

# Attachment Theory: The Roots of Human Connection

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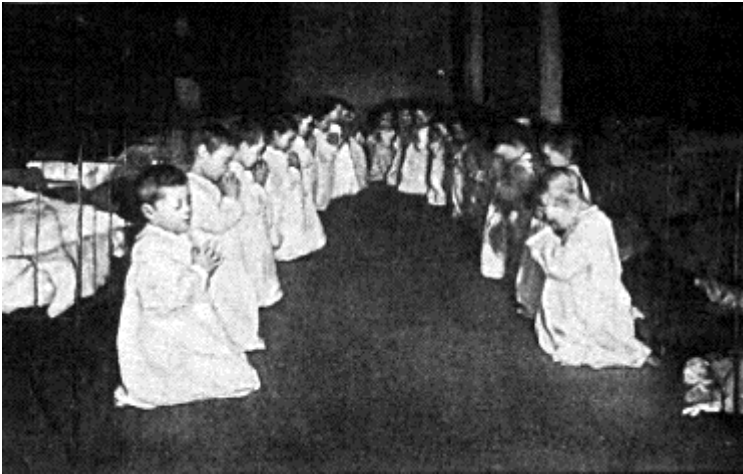
## Earlier Theories

The concept of infants' emotional attachment to caregivers has been known anecdotally for hundreds of years. From the late 19th century onward, psychologists and psychiatrists suggested theories about the existence or nature of early relationships. Early Freudian theory had little to say about a child's relationship with the mother, postulating only that the breast was the love object. Freudians attributed the infant's attempts to stay near the familiar person to motivation learned through feeding and gratification of libidinal drives. In the 1930s, British developmental psychologist Ian Suttie suggested that the child's need for affection was a primary one, not based on hunger or other physical gratifications. William Blatz, a Canadian psychologist and teacher of Mary Ainsworth, also stressed the importance of social relationships for development. Blatz proposed that the need for security was a normal part of personality, as was the use of others as a secure base. Observers from the 1940s onward focused on anxiety displayed by infants and toddlers threatened with separation from a familiar caregiver.

Another theory prevalent at the time of Bowlby's development of attachment theory was "dependency". This proposed that infants were dependent on adult caregivers but outgrew it in the course of early childhood; attachment behaviour in older children would thus be seen as regressive. Attachment theory assumes older children and adults retain attachment behaviour, displaying it in stressful situations. Indeed, a secure attachment is associated with independent exploratory behaviour rather than dependence. Bowlby developed attachment theory as a consequence of his dissatisfaction with existing theories of early relationships.

## Maternal Deprivation

The early thinking of the object relations school of psychoanalysis, particularly Melanie Klein, influenced Bowlby. However, he profoundly disagreed with the prevalent psychoanalytic belief that infants' responses relate to their internal fantasy life rather than real-life events. As Bowlby formulated his concepts, he was influenced by case studies on disturbed and delinquent children, such as those of William Goldfarb published in 1943 and 1945.



Two rows of little boys, about 20 in total, kneel before their beds in the dormitory of a residential nursery. Their eyes are shut and they are in an attitude of prayer. They wear long white night gowns and behind them are their iron framed beds. Prayer time in the Five Points House of Industry residential nursery, 1888. The maternal deprivation hypothesis published in 1951 caused a revolution in the use of residential nurseries.

Bowlby's contemporary René Spitz observed separated children's grief, proposing that "psychotoxic" results were brought about by inappropriate experiences of early care. A strong influence was the work of social worker and psychoanalyst James Robertson who filmed the effects of separation on children in hospital. He and Bowlby collaborated in making the 1952 documentary film *A Two-Year Old Goes to the Hospital* which was instrumental in a campaign to alter hospital restrictions on visits by parents.

In his 1951 monograph for the World Health Organisation, *Maternal Care and Mental Health*, Bowlby put forward the hypothesis that "the infant and young child should experience a warm, intimate, and continuous relationship with his mother (or permanent mother substitute) in which both find satisfaction and enjoyment", the lack of which may have significant and irreversible mental health consequences. This was also published as *Child Care and the Growth of Love* for public consumption. The central proposition was influential but highly controversial. At the time there was limited empirical data and no comprehensive theory to account for such a conclusion. Nevertheless, Bowlby's theory sparked considerable interest in the nature of early relationships, giving a strong impetus to, (in the words of Mary Ainsworth), a "great body of research" in an extremely difficult, complex area. Bowlby's work (and Robertson's films) caused a virtual revolution in hospital visiting by parents, hospital provision for children's play, educational and social needs and the use of residential nurseries. Over time, orphanages were abandoned in favour of foster care or family-style homes in most developed countries.

