KEY CONCEPT: ATTACHMENT

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Concept origins

Developed by John Bowlby, attachment theory emerged gradually during the two decades following the Second World War. Drawing on **psychoanalysis**, ethology, developmental and **cognitive** psychology, cybernetics and information processing (Bretherton, 1992), Bowlby's (1944, 1951) early studies of the negative impact of parent–child separation on the subsequent emotional health of children were groundbreaking and controversial. By the end of the 1950s Bowlby (1958, 1959, 1960) gave his initial articulation of attachment theory as the growing child's tie to its mother forming the basis for relational security, confidence, morale, curiosity and love. At its simplest, an infant's attachment **behaviour** promoted closeness to the attachment figure, which—from an evolutionary perspective—increased chances of survival. This served a protective function *and* as a secure base for exploration of the environment. Numerous other researchers joined Bowlby in investigating and refining attachment theory. Patterns that Mary Ainsworth and others observed in 'Strange Situation' (Ainsworth and Wittig, 1969) encounters initially resulted in attachment being broadly classified as either secure, insecure avoidant, or insecure ambivalent (Ainsworth and Bell, 1970; Ainsworth *et al.*, 1978). This classification was later further refined. The opening period of work on attachment theory was summarised in Bowlby's (1969, 1973, 1980) *Attachment and Loss* trilogy. By this time the body of this work was already significantly impacting not only on psychological therapy with children, but far more broadly on the management and **care** of children in nurseries and other early years settings, hospitals, and within educational provision; helping **teachers** and other stakeholders understand and better utilise the human affective dimensions of their practice.

Current status and usage

In developing Ainsworth's attachment classification, Main and Solomon (1990) identified a disorganised type, thus making four broad categories: this type came to be particularly associated with significant maternal psychological dysfunction. The latest research, from the mid 1990s onwards, has included increasing efforts to explore the neuro-psycho-biological underpinnings of attachment theory and chart the impact of environmental and attachment experiences on neurological structures (Schore, 2012; Schore, 2017). An understanding of attachment theory has much to offer educational specialists, especially, but by no means exclusively, in early years contexts and with children in and from **care** systems. Building on the attachment template established within the infant during its first two years, when the brain growth spurt occurs (the brain doubling in size), **teachers** are increasingly drawing on these ideas to promote both academic and psychosocial outcomes (e.g., Bombèr, 2007; Bergin and Bergin, 2009; Cozolino, 2013; Parker *et al.*, 2016).

In approaching the concept of attachment (Bowlby, 1988) it is useful to consider it as a key way of understanding **relationships**; their function, strengths, problems and joys and how these evolve across the lifespan and within different **culture**s. Attachment theory does not stop at children and their parental relations—it has been applied to couples, between grand-children and grand-parents, between **teachers** and students and elsewhere. Experimental studies offer useful evidence to support this work: Lorenz (1935) on imprinting in newly hatched goslings and that of Harlow (1961; Harlow and Zimmermann, 1958; *cf.* van der Horst *et al.*, 2008) on the impact of maternal deprivation on rhesus monkeys being particularly illustrative. Taking just the latter, Harlow highlighted a number of phenomena, including: (1) infant monkeys seeking safety with their mothers when faced with danger; (2) the negative effects of being raised in isolation, effects which increased and would become more enduring the longer the privation continued; and (3) their preference for surrogate cloth mothers (to which they could cling and obtain comfort) over simple wire models (that would provide food). The notion of critical periods, optimal for the creation of attachment bonds and after which their construction

is impaired, derived from such studies and was further supported by research on so-called feral children. This type of approach raises obvious questions, such as the extent to which results from animal studies can be generalised to humans and the ethically problematic nature of some of the research. These are important points of access into beginning to critically consider this work.

In deepening one's understanding of attachment an extensive body of literature may be considered. In an earlier survey of the field, Steele (2002) highlighted among other things the utility of attachment in investigating the role of the father on a child's development (thus underlining the relationship-specific nature of the concept); its relevance in considering the impact of parental divorce and separation; and the impact and **politics** of day-**care**. In the course of this, Steele stressed the relevance of the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI), developed by Main and Goldwyn (1987), as a **qualitative** interview method of assessing accounts adults gave of both their own **childhood** experiences with their parents and their contemporary understanding of these experiences. The resultant classification of these AAI (and similar) accounts enabled reasonably reliable predictions to be made of parental sensitivity and patterns of attachment security across generations (Grossmann *et al.*, 2005). With effective interventions available, such **assessment** can be very useful as a step towards helping parents-to-be and those with childcare responsibilities to better resolve their own emotional **relationships** to their formative attachment figures. If we see early years workers and subsequent **teachers** as important secondary attachment figures for infants, students and young people, and we take the affective and **pastoral** dimensions of **teaching** seriously, this opens up possibilities for further developing reflective practice during teacher training and in ongoing CPD. Such an approach could have significant benefits for both teachers and students (Bombèr, 2007; Parker *et al.*, 2016).

Attachment was a controversial concept when it emerged, challenging then existing orthodoxies. It has come to be challenged itself as it has grown into a dominant **paradigm**. Part of the challenge comes from the **neoliberal** critique of the affective dimension and therapeutic education (e.g., Ecclestone and Hayes, 2009). More interestingly perhaps, implicit social **class** and patriarchal assumptions within the language of attachment theorising, several feminist critics claim, perpetuate **essentialist** views of women and obscures the exploitative circumstances under which most women mother, naturalising the heterosexual nuclear

family (Birns, 1999; Franzblau, 1999 and 2002; Wendt, 2016). These are important questions both about the socio-historical context of the concept and its derivative practices, about its integrity, its **politics**, and about its validity and credibility (Duschinsky *et al.*, 2015). In engaging with such questions, it is vital to consider the key points at issue and the manner in which this (just as any other) dynamic theory has changed over time in response to challenging new data (Feyerabend, 1975). Thus, while initial formulations of attachment clearly privileged infant–mother relations (monotropy), this gave way to a modern emphasis on an array of attachment figures (Schaffer and Emerson, 1964; Rutter, 1981), each with their own relationship-specific characteristics, while still recognising the biopsychosocial specificity of the mother and maternal function. Following earlier work by Ainsworth (1963), Otto and Keller (2014) have presented interesting work on the cultural variations in attachment across the world. From another vertex, critics' assumptions may themselves be scrutinised, something Liss and Erchull (2012) did in an **empirical** study which found that feminist mothers are in practice more supportive of attachment parenting that their non-feminist counterparts. Such findings are useful in evaluating these inevitably complex debates.

Questions to consider

1. Are **teachers** aware of attachment theory and should they be? Why?
2. Physical contact experiences with parents offer reassurance and promote security, so should teachers do this across the various phases of education?
3. Attachment theory uses technical terms (e.g., 'affectional bonds' for 'love'): discuss the advantages and shortcomings of such subject specific vocabulary.
4. What are the differences between Bowlby's ideas on attachment **relationships**, Piaget's notion of schemas, Vygotsky's ZPD, and psychoanalytic object relations theory?

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