

Chapter 9

The Legacy of John Bowlby's Attachment Theory

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Introduction

This chapter discusses the contribution of John Bowlby's more than 50 years of thinking about attachments, separation, relationships and emotional stability. After a brief biography, the chapter considers his well-known, and sometimes controversial, 'Attachment theory' alongside the work of his collaborators at the time, including James Robertson and Mary Ainsworth. A key focus is attachment theory in relation to children in their home and early years environments, and how understanding this theory is important for early years practitioners to appreciate the lived experiences of children in out of home contexts. The chapter concludes with a consideration of the place of love and loving relationships in contemporary professional practice and the implications of 'Modern Attachment Theory' for early years and childcare practitioners working globally.

John Bowlby [1907-1990]: A brief biography

Bowlby (1907–1990) was the son of Sir Anthony Bowlby, a London surgeon. After serving briefly as a naval cadet, he read natural sciences and psychology at the University of Cambridge. Bowlby worked for a time in a school for boys with psychiatric problems, then trained as a doctor and child psychiatrist, working during the Second World War as a psychiatrist for the War Office Selection Board. After the war, Bowlby was Deputy Director of the Tavistock Clinic in London, a world-renowned centre for child psychiatry and psychotherapy (*For further detail see [King & Rayner 1993](#)*).

It was soon after he graduated from Cambridge in 1928 that Bowlby began to study separation and anxiety, building on observations of two young boys in a remedial home where he was working (Bretherton 1992; and Cassidy, 2008). From these observations Bowlby developed what is now known as 'Attachment theory'. Bowlby disagreed with the philosophies of his former supervisor Melanie Klein, and aligned his ideas more strongly with those of Sigmund Freud, claiming that psychoanalysis must be rooted in children's

relationships within their family as well as being supported by solid scientific research (Alsop-Shields and Mohay, 2001) (see Chapter 8).

What was the original ‘Attachment Theory’?

Bowlby’s work should be seen in the context of a much broader tradition of interest in infant-caregiver relationships. Bowlby’s notion of attachment was significantly prompted by the findings of his early studies in 1944 which had investigated the behaviour of 44 children aged from five to 16 years who had been caught stealing and were referred to the Tavistock clinic for psychological assessment. Bowlby’s conclusions about the causes of their behaviour were highly criticised because the methods he used were not considered to be rigorous, which he conceded to be the case (Bowlby, 1944a, 1944b). Nevertheless, his early ideas provided an important basis for the later work

Influence and collaboration

James Robertson was a social worker, and later a psychoanalyst. After the war, he became interested in Bowlby’s work and, worked as his research assistant at the Tavistock Clinic focusing on the behaviour of children separated from their mothers (Alsop-Shields and Mohay, 2001). Bowlby and Robertson concluded that the two boys Bowlby had studied - as well as some distressed 2 year olds in hospital being studied by Robertson - suffered anxiety as a result of being separated from their mothers for long periods. Bowlby and Robertson similarly concluded that young children form intense relationships with their mothers that are different from the relationships formed with other adults (such as nurses). Bowlby began to develop his theory that when infants are separated from their mothers there is a detrimental effect on the mother-child relationship which in turn has an irretrievable, negative effect on the child’s ability to function as an emotionally stable human being.

Bowlby developed the notion that the mother-child relationship (‘monotropy’) was crucial to the child’s ability to make what he identified as a ‘secure attachment’. Early in his career, Bowlby had been interested in the work of ethologist, Lorenz who in 1935 published his study of the attachment behaviour of geese and the notion of ‘imprinting’ of the parent upon the young goslings. Lorenz’s work (and other animal studies) led Bowlby to claim that human infants seek comfort from those who are most immediately available to them and are able to meet their emotional needs; he proposed that the mother should perform this role because she was innately drawn to the infant. Of course, viewed through the lens of the 21st

Century and changed capacity to work with children to understand and theories about their development, it now seems quite absurd that a theory of child development should be developed by drawing on studies of animals and children who were sick and had learning difficulties. This strong criticism of Bowlby's work must be acknowledged and I will return to it later.

Bowlby began to publish his controversial ideas in a range of papers; the first 'The Nature of the Child's Tie to his Mother' (1958) was the 'first basic blueprint of attachment theory' (Bretherton 1992, p.762). Bowlby went on to publish three volumes on attachment theory (1969, 1973, 1980) the later ones seeking to correct what he viewed as misinterpretations of his earlier writings; clearly in the 1980s many women – and the feminist movement as a whole – saw his work as fuelling the policy argument (and many personal views) that women should remain at home with their children until they attended school around 5 or 6 years of age.