## Formulation of The Theory

Following the publication of *Maternal Care and Mental Health*, Bowlby sought new understanding from the fields of evolutionary biology, ethology, developmental psychology, cognitive science and control systems theory. He formulated the innovative proposition that mechanisms underlying an infant's emotional tie to the caregiver(s) emerged as a result of evolutionary pressure. He set out to develop a theory of motivation and behaviour control built on science rather than Freud's psychic energy model. Bowlby argued that with attachment theory he had made good the "deficiencies of the data and the lack of theory to link alleged cause and effect" of *Maternal Care and Mental Health*.



A young mother kneels in a garden with her two children. A baby sits astride her knee facing outwards and looking away from the camera. A toddler stands slightly in front of his mother holding a spade and frowning at the camera. Infant exploration is greater when the caregiver is present; with the caregiver present, the infant's attachment system is relaxed and he is free to explore.

The formal origin of the theory began with the publication of two papers in 1958, the first being Bowlby's "The Nature of the Child's Tie to his Mother", in which the precursory concepts of

"attachment" were introduced. The second was Harry Harlow's "The Nature of Love". The latter was based on experiments which showed that infant rhesus monkeys appeared to form an affectional bond with soft, cloth surrogate mothers that offered no food but not with wire surrogate mothers that provided a food source but were less pleasant to touch. Bowlby followed up his first paper with two more; "Separation Anxiety" (1960a), and "Grief and Mourning in Infancy and Early Childhood" (1960b). At the same time, Bowlby's colleague Mary Ainsworth, with Bowlby's ethological theories in mind, was completing her extensive observational studies on the nature of infant attachments in Uganda. Attachment theory was finally presented in 1969 in *Attachment*, the first volume of the Attachment and Loss trilogy. The second and third volumes, *Separation: Anxiety and Anger* and *Loss: Sadness and Depression* followed in 1972 and 1980 respectively. Attachment was revised in 1982 to incorporate later research.

Attachment theory came at a time when women were asserting their right to equality and independence, giving mothers new cause for anxiety. Attachment theory itself is not gender specific but in Western society it was largely mothers who bore responsibility for early child care. Thus lack of proper nurturing of children was blamed on mothers despite societal organisation that left them overburdened. Opposition to attachment theory coalesced around this issue. Feminists had already criticised the assumption that anatomy is destiny which they saw as implicit in the maternal deprivation hypothesis.

## **Ethology**

Bowlby's attention was first drawn to ethology when he read Konrad Lorenz's 1952 publication in draft form (although Lorenz had published earlier work). Other important influences were ethologists Nikolaas Tinbergen and Robert Hinde. Bowlby subsequently collaborated with Hinde. In 1953 Bowlby stated "the time is ripe for a unification of psychoanalytic concepts with those of ethology, and to pursue the rich vein of research which this union suggests". Konrad Lorenz had examined the phenomenon of "imprinting", a behaviour characteristic of some birds and mammals which involves rapid learning of recognition by the young, of a conspecific or comparable object. After recognition comes a tendency to follow.

A young woman in rubber boots is walking through a muddy clearing in a wood at Kostroma Moose Farm followed by a very young moose, struggling to keep up



This bottle-fed young moose has developed an attachment to its carer.

The learning is possible only within a limited age range known as a critical period. Bowlby's concepts included the idea that attachment involved learning from experience during a limited age period, influenced by adult behaviour. He did not apply the imprinting concept in its entirety to human attachment. However, he considered that attachment behaviour was best explained as instinctive, combined with the effect of experience, stressing the readiness the child brings to social interactions. Over time it became apparent there were more differences than similarities between attachment theory and imprinting so the analogy was dropped.

Ethologists expressed concern about the adequacy of some research on which attachment theory was based, particularly the generalisation to humans from animal studies. Schur, discussing Bowlby's use of ethological concepts (pre-1960) commented that concepts used in attachment theory had not kept up with changes in ethology itself. Ethologists and others writing in the 1960s and 1970s questioned and expanded the types of behaviour used as indications of attachment. Observational studies of young children in natural settings provided other behaviours that might indicate attachment; for example, staying within a predictable distance of the mother without effort on her part and picking up small objects, bringing them to the mother but not to others. Although ethologists tended to be in agreement with Bowlby, they pressed for more data, objecting to

psychologists writing as if there was an "entity which is 'attachment', existing over and above the observable measures." Robert Hinde considered "attachment behaviour system" to be an appropriate term which did not offer the same problems "because it refers to postulated control systems that determine the relations between different kinds of behaviour."

