

Introduction: Special Issue on Attachment

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Introduction

The affiliation between attachment theory and clinical social work goes back to the earliest history of attachment theory and research in the association between John Bowlby, a British psychoanalyst, and James Robertson, a social worker who worked with Bowlby in a residential nursery for homeless children in London. Robertson was hired by Bowlby to observe and record data regarding the dramatic effects of separation on young institutionalized children. Their shared interest resulted in Robertson's (1952) pioneering film, *A Two-Year-Old Goes to Hospital*, and their first co-authored article (Bowlby et al. 1952) in the early 1950s.

Robertson's controversial film helped better the plight of hospitalized children throughout the Western world and highlighted the impact of the external environment on child development. His observations also served to identify phases of separation responses (i.e., protest, despair, and denial/detachment) when a child is separated from the unavailable attachment figure. Late in 1950, Mary Ainsworth was hired as an assistant in Bowlby's research clinic in London to analyze Robertson's data on young children. She was so impressed by Robertson's records that she tried to emulate them through her own naturalistic observations

of separation and reunion between mothers and infants, and through that process, she created the evaluation tool that came to be known as the "Strange Situation" (Bretherton 2000).

Drawing on the observations of Robertson and Ainsworth, and influenced by the ethology (animal behavior) studies of Lorenz and Hinde, the infant studies of Piaget, and his own psychoanalytic training, Bowlby presented his initial groundbreaking ideas on attachment in three formal presentations to the British Psychoanalytic Society in London in the late 50s and early 60s (Bretherton 2000). Rejecting the psychoanalytic explanations of the time, Bowlby described the attachment system as an inborn push toward proximity to a preferred caregiver that results in the establishment of the infant's tie or bond with that caregiver that is well-established by 12 months of age. He proposed that both external and intrapsychic stimuli serve to shape the infant's attachment, which continues to impact functioning throughout the lifespan. His second presentation incorporated Robertson's work on separation responses. Here Bowlby claimed that intense separation anxiety was a sign of a child's feeling of repeated abandonment, while pseudo-independence signified defensiveness and not maturity. In sharp contrast to existing psychoanalytic thinking about dependency and anxiety, Bowlby suggested that a well-loved child develops self-reliance, though initially the child will protest separation from parents. Bowlby's final presentation to the Psychoanalytic Society focused on grief and mourning in infancy and early childhood, a controversial paper due to views that contrasted with those of traditional psychoanalytic theories of development. He believed that grief and mourning occur when the attachment figure is repeatedly unavailable, thereby activating the child's attachment system in the

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form of crying behavior. He also believed that continual parental absences could leave a child with an inability to form deep relationships.

These three papers, which formed the foundation of Bowlby's (1969/1982, 1973, 1980) well-known trilogy on Attachment, Separation, and Loss, initially elicited strong objections from his psychoanalytic colleagues because they veered from Freudian theory and sounded to some like behaviorism. Nevertheless, Bowlby's recognition of the salience of familial relationships and the impact of the environment on infant and child development was compatible with the social work profession's ecological and family systems stance. Indeed, Bowlby realized the existence of a mutual influence between social work and his own psychiatric practice, and he valued numerous social work clinicians in addition to Robertson. In a 1977 interview, Bowlby made a point of talking about his collaboration with social workers at the Canonbury Child Guidance Clinic in England in the late 1930s. He spoke of two social workers there

...who were analytically oriented and who were interested to understand the problems of the parents in terms of their own psychological histories. Well, that is what is widely recognized now but at that time it was new. They were excellent people, they were doing excellent work, and I learned a hell of a lot from them. I learned far more from those two social workers than I learned from my psychiatric colleagues. (Bowlby 1977, p. 12)

Later in the same interview, Bowlby pointed to the influence that he and Winnicott had on social work: "I think that he and I between us have had a very big influence on the social work profession..." (p. 21).

Attachment theory and research do not, however, appear in the social work literature in the United States until the late 1970s, more than 20 years after the first collaboration between Robertson and Bowlby. Students of social work in the mid 1960s (including one of the co-editors of this special issue) were exposed to Bowlby's (1958, 1960) early writings, and by the 1970s, social workers had begun using terms such as "attachment" and "bonding" in their work with children and parents, albeit without tying them to the attachment literature. This was especially the case for social workers (such as the other co-editor of this special issue) who practiced in hospitals and maternal-child health settings and wrote about the relationship between mothers and newborns.

The first social work articles directly referencing the work of Bowlby and other early attachment theorists came out in the latter part of that decade. One of the contributors to this special issue, clinical social worker Pat Sable, published her first article on attachment in *Social Casework*

in 1979. Because there were still so few articles on attachment being published by anyone, Sable became acquainted with both Bowlby and Ainsworth on the strength of her early publications, and John Bowlby stayed at her home in Los Angeles in 1980 while on a lecture tour. The earliest attachment-based articles to appear in this Journal were by Nancy Boyd Webb (1983, 1984). Both were on clinical topics (vacation separations and terminations) and linked to Bowlby's attachment theory.