Mary Salter (later Ainsworth) studied at the University of Toronto where she first became interested in Blatz's (1940) 'security theory' (Bretherton 1992, p.760). After marrying, Ainsworth moved to England and worked with Bowlby at the Tavistock clinic. She later studied the sensitivity of the interaction between the mother and child in Uganda (1963) and Baltimore (1967), work which appears to have had a strong influence on Bowlby's thinking. Bretherton (1992) summarises Ainsworth's contribution thus:

Three infant attachment patterns were observed: securely attached infants cried little and seemed content to explore in the presence of mother; insecurely attached infants cried frequently, even when held by their mothers, and explored little; and not yet attached infants manifested no differential behavior to the mother. It turned out that secure attachment was significantly correlated with maternal sensitivity. Babies of sensitive mothers tended to be securely attached, whereas babies of less sensitive mothers were more likely to be classified as insecure. Mothers' enjoyment of breast-feeding also correlated with infant security. (Bretherton 1992:764).

In a later study Ainsworth and Bell (1970) used observations of aspects of attachment interactions to develop a tool - the 'strange situation' - designed to assess children's reaction to being left in the company of strangers. In the 'strange situation' tests Ainsworth and Bell (1970) elaborated on Bowlby's ideas, and are significant in how they determined whether a child displayed closely attached behaviour patterns with their mothers. Bretherton (1992) suggests that findings from the 'strange situation' studies drew similar conclusions to the

earlier work of Bowlby, Robertson and Rosenbluth (1952), which further strengthened Bowlby's claims about the significance of the mother-child bond.

Bowlby believed that children's behaviour is altered by the conditions of both the environment (i.e. how the child perceives his/her safety in the face of threat from danger) and the temperament of the child (i.e. whether s/he is hungry or in pain), (see Cassidy 2008). The point here is that the child's level of stress is aroused (or reduced) by how the adult (for Bowlby this is the mother) reacts to the child's demands for attention. As Bowlby put it, demand for attention manifests itself when the infant is 'strongly disposed to seek proximity to and contact with that individual ... especially in certain specified conditions' (Bowlby, 1982, p. 669). Kobak and Madson (2008) qualified this:

Bowlby sought to reserve the term 'fear' for situations that alarm a child as a result of the presence of frightening stimuli, and the term 'anxiety' for situations in which an attachment figure or trusted companion is absent. This distinction clarifies the situation faced by the children Bowlby and Robertson, observed in the residential nurseries and hospitals. Not only were the children *alarmed* at being placed in unfamiliar surroundings and cared for by unfamiliar adults; they were also *anxious* at not being able to gain access to their mothers. (p.28. italics my emphasis).

Bowlby insisted that the availability of the adult must be reliable and consistent for the child to feel safe and secure. We can perhaps conclude that most important, in all of this, is that a young child knows that a significant adult returns when the child needs her/him. Children with secure human attachments will call upon their internal working model to decide that their mother will return and anticipating her arrival. Indeed as Lamb (2007:2) contends 'a child with secure attachment is able to rely on the parent or parents as a source of comfort and safety in times of upset and stress.' An infant's need for emotional security as a prerequisite for learning is significant (Gopnik et al, 1999). Parents and professionals need to understand infants' 'internal working models' in order to provide the conditions for infants to feel safe, secure, loved and predisposed to explore.

Criticisms of Bowlby's Attachment Theory

Bowlby's critics have strongly refuted his claims about the centrality of the mother's role. A key criticism of Bowlby's theory was that his (and Robertson's) work focussed on children who were already suffering other difficulties (learning difficulties and illness) and were apart from their mother. They did not, it appears, study children who spent most of their time with their mothers and how they responded when left with other caring adults. Michael Rutter

(1972) disputed Bowlby's notion of disruption and maternal deprivation, arguing instead that the adult's ability to be emotionally and physically available to the infant mattered more to the child's ability to function emotionally, than whether this was or was not provided by the mother. However, because Bowlby's theory of attachment had placed such importance on the role of *mothers*, the separation process, and subsequent harm to the infant, if placed in the care of a other adults became the focus of huge critical debate for women returning to the workforce following the birth of a baby. Bowlby's research is said to have caused many women to feel guilty about whether placing them in group childcare can be harmful to them emotionally. Rutter (1972) suggests that children experiencing high quality mothering can form multiple attachments with up to four or five care-givers without adverse effects.