### Psychoanalysis

Several lines of school children march diagonally from top right to bottom left. Each carries a bag or bundle and each raises their right arm in the air in a salute. Adults stand in a line across the bottom right hand corner making the same gesture.



Evacuation of smiling Japanese school children in World War II from the book Road to Catastrophe

Psychoanalytic concepts influenced Bowlby's view of attachment, in particular, the observations by Anna Freud and Dorothy Burlingham of young children separated from familiar caregivers during World War II. However, Bowlby rejected psychoanalytical explanations for early infant bonds including "drive theory" in which the motivation for attachment derives from gratification of hunger and libidinal drives. He called this the "cupboard-love" theory of relationships. In his view it failed to see attachment as a psychological bond in its own right rather than an instinct derived from feeding

or sexuality. Based on ideas of primary attachment and neo-Darwinism, Bowlby identified what he saw as fundamental flaws in psychoanalysis. Firstly the overemphasis of internal dangers rather than external threat. Secondly the view of the development of personality via linear "phases" with "regression" to fixed points accounting for psychological distress. Instead he posited that several lines of development were possible, the outcome of which depended on the interaction between the organism and the environment. In attachment this would mean that although a developing child has a propensity to form attachments, the nature of those attachments depends on the environment to which the child is exposed.

From early in the development of attachment theory there was criticism of the theory's lack of congruence with various branches of psychoanalysis. Bowlby's decisions left him open to criticism from well-established thinkers working on similar problems. Bowlby was effectively ostracized from the psychoanalytic community.

### **Internal Working Model**

Bowlby adopted the important concept of the internal working model of social relationships from the work of the philosopher Kenneth Craik. Craik had noted the adaptiveness of the ability of thought to predict events. He stressed the survival value of and natural selection for this ability. According to Craik, prediction occurs when a "small-scale model" consisting of brain events is used to represent not only the external environment, but the individual's own possible actions. This model allows a person to try out alternatives mentally, using knowledge of the past in responding to the present and future. At about the same time Bowlby was applying Craik's ideas to attachment, other psychologists were applying these concepts to adult perception and cognition.

### **Cybernetics**

The theory of visible systems (cybernetics), developing during the 1930s and '40s, influenced Bowlby's thinking. The young child's need for proximity to the attachment figure was seen as balancing homeostatically with the need for exploration. (Bowlby compared this process to physiological homeostasis whereby, for example, blood pressure is kept within limits). The actual distance maintained by the child would vary as the balance of needs changed. For example, the approach of a stranger, or an injury, would cause the child exploring at a distance to seek proximity. The child's goal is not an object (the caregiver) but a state; maintenance of the desired distance from the caregiver depending on circumstances.

### **Cognitive Development**

Bowlby's reliance on Piaget's theory of cognitive development gave rise to questions about object

permanence (the ability to remember an object that is temporarily absent) in early attachment behaviours. An infant's ability to discriminate strangers and react to the mother's absence seemed to occur months earlier than Piaget suggested would be cognitively possible. More recently, it has been noted that the understanding of mental representation has advanced so much since Bowlby's day that present views can be more specific than those of Bowlby's time.

## **Behaviourism**

In 1969, Gerwitz discussed how mother and child could provide each other with positive reinforcement experiences through their mutual attention, thereby learning to stay close together. This explanation would make it unnecessary to posit innate human characteristics fostering attachment. Learning theory, (behaviorism), saw attachment as a remnant of dependency with the quality of attachment being merely a response to the caregiver's cues. Behaviourists saw behaviours like crying as a random activity meaning nothing until reinforced by a caregiver's response. To behaviourists, frequent responses would result in more crying. To attachment theorists, crying is an inborn attachment behaviour to which the caregiver must respond if the infant is to develop emotional security. Conscientious responses produce security which enhances autonomy and results in less crying. Ainsworth's research in Baltimore supported the attachment theorists' view.