With these few exceptions, social work clinicians may not have been familiar with the ideas emerging from the early writings of Bowlby and Ainsworth because attachment theory took a decidedly empirical research bent. In contrast, developmental psychologists more widely embraced the observational methods of Ainsworth and Robertson. A developmental psychologist and attachment researcher in her own right, Ainsworth (Ainsworth et al. 1978) began to measure the impact of the quality of maternal caregiving on the development of what she called "attachment styles" that reflect the presence or absence of security in the infant's attachment to the caregiver. The Strange Situation instrument she developed for measuring infant attachment security, still in use more than three decades after her pioneering studies, was based on hours of mother/infant observation in the home, culminating in a brief laboratory study. This study mildly stresses the attachment system of 12-to-18-month-old babies with a series of short separations from the mother. In some of the separations, the infant is left with a stranger; during others, the child is completely alone. The type of response the infant shows to the mother upon reunion is thought to signify the child's internal working model or style of attachment. These patterned responses form the basis for differentiating between those infants who are securely attached and those who show one of two types of insecure attachment: resistant/ambivalent or avoidant.

In subsequent studies, Mary Main (Main et al. 1985; Main and Solomon 1990) identified another category of insecure attachment called "disorganized/disoriented" for those children who behave in a chaotic and inconsistent manner upon reunion after the separations. She and her colleagues also developed an instrument, the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI; George et al. 1996), for studying attachment "states of mind" in adults. The terms she used to describe these states parallel the attachment styles of infancy: secure/autonomous (paralleling secure), preoccupied (for resistant or ambivalent), dismissing (for avoidant) and unresolved/disorganized (for disorganized/disoriented). A large body of research using the Strange Situation and the AAI now documents a robust empirical link between the attachment patterns of infants at 12 months and the attachment classifications of their mothers, suggesting a strong association between the

caregiver's state of mind regarding attachment (which affects responsiveness and sensitivity) and the infant's own attachment organization (Hesse 1999).

Since the advent of the AAI and other measures designed to study adult attachments, attachment research has exploded over the past 20 years in both volume and quality. Consequently, attachment research has sparked the interest of many in the psychoanalytic community because its findings resonate with contemporary theory and practice. An impressive amount of work now documents the existence of attachments across the lifespan (Grossman et al. 2005; Sroufe et al. 2005) and supports the presence of an intergenerational transmission of attachments between infants and caregivers (Cassidy and Shaver 1999). The field of developmental psychopathology has been impacted by attachment research as well, and new models of child, adult, and couple intervention have incorporated attachment constructs (Berlin et al. 2005; Rholes and Simpson 2004; Tosone and Aiello 1999). In addition, attachment research now provides empirical validation for the theoretical views emerging from contemporary self psychology, relational theory, and intersubjectivity (Cortina and Marrone 2003; Fonagy 2001; Mitchell 2000). With the increased interest in attachment theory and research in the clinical practice community, social workers have begun to incorporate attachment ideas into their own work and writing.

In this Journal, for example, a review of attachment literature and research was published in the early 1990s (Schneider 1991), to be followed in subsequent years by a steady stream of clinical, theoretical, and research articles, and book reviews relating to attachment, a number of them by contributors to this present volume (Basham 2002; Bennett 2004, 2006a, 2006b; Bettman 2006; Nelson 1998; Ringel 2005; Sable 1992, 1994). The additional advent of infant observation research and neuro-imaging techniques in the 1990s stimulated increasing numbers of social workers to recognize the significance of infant research for understanding early attachment experiences and their impact on neurobiological development, particularly as it relates to affect regulation. This new integration of the biological into our understanding of infant development highlights in a way never before possible the impact of early infant/parent/caregiver experiences on the nervous system of the developing child and throughout the life span, especially in terms of affect regulation and interpersonal relationships. With the social work profession's emphasis on integrating research, theory, and practice, social workers were also open to recognizing the importance of this new body of work for clinical practice, including psychotherapy. Three articles on neurobiology have been published in this Journal (Baylis 2006; Inbinder 2002; Shapiro and Applegate 2000), and one of them has

been expanded into a book, *Neurobiology for Clinical Social Work* (Applegate and Shapiro 2005).

This burgeoning social work interest in both attachment theory and neurobiology prompted the current co-editors to suggest this Special Issue of *Clinical Social Work Journal*, concentrated on attachment-based social work with adults. Building on the psycho-social behavioral observations of early infant research, the neurobiological research now available highlights as never before possible the early and life-long impact of early attachment experiences. With this current climate in mind, this Special Issue focuses on the "New Directions" and "New Populations" of attachment theory, as practiced by clinical social workers working with adults. Contributions were solicited from clinical social workers around the country who are practicing from and writing about contemporary attachment theory, incorporating the exciting changes linking attachment and affect regulation.