Later Rutter (1995) posited that the cultural capacity of the child, the family and the context had been overlooked in favour of applying a universal tool to identify and measure security of attachment, arguing that the application of the 'strange situation' was fundamentally (and culturally) flawed. Nevertheless, observations of mother-child interactions in Ainsworth et al's (1978) Baltimore studies led to the theory that the mother's role was to provide a safe and secure base from which a child could leave to explore and return to as a safe place to return in time of emotional need. As Kobak and Madson (2008:28) point out: 'Viewing attachment, fear, and exploration as behavioural systems allows for increased precision in understanding infants' and young children's behaviour', though they further criticised Ainsworth's manipulation of context.

Attachment Relationships in families

Culturally determined child rearing practices are an important consideration in regard to Bowlby's theory of attachment. As well as by their mothers, children are also likely to be looked after by fathers and other family members such as grandparents as well as older siblings (Ainsworth, 1967; Howes and Spieker, 2008). Japanese parenting practices are such that parents are very rarely away from their children (van IJzendoorn and Sagi-Shwartz, 2008); in comparison, children in Israel raised in a kibbutz are used to being separated from their parents and are therefore not distressed during a separation which is common practice (Aviezer et al, 1994). As McHale (2007) points out the characteristically dyadic model of attachment theory fails to acknowledge the complexity of children's social and familial relationships, where infants experiences are multiple and variously reciprocal (Zhang, 2010). Understanding the cultural expectations of children in group settings is crucial so as to avoid

misinterpreting a child's confident adherence to the cultural expectation of her/his family as insecurity.

Any appraisal of Bowlby's (early) work needs to take account of the how his observations could only derive from the cultural traditions of his time; Bowlby's account reflects quite particular and characteristically 'Western' child care and family patterns. It is not difficult to see how the very conception of care itself currently differs from that of Bowlby's initial era. Revolutions in gendered behaviours of partnership and employment, for example, effectively re-define how children's need for care can be met. Similarly, readers should consider how sexuality – particularly same-sex parenting, parenting styles, accommodation arrangements (spending the weekend with a father where parents are separated), adoption of older children, and so on – impact upon the capacity of children to develop secure relationships with others.

Attachment Relationships in early years settings

The current policy framework in England (Department for Education, 2014) requires all early years providers to ensure every child aged under five years is assigned a key person. However, Page and Elfer (2013) show that this has not always been the case - that the key person role has not always been implemented as originally intended by Elinor Goldschmied who conceptualised this role thus:

. . . how one or two adults in the nursery, while never taking over from the parents, connect with what parents would ordinarily do: being special for the children, helping them manage throughout the day, thinking about them, getting to know them too . . .
(Elfer, Goldschmied and Selleck, 2003: vi).

Yet, critics of attachment practice in nursery claim that children can be overly reliant on their key adult and as a result are inhibited from pursuing other learning opportunities with their friends. Dahlberg, Moss, and Pence (2007) have argued that in group care settings in particular, the home cannot be emulated and it is futile to even try. Degotardi and Pearson (2009) maintain that limiting relationships in nurseries to a westernised view of attachment theory does not take account of other societal structures. Trevarthen (2004) suggests that attachment theory alone cannot explain a young child's inherent need to explore their surroundings or their interest in other children. Nevertheless, children who have not received consistent caregiving relationships at home are in greater need of high quality attachments in nursery suggest Howes and Spieker (2008). Furthermore observations conducted by Datler, Datler and Funder (2010) of a 15 month old child as he struggles to settle into nursery make

compelling evidence for children to be closely attached to a key person. In spite of competing views of attachment practice in out of home contexts, more crucially for early years practitioners is consideration of the following points:

We think that for practitioners working in professional roles with infants and young children there are two key messages to bear in mind here: 1) high quality caregiver relationships are central to emotional development in infants and toddlers (Schoore 1997; Carroll 2001; Elfer, et al. 2011 and, learning (Sylva et al., 2012). 2) Relationships take time to develop (Cassidy, 2008). Thus there is a compelling argument for young children who attend day care to be given not only opportunity but *time* to become closely attached to one or two special adults – key person (s) rather than being indiscriminately cared for by a range of people (Page et al., 2013:36)

Attachments and Love

For a while now I have been arguing for a critical dialogue about the place of love in early years practice. In 2010 I reported on the literature that has begun to respond to the notion of love. I discussed for example, training packages such as *The Solihull Approach* (Solihull NHS Primary Care Trust, 2004) which has started to include subtle ‘safe’ language, such as emotional well-being into their literature. I argued that such terms had previously shrouded the importance of the word ‘love’ as a word that had been pushed aside and a subject that was somehow seen as taboo in the early childhood education arena. I included examples of what I considered had then been a recent policy shift in political language to include the term *love* alongside that of educational attainment. Gerhardt (2004) is resolute about why children need to be loved in relation to healthy brain development and makes the following point about adult child attachment and regulation.