Behaviourists generally disagree with this interpretation. Though they use a different analysis scale, they maintain that behaviours like separation protest in infants result mainly from operant learning experiences. When a mother is instructed to ignore crying and respond only to play behaviour, the baby ceases to protest and engages in play behaviour. The "separation anxiety" resulting from such interactions is seen as learned behaviour, resulting from misplaced contingencies. Such misplaced contingencies may represent the ambivalence on the part of the parent, which is then played out in the operant interaction. Behaviourists see attachment more as a systems phenomena than a biological predisposition. Patterson's group has shown that in uncertain environments the lack of contingent relationships can account for problems in attachment and the sensitivity to contingencies. In the last decade, behaviour analysts have constructed models of attachment based on the importance of contingent relationships. These behaviour analytic models have received some support from research, and meta-analytic reviews.

## **Developments**

As the formulation of attachment theory progressed, there was criticism of the empirical support for the theory. Possible alternative explanations for results of empirical research were proposed. Some of Bowlby's interpretations of James Robertson's data were rejected by the researcher when he reported data from 13 young children cared for in ideal rather than institutional circumstances

on separation from their mothers. In the second volume of the trilogy, *Separation*, Bowlby acknowledged Robertson's study had caused him to modify his views on the traumatic consequences of separation in which insufficient weight had been given to the influence of skilled care from a familiar substitute. In 1984 Skuse based criticism on the work of Anna Freud with children from Theresienstadt who had apparently developed relatively normally despite serious deprivation in their early years. He concluded there was an excellent prognosis for children with this background, unless there were biological or genetic risk factors.

Bowlby's arguments that even very young babies were social creatures and primary actors in creating relationships with parents took some time to be accepted. So did Ainsworth's emphasis on the importance and primacy of maternal attunement for psychological development (a point also argued by Donald Winnicott). In the 1970s Daniel Stern undertook research on the concept of attunement between very young infants and caregivers, using micro-analysis of video evidence. This added significantly to the understanding of the complexity of infant/caregiver interactions as an integral part of a baby's emotional and social development.

In the 1970s, problems with viewing attachment as a trait (stable characteristic of an individual) rather than as a type of behaviour with organising functions and outcomes, led some authors to the conclusion that attachment behaviours were best understood in terms of their functions in the child's life. This way of thinking saw the secure base concept as central to attachment theory's, logic, coherence and status as an organizational construct. Following this argument, the assumption that attachment is expressed identically in all humans cross-culturally was examined. The research showed that though there were cultural differences, the three basic patterns, secure, avoidant and ambivalent, can be found in every culture in which studies have been undertaken, even where communal sleeping arrangements are the norm.



On the right a young boy of asiatic appearance with a pudding basin haircut, leans over a baby lying on its back on the left. The boy and baby are touching noses. The baby gazes up at the boy with an expression of intense interest. Research indicates that attachment pattern distributions are consistent across cultures, although the manner in which attachment is expressed may differ.

Selection of the secure pattern is found in the majority of children across cultures studied. This follows logically from the fact that attachment theory provides for infants to adapt to changes in the environment, selecting optimal behavioural strategies. How attachment is expressed shows cultural variations which need to be ascertained before studies can be undertaken; for example Gusii infants are greeted with a handshake rather than a hug. Securely attached Gusii infants anticipate and seek this contact. There are also differences in the distribution of insecure patterns based on cultural differences in child-rearing practices.

The biggest challenge to the notion of the universality of attachment theory came from studies conducted in Japan where the concept of *amae* plays a prominent role in describing family relationships. Arguments revolved around the appropriateness of the use of the Strange Situation procedure where *amae* is practiced. Ultimately research tended to confirm the universality hypothesis of attachment theory. Most recently a 2007 study conducted in Sapporo in Japan found

attachment distributions consistent with global norms using the six-year Main and Cassidy scoring system for attachment classification.

Critics in the 1990s such as J. R. Harris, Steven Pinker and Jerome Kagan were generally concerned with the concept of infant determinism (nature versus nurture), stressing the effects of later experience on personality. Building on the work on temperament of Stella Chess, Kagan rejected almost every assumption on which attachment theory etiology was based. He argued that heredity was far more important than the transient effects of early environment. For example a child with an inherently difficult temperament would not elicit sensitive behavioural responses from a caregiver. The debate spawned considerable research and analysis of data from the growing number of longitudinal studies. Subsequent research has not borne out Kagan's argument, broadly demonstrating that it is the caregiver's behaviours that form the child's attachment style, although how this style is expressed may differ with temperament. Harris and Pinker put forward the notion that the influence of parents had been much exaggerated, arguing that socialisation took place primarily in peer groups. H. Rudolph Schaffer concluded that parents and peers had different functions, fulfilling distinctive roles in children's development.