

attachment theory: sustaining exploration



attachment theory: sustaining exploration. The *Handbook of Attachment* (Cassidy and Shaver 1999) shows how much attachment theory, developed by Bowlby and by Ainsworth, has enlarged and benefited our understanding of human instinctive social behaviour. Despite this, practitioners working primarily with adults rather than

with young children find that the difficulties adult clients often present are not included in Bowlby's model. Clients' difficulties frequently relate to relationships with peers, when (i) at work, (ii) at home, and (iii) at leisure, and when they are aroused sexually. To fill this gap, Heard and Lake (1986, 1997) have extended the Bowlby/Ainsworth attachment theory.

The extension gives practitioners a comprehensive model of human instinctive behaviour that takes account of: (i) the way in which the human urge to be creative and enjoy sharing interests with companions can be sustained; (ii) an extended view of caregiving that includes the task of parents, mentors, and other professional carers to promote psychological development (so that children and adolescents can move into the world of their peers safely); (iii) ways in which to conceptualize the variety of sexual relationships that human beings espouse, which range from stable affectional relationships to those that are promiscuous, often violent, and in which sustained long-term affection is lacking; and (iv) the effects on mood and sense of self, which are evoked by the non-verbal signals of body language, leading some people to be described as: 'he is always winding me up'; or 'she is a lovely person to be with, she makes me feel great'; and 'whatever I do, he is always critical so I feel no good'.

The foundations for the extensions lie in the model for instinctive behaviour put forward by Bowlby (1982) as an alternative to the models suggested by Freud. Interestingly Bowlby's model has not been developed sufficiently by attachment researchers to show how exploration may be maintained.

Briefly, Bowlby postulated two complementary instinctive behavioural systems (the attachment system and the complementary caregiving system), which he referred to as goal-corrected systems, making clear that they were governed by servomechanisms. The attachment system is activated by alarming events, the condition of the person, and the behaviour of attachment figures: the small hierarchy of figures to whom a child has become attached, of which the most preferred is 'the person who has looked after you the most', usually the biological mother. Activation of the attachment system leads to behaviour that increases proximity to attachment figures. When increased proximity is attained, the end point or goal of the system is reached and the behaviour of seeking proximity is terminated, but the system remains active, ready to respond when any behaviour-activating events are perceived or felt.

Bowlby saw the attachment, i.e. the careseeking system, as active throughout life. He gave little detail about the attachment figures' caregiving system, beyond stating that its prime function was to provide protection and comfort by attachment figures, who are 'older and wiser'.

Although Bowlby was well aware that feelings are

aroused when either of the systems is activated (particularly feelings associated with failure to achieve proximity to the preferred attachment figure) and, although he wrote at some length on information processing, he did not elaborate on the kind of interactions that take place between caregiver and careseeker nor on the subjective experience associated with reaching the goal of either system.

There was at that time no reliable methodology to study subjective experience. Ainsworth's robust Strange Situation Test (Ainsworth et al. 1978) enabled the association to be studied between security in infancy and mothers who were sensitive and attentive. A little later Main recognized the disorganized/disoriented insecure child (Lyons-Ruth and Jacobvitz 1999), and her Adult Attachment Interview (Hesse 1999), showed that insecure relationships are transmitted across generations.

By the 1980s the observations of Trevarthen and of Stern described the reciprocal behaviour seen as people interact with one another. Trevarthen identified primary and secondary intersubjectivity. He expresses his current views in a long article (Trevarthen and Aitken 2001) in which he states that newborn infants, provided they are not motivated to show instinctive behaviours that attract parental care, communicate with adults using expressive forms and rhythms of interest and feelings displayed by other human beings. He considers this purposeful intersubjectivity is fundamental for our understanding of human mental development.

Stern (1985) described the effects of: (i) 'cross modal affect attunement' between infants and mother in which a mother shows her feelings about the exploratory assays being made by her infant; (ii) 'purposeful misattunement' by mother which seems to regulate the infant's level of arousal; and (iii) 'misattunement' which stops the infant exploring. He describes cross-modal affect attunement as a reactive phenomenon, for which empathy is not required; he considers empathy requires information processing at a cognitive level.

Recently McCluskey (2001) described a promising methodology to assess the level of goal-corrected empathic attunement shown to adult clients by counsellors and therapists. She demonstrated that empathic responses to a client's distress, evoked by threat of loss and actual loss of an important relationship, can reawaken the client's ability to explore the situation: that is to say the client begins to face handling the distressing situation. Her methodology is now being replicated and refined to study the elements of non-verbal behaviour governing the degree of closeness or distance kept between client and practitioners during dyadic and group therapeutic encounters.

In extending attachment theory the focus has been on the emotional experience of attaining, or not attaining,

the goals of Bowlby's systems and also those of three additional instinctive motivational systems organized on the same principles.

All five systems are now referred to as 'the dynamics of attachment and exploratory collaboration' (Heard and Lake 2002). Together they act as one process that, provided the goals of each of the five systems are sufficiently well met, safeguards the capacity to be collaborative, exploratory, and creative.

The additional systems comprise:

- A system for sharing and extending one's interests with likeminded peers: evidence comes from many observations such as those collected by Hurlock (1972). We consider that the development of social competence (Lake 1985) depends not only on the quality of the relationships individuals have had with attachment figures, but also on the quality of the bonds of companionship made with peers, through sharing a supportive and exploratory pursuit of mutual interests.
- A system for affectional sexuality: evidence comes from the findings of attachment researchers such as Hazen and Shaver (1987), and Hazen and Ziefman (1994). A system for affectional sexuality is distinguished from defensive forms of sexuality.
- A system for personal defence, whose elements are mentioned by many authors: it appears to develop in three forms: maturative, non-maturative stage 1, and non-maturative stage 2.

The maturative form is present in situations in which (1) the individual's internal supportive system (constructed from memories of attachment relationships represented in internal working models of specified relationships) is functional and when it has been possible (2) to construct a personal supportive environment (the style of life individuals construct to provide reminders of attuning relationships with attachment figures (Heard and Lake 1997)). When these two systems are not sufficiently functional, non-maturative forms of the system for personal defence emerge.

The goal of non-maturative stage 1 defence is to reach a form of relating with feared attachment figures in which acceptance and approval can be experienced. When attachment bonds have withered, if ever made, non-maturative stage 2 defence is used. The goal then is to achieve, without concern for others, immediate relief from distress and pleasure. In therapeutic relationships clients usually show non-maturative stage 1 defences.

The caregiving system, renamed the system for promoting growth and development (Heard and Lake 2001), distinguishes two equally essential components: one for caregiving as described by Bowlby, and the second that aids psychological development (previously described as the educative dimension of caregiving). An empathic

attachment figure is able to move from one component to the other, keeping in tune with one who is either seeking care and protection or, confident that care will be provided, seeking help to develop interests and skills. The task for attachment figures is not easy. No one will move effortlessly in all contexts from one component to the other. Anecdotal evidence shows that when individuals are demonstrating their non-maturative defences, their capacity to be empathic to the state of someone seeking care or opportunities for development is diminished.

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