Babies need a caregiver who identifies with them so strongly that the baby’s needs feel like her own; he is still physiologically and psychologically an extension of her. If he feels bad when the baby feels bad, she will then want to do something about it immediately, to relieve the baby’s discomfort – and this is the essence of regulation.
(Gerhardt, 2004:23)

Thus, taking Bowlby’s suggestion that the mother’s feelings are innately triggered by her ‘love’ for the child, there is, I suggest even more reason to discuss how these responses are triggered, or not, in adults who are unrelated to these young children in early years settings. I have been arguing for a dialogue about the ethics of *love*, care and education as being central to the holistic development of babies and children. There remains real concern for some professionals about child protection reprisals in relation to holding, touching and kissing (Piper and Smith, 2003). However, I argue that to refuse babies and very young children

opportunities to be closely attached both emotionally and physically is in the end likely to do more harm than good (Page 2014). There is little written about the importance of such dialogue. This adds to the dilemmas for early years practitioners about whether they are doing something wrong. The literature that does exist is so closely associated with issues of child protection as opposed to attachment theory. This is a highly complex issue.

There is an urgent need to reconsider how busy early years professionals can be supported to provide these warm, reciprocal loving relationships that these infants and toddlers so urgently need. I am in agreement with Elfer's (2014) call for a greater attention to professional reflection opportunities for early years practitioner to be able to reflect upon and discuss the emotional aspects of their professional work with young children.

Attachment Theory and current [UK] policy

This section considers policy from a UK perspective, though clearly there will be connections and disconnections with policies in other countries. Current issues in the UK vary across the four states (not least because Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland and England all have different policies for early childhood education and care). Some pressing key issues include:

- Attachment Theory and Training
- Transitions
- Relationships and Learning

Attachment Theory and Training

Robinson (2003) translated Maslow's hierarchy of need into what she considers are the 'ideal attributes for early years professionals' (p.10). I suggest the final and highest attribute of 'self-awareness' or 'self-actualisation' in Robinson's hierarchy is still where the concentration of effort is most needed. Practitioners who work with the youngest children need support to manage their 'emotional labour' (Hochschild, 1983). Linsey and McAuliffe (2006) suggest that the childcare agenda is 'primarily focused on the needs of parents and families to respond to changing working patterns and balancing work and family life' (p.404). I suggest that this it is exactly why practitioners who work with all children, but *especially* those working with *infants and toddlers* must be supported to reach *self actualisation*. This is important for practitioners to be able to 'offer opportunities for children to grow up with *good attachment*' (Day Care Trust 2007, p.5) and to be able to offer opportunities for children to

grow up with parental '*permission*' to form *loving* attachments to the key practitioners with whom they spend much of their everyday lives. Love was emphasised in the research review (David et al 2003) for the governmental *Birth to Three Matters* project.

We may not yet call it *love* but surely love is exactly what it is? One of the major outcomes of an independent childhood inquiry suggested there is need for 'a more caring society based upon the law of love' (Layard and Dunn, 2009:6). I suggest that this is where policy attention should now be focused. Yet, despite a wide ranging report to Government there is still no clear or coherent policy on the essential ingredients in the training of those who work with the youngest children. In 2012, the Nutbrown Review made specific recommendations on the training of practitioners. On attachment and love Nutbrown said:

... all those working in the early years – whatever their job title and role – must be carers as well as educators, providing the warmth and love children need to develop emotionally alongside and as part of planned and spontaneous learning opportunities.

(Nutbrown 2012, para 2.7, p. 19)

The fact that human relationships are complex is undisputed (Hind, 1997; Page and Elfer, 2013; Degotardi and Pearson, 2014); children do manifestly make attachments with other caregivers outside of the family (Ahert, Pinquart and Lamb, 2006). Nevertheless, understanding infant attachment patterns hold significant challenge for early years practitioners (Elfer and Dearnley 2007; Elfer, 2014). The specific and individual needs of infants and toddlers are woefully misunderstood and as a result the least qualified staff are often to be found working with the youngest children in early years settings (Goouch and Powell, 2012) Yet, my research (Page, 2011) suggests mothers want their children to be not only cared for and educated but also to be *loved* by well qualified and emotionally available adults. Therefore I suggest that these very young children require care from a key person who is able to understand the complex and demanding needs of infants and toddlers, are emotionally resilient, and are able to intellectualise notions of love and care. Secure attachments are vital to young children's ability to be able to manage their own feelings and to cope without their parent. Such relationships are not created overnight however. The UK government has committed to fund places for 40% of the most vulnerable two year olds. But the sector is universally warning that it is impossible to achieve this without more and better qualified practitioners (Mathers, et al, 2014). Further, the UK government policy on supporting 'Vulnerable' families (Gibb et al, 2011) is likely to fail if provision for the

youngest children in those families is not met by well qualified practitioners who can make positive and supportive relationships with the family.