The opening article of this Volume by Drs. Allan and Judith Schore speaks to this profound change that has brought about a new developmental phase in attachment theory and research, a change the Schores call "Modern Attachment Theory." They propose that we now can begin to conceptualize our work in terms of an expanded definition of attachment as the dyadic regulation of affect. The impact of this change ripples throughout the remaining articles in both Part I, "New Directions," and Part II, "New Populations."

Pat Sable, for example, in her article on adult attachment works to build a definition of adult attachment that incorporates both the conceptual and observational aspects of early attachment theory with the latest findings from the neurobiological arena relating to the mutuality of affect arousal, attunement, and regulation. Christine Miscall Brown and Dori Sorter's article follows with a clinical case where the quality of the therapist's voice—pitch, rhythm and intonation—was of primary importance, a fact that was highlighted both in the patient's early attachment traumas and in an eventual telephone treatment phase. Voice quality or prosody is a crucial aspect of right-brain to right-brain maternal/infant arousal, attunement, and regulation that has been noted repeatedly in the neurobiological research (Schore 2003). As demonstrated in Brown and Sorter's article, voice quality is increasingly being understood as critical in the psychotherapeutic relationship as well. In the final article of Part I, Judith Kay Nelson uses both traditional and modern attachment theory and research to build a theory of laughter, a complex, multi-layered attachment behavior appearing early in infant development as well as in the therapeutic relationship.

Historically, attachment theory has been applied to work with parents and young children, but Part II focuses instead on attachment-informed treatment with "New

Populations” of adult clients. Continuing the link outlined in Part I between attachment and affect regulation, the first three articles of this section introduce treatment of clients who present with poor affect regulation and disorganized patterns of relating due to their experiences of trauma. The section begins with an article by Joanna Bettman and Rachael Jaspersen who apply attachment theory to their exciting work with young adults in a wilderness residential treatment setting. They demonstrate how the “extreme novelty” of wilderness treatment, combined with the presence of a secure base of therapeutic caregiving, can activate and alter the attachment systems of young people who have insecure or disorganized attachment patterns.

Next, Sharon Farber uses attachment theory to expand her understanding and support her work with patients who self-harm through eating disorders or self-mutilation. In particular, Farber focuses on the impact of early attachment trauma that results in a disorganized style of attachment and dissociation, a fallback method of regulating overwhelmingly negative affect in the face of trauma. In a third article on work with traumatized clients, Kathryn Basham writes about the treatment of military couples whose attachments have been impacted by deployment stress and the combat trauma of the current Iraq war. Basham presents an original phase-oriented model of couple therapy, which focuses on the treatment of affect dysregulation and the disruption of attachments. Her work illustrates how attachment serves as a foundation for future functioning and stress regulation in the face of war trauma.

Moving away from trauma to looking at normal development, Shoshana Ringel’s article explores the family backgrounds, attachment bonds, and spiritual experiences of Orthodox Jewish women. She makes a creative connection between early attachment experiences and a Kabbalistic perspective that offers a paradigm complementary to attachment theory from which to evaluate the respondents’ religious experiences and identification. Finally, Susanne Bennett contributes an innovative model for teaching new MSW supervisors. In addition to—and expanding on—the usual content for supervisory tasks and process, Bennett incorporates principles and ideas from attachment theory and research into eight monthly face-to-face and internet training modules.

The link between clinical social work and attachment theory was readily apparent to Bowlby, the founding father of attachment theory and research. When Allan Schore, a pioneer in the neurobiological aspects of modern attachment theory, was asked to contribute to this special issue, he made a comment similar to Bowlby’s:

It is so great that the *Clinical Social Work Journal* is doing this special issue on attachment. There is a perfect match between clinical social work and

attachment, going right back to the whole bio-psycho-social focus of traditional social work practice. Social workers have always been attuned to the kinds of issues that we now know to be of crucial importance in development and in treatment. (Personal communication, January 26, 2007)

The link between attachment theory and research and clinical social work is now clearly established. However, social workers have long been more in the role of consumers of theory than its explicators and developers. We are great innovators, creative in our application of theory to the often challenging clients and patients who find their way to us. For much of our history working on the front lines of human suffering, we have been less in the forefront when it comes to putting our ideas, thoughts, work, and accomplishments down in writing. The *Clinical Social Work Journal* was founded to help reverse that trend, so it is fitting that we here highlight some of the leading social work thinkers, researchers, scholars, and practitioners who are adding to the body of knowledge about attachment theory and research and how to apply it clinically.

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