

Closing Thoughts: Special Issue on Attachment

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Closing Thoughts

We would like to express appreciation to the authors of this Special Issue on Attachment for their contributions both to the Journal and the field of clinical social work. All these authors are experts in terms of their specific clinical interests, and they have provided us with a creative and stimulating look at the new directions attachment theory is taking due to the influence of contemporary attachment and neurobiological research. As co-editors, it has been exciting to work with these writers, researchers, theorists, and practitioners as we have enriched our understandings and broadened our applications of attachment theory to the conceptualization of our clinical work.

We also want to take this opportunity to emphasize the saliency of “modern attachment theory”—as Allan and Judith Schore described it in this Journal—for contemporary social work education and empirically-informed social work practice. As professors in social work programs, we are keenly aware of the current academic emphasis on “evidence-based practice” (EBP), a controversial concept within our profession that holds various meanings, depending on one’s understanding about practice evaluation. This concept first emerged in the medical profession to address gaps in medical practice, and as other professions

embraced the EBP philosophy, debates emerged regarding how EBP should be enacted. One rather narrow interpretation within social work suggests that practitioners and administrators should dismiss theory and base interventions solely on empirical research that provides evidence of an effective model of practice. Taking a broader philosophical view, Gambrill (2006) sees EBP as a *process* “designed to break down the division among research, practice, and policy—highlighting ethical obligations” (p. 341). She has said that narrow definitions of EBP may actually be “the emperor’s new clothes,” consisting of “authoritarian practices” that include “inflated claims” (Gambrill 2003, p. 4) about effective interventions. She further notes that the social work literature tends to “ignore the role of flaws in published research” (2003, p. 12) regarding practice.

In factual practice, many social workers minimize or are unfamiliar with studies evaluating treatment outcomes. Some may not realize that, with few exceptions, meta-analytic research comparing practice models has found no consistent differences in terms of treatment outcomes among different modalities or theoretical orientations (Blatt et al. 2006; Drisko 2004; Ogles et al. 1999). According to Ogles et al. (1999), clinical practice over the past 30 years has “become increasingly specific, technical, and standardized,” yet research on practice shows that “models and techniques have a relatively small influence on treatment outcome” (p. 209). Although there are few differences in treatment “efficacy” (i.e., outcome evaluated through randomized control trials), treatment models are not equally “effective” in the real world of practice (Ogles et al. 1999). This is particularly true in social work practice, where there are numerous practical, ethical, organizational, and ideological obstacles for carrying out efficacious and effective treatment (Gambrill 2006).

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Since, few empirically significant differences have been found in comparing treatment models, some psychotherapy researchers have taken a new tack. Recently, researchers have examined the “common factors” among *all* theories and techniques that affect outcome (Hubble et al. 1999). Interestingly, this type of psychotherapy research strongly suggests that the warmth and caring of the therapist, in combination with individual client characteristics, is the central common factor affecting treatment outcome. According to Drisko’s (2004) review of psychotherapy research, several researchers conclude that “the relationship is the largest curative factor in psychotherapy” (p. 86). Due to its importance, researchers have begun to focus more intentionally on understanding the clinical relationship *per se*.

Of particular note here is the resurgence of research on the therapeutic working alliance that has paralleled an increased interest in attachment research (Bachelor and Horvath 1999). Empirical studies on the associations between the working alliance and attachment suggest that a strong alliance, facilitated by an attuned therapist, can lead to a “secure base” (Bowlby 1988) of treatment, thereby facilitating the client’s exploration and growth. In another line of research on the relational process, Blatt et al. (2006) suggest that differences in the efficacy and effectiveness of treatment are related to “complex questions about the nature of the treatment process” (p. 564). They propose that different clients may benefit from different types of treatments based on individual client characteristics, such as the client’s interpersonal relationships and personality organization. The authors in this Journal would concur. All have provided clinical illustrations of the value of being attuned to clients’ varying attachment needs and styles, interpersonal relationships, and patterns of affect arousal and regulation in order to establish a working alliance for unfolding treatment.

Given its relevance, we believe that modern attachment theory should be a strongly supported addition to the curriculum of all social work graduate schools (as it is in the co-editors’ institutions). Modern attachment theory has much to offer that fits within the mandates of the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE), which sets the profession’s educational standards. For example, CSWE requires that courses on human behavior and the social environment (HBSE) be taught as the foundation for all subsequent MSW work, providing biological, psychological, and socio-cultural content and theories for understanding human development and functioning. Modern attachment theory offers basic conceptualizations of the “biological substrates” (Applegate and Shapiro 2005, p. 209) of human development, the subtle interface of “nature” and “nurture,” and a nuanced understanding of human resiliency in the face of profound environmental

risks. These conceptualizations provide an ideal framework for updating and expanding person-in-environment and ecological systems perspectives, concepts central to social work education. The teaching of modern attachment theory creates special opportunities for social workers to better understand affect regulation, interpersonal relationships, and the change process. Further, attachment research provides critical data to inform policy development, particularly policies pertaining to children, families, violence, and trauma. And finally, the field of attachment offers social work students an important lens with which to focus and empirically examine the many unanswered mysteries regarding environmental impact on human functioning. In other words, modern attachment theory offers contributions to practice, research, and policy, which supports the requirements of CSWE as well as the philosophical goals of evidence-based practice.

In closing, the clinical relationship has been at the heart of social work since the beginnings of the profession, from the initial settlement house work of Jane Addams and Mary Richmond, to the moving infant–mother work described in “Ghosts in the Nursery” (Fraiberg et al. 1975). Modern attachment theory builds on this historical base to give social workers a theoretical frame for understanding these relationships. We suggest to our colleagues involved in the EBP discourse that our profession should embrace attachment theory to better understand the myriad dimensions of human development, social functioning, and interpersonal relationships across the life span. We agree that social work practice should be founded on theory that has been empirically examined, and theoretically-based practice should be evaluated for its treatment effectiveness. To this end, modern attachment theory provides a valuable foundation for “evidence-based” social work practice.

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