Transitions

Transitions are a natural part of life but there is a need to be acutely aware that:

...leaving a baby with a practitioner for the first time will not necessarily make much sense to the child as he or she feels lost and bewildered, crying bitterly for the loss of their most special person not knowing if they will ever return. How the practitioner reacts to the child's distress is of the *utmost importance*

Page *et al.*, 2013:178-179 (my italics).

Relationships and Learning

Reflecting on the earlier point that children learn best and are predisposed to exploration when they are securely attached, is an area worthy of discussion in relation to organising an appropriate environment for young children's learning. It is sometimes the case that early years practitioners fear that a child will become 'spoiled' if they are given what is considered to be 'too much' attention; however as the work of Bowlby has shown it is quite the opposite which is true. As the famous psychoanalyst and paediatrician, Winnicott (1964) points out, for very young children the adult *is* the emotional environment and therefore it is important that the infant or young child feels that his or her feelings are being 'contained' by the adult in such a way as to provide the opportunity for the child to explore the environment safe in the knowledge that s/he or she can return to the adult in time of distress and when in need of comfort. This is where a thoughtful and appropriate understanding of both attachment theory and the role of the adult are key to children's learning and development.

The Bowlby legacy: Modern Attachment Theory

'Modern Attachment Theory' is an assortment of disciplines realised in a broad family of jargons which have attachment – and hence Bowlby – at their centre. Whilst there are numerous critics of many aspects of Bowlby's work, there is none who does not acknowledge his place as the primary organiser of the conceptual place of attachment theory; and some of these recent forms are only indirectly related to what Bowlby set out in *Childcare and the Growth of Love* (1953) and the subsequent trilogy on *Attachment Theory*. The design of Modern Attachment Theory is summarised in one particular (and influential) account as a

‘profoundly developmental approach’ which posits

...the concept of *regulation theory* as an amalgam of Bowlby’s attachment theory, updated internal object relations theories, self psychology, and contemporary relational theory all informed by neuroscience and infant research.

(Schoore and Schoore, 2008:20 my italics).

And, more accessibly, Graham provides a useful characterisation of what ‘attachment theory’ and research over the last 50 years and modern neuroscience of the last 20 years are telling us:

- 1 Our earliest relationships actually build the brain structures we use for relating lifelong;
- 2 Experiences in those early relationships encode in the neural circuitry of our brains by 12-18 months of age, entirely in implicit memory outside of awareness; these patterns of attachment become the “rules”, templates, schemas, for relating that operate lifelong, the “known but not remembered” givens of our relational lives.
- 3 When those early experiences have been less than optimal, those unconscious patterns of attachment can continue to shape the perceptions and responses of the brain to new relational experiences in old ways that get stuck, that can’t take in new experience as new information, can’t learn or adapt or grow from those experiences; what we have come to call, from outside the brain looking in, as the defensive patterns of personality disorders. What one clinician calls “tragic recursive patterns that become encased in neural cement.” (Graham, 2008:xiii)

Conclusion: new definitions and new practices for old problems

Attachment theory is at the centre of early years practice, however variably defined. However, I suggest that parents, policy-makers, practitioners and researchers alike should, properly informed and enabled, identify their particular challenges and duties from within Schoore and Schoore’s (2008) prospectus that attachments are the product of the interactions of nature and nurture, temperament and culture.

So if we accept that attachment and secure relationships are so vitally important, what are the implications of this for early years settings? How might the setting be changed? Are there implications for pedagogy? What does the 24 hour ‘learning environment’ in a setting that prioritises secure, attached relationships actually look like?

I suggest that three concepts should dominate institutional planning:

- The explicit acknowledgement of the *cultures* within which young children live; this means an awareness on the part of staff of the cultural richness and deprivations which children grow within their homes and settings;
- The recognition of the 24-hour *learning environment* – understood as the sum of all the experiences, planned and unplanned which children undergo – of which the setting is (only, albeit importantly) a small part;
- The development of an explicit *Attachment Pedagogy* which informs and structures practitioners' behaviours with children in terms of a modern attachment theory that takes account of the myriad insights that research continually provides (in neuroscience no less than psycho/socio-cultural theory). (See chapter 26).

To which prescription I would only add that slightly knotty problem of 'love...'

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