child's behaviour patterns at each separation yield a measure of the strength and security of the child's attachment to his mother.

Ainsworth found three contrasting patterns of attachment. The most frequently found reaction to this situation is for children to cry during the separation but then to be easily soothed upon reunion, the children actively sought and maintained proximity to their mothers, and any distress was clearly related to their mothers' absence. The children also preferred their mothers to the stranger. Ainsworth classified this as a *secure* attachment pattern.

Some infants shunned contact with their mother on reunion, either ignoring her when she returned to the room or mingling welcome with other responses such as turning away, averting their gaze and moving past her. The stranger and the mother are treated in similar ways. The children are also inhibited in their play. - This is described as an insecure attachment of the 'anxious-avoidant' type.

A third pattern of response was typified by infants who were very upset when their mother left the room but were not easily comforted on her return. They resisted contact, but combined this with some proximity seeking. They showed anger towards their mother and gave the impression of being ambivalent about

reunion after separation. They also resisted comfort from the stranger. This is described as another insecure attachment of the type 'anxious-ambivalent'.

Reviewing Ainsworth's original data, Main and Solomon (1990) added a further type of insecure attachment pattern. It is most commonly seen in families where there is parent pathology, child abuse or high social risk. Here the child is dazed, confused or apprehensive, and shows no coherent system for dealing with separation and reunion, suggesting fear or confusion about the relationship. This is termed 'disorganized' attachment pattern.

Before conducting the 'strange situation' experiment, Ainsworth and her team visited the mothers and their infants in their own homes over the babies' first year. They found a high correlation between the experimental results and the quality of the mother-child relationships they had observed. Mothers of the securely attached children were essentially responsive to their babies. Mothers of the anxious-avoidant group were unresponsive; mothers of the anxious-ambivalent group were inconsistently responsive. Each of these types can therefore be understood as a strategy that the child has adopted in relation to his mother's behaviour.

Ainsworth was also able to demonstrate that early attachment patterns would impact on the child's future life. Children adjudged to be securely attached at one year will have a longer attention span, be more skilful at handling conflict with their peers, and be more confident and resilient than children who were insecurely attached. This supports Bowlby's view that the child who has become securely attached to a mother who is responsive to his needs builds up an 'internal working model' of himself as being worthy of receiving and giving love. In contrast, the anxious-avoidant child will form an internal working model of himself as being unworthy of love, who must conceal his anger and despair at his mother's rejection or risk driving her away altogether. The anxious-ambivalent child's internal working model is also of an unlovable self, but he conceives his unpredictable mother as needing to be coerced into granting affection. Bowlby wrote that "human infants...are programmed to develop in a socially co-operative way; whether they do so or not turns in high degree on how they are treated" (1988, p.9).

Relationship patterns established in the early years of life powerfully influence the child's self-concept and subsequent behaviour as well as his capacity for self-reflection. Jeremy Holmes draws attention to the ability to give a coherent narrative of past relationships as an index of secure attachment. People with a history of insecure attachment experience far greater difficulty in narrating their past. This suggests an important task of therapeutic working is to help piece together a coherent account of the child's emotional history. By collaboratively working out the details of a child's history a narrative begins to emerge, and "out of this narrative comes meaning...the 'broken line' of insecure attachment is replaced by a sense of continuity."

Bowlby believed that the human psyche is strongly inclined towards self-healing. He felt that, because attachment is indispensable to psychic well-being, the quality of the relationship (the therapeutic alliance) is critical for success rather than an obsessional focus on therapies, symptoms and cures. Feeling safe and secure in a relationship allows for the exploration of problems and the discovery of methods for overcoming them. Once a secure base has been found, by the providing of a secure, reliable and consistent source of support and

understanding, attachment behaviour is switched off and exploratory behaviour begins. Then the insecurely attached child can begin to revise his internal working model of himself and improve the quality of his relationships.

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