

## Bowlby's legacy

An edited extract from Kraemer, S, Steele H, Holmes J. (2007) A tribute to the legacy of John Bowlby at the centenary of his birth *Attachment & Human Development* 9(4): 303 – 306. This was an introductory editorial in a special edition of A&HD including proceedings of a conference at the Tavistock Clinic organised by Sebastian Kraemer, Howard Steele and Jeremy Holmes.

---

“In the case of human personality the integrating function of the unique mother-figure is one the importance of which I believe can hardly be exaggerated; in this I am at one with Winnicott who has constantly emphasized it . . . I see the ill-effects stemming from maternal deprivation and separation as due in large part to an interference with this function, either preventing its development or smashing it at a critical point” (Bowlby, 1958: 370).

These words were first heard at the British Psychoanalytical Society 50 years ago. Although (as we see from his acknowledgement here of Donald Winnicott, his senior by 10 years), he was far from alone, it was Bowlby's conviction that he was onto a scientific truth based on observable behaviour which made possible attachment theory as we know it today. He uses plain English to powerful effect: the “smashing” of what was yet to be called an attachment. Yet the experiences he describes were not new. They will have been universally experienced but often disregarded as shameful weaknesses of infancy and irrelevant to psychology. It is evidence of the paradigm shift Bowlby created that we cannot now easily, or even at all, imagine an immature mammal that does not seek to be looked after as much as it wants to be fed.

Growing up as he did in the shadow of the First World War, and sent to boarding school from the age of 11 years old, Bowlby's own attachment experiences sensitized him to the agony of loss in childhood. With Winnicott and Emanuel Miller, he had warned in a 1939 letter to the *British Medical Journal*<sup>1</sup> of the dangers of separating small children from their parents during wartime. Again (though we cannot be sure who wrote this phrase) the language is graphic:

. . . It is quite possible for a child of any age to feel sad or upset at having to leave home, but . . . such an experience in the case of a little child can mean far more than the actual experience of sadness. It can in fact amount to an emotional “black-out” and can easily lead to a severe disturbance of the development of the personality which may persist throughout life (Bowlby, Miller, & Winnicott, 1939).

Ten years earlier in 1929, when he was 21 years old, Bowlby had just completed his degree in natural sciences and psychology at Trinity College Cambridge. Instead of going straight to medical school in London, he worked as a teacher in two schools. Of his experience at the second, Priory Gate in Norfolk, he said much later: “. . . when I was there I learned everything that I have known; it was the most valuable six months of my life, really” (van Dijken, 1998). Priory Gate was a progressive school for maladjusted children influenced by the “new psychology,” derived from Freud and contemporary educational psychologists, which understood that children's problems originated in adverse experiences in early life. Bowlby was influenced by one of the teachers in particular, John Alford, who encouraged him to take up psychoanalytical training when he went to London later that year. Two children at the school in particular impressed themselves on him, one almost literally. This was a 7-year-old child at the school who followed him around all day and was known as Bowlby's “shadow.” Bowlby also recalled a 16-year-old “emotionally closed” boy who was a thief. He was the illegitimate child of well-to-do parents, who had handed him over to a nurse to bring him up and then sent him to Eton, from where he was expelled: “. . . thus I was alerted to a possible connection between prolonged deprivation and the development of a personality apparently incapable of making affectional bonds and, because immune to praise or blame, prone to repeated delinquency” (Bowlby, 1981: 2).

---

<sup>1</sup> Much to Bowlby's annoyance a similar letter to *The Times* was not published.

There is a curious and pleasing historical parallel to this phase of Bowlby's life. At the same age, and having just left the same Cambridge college, Isaac Newton also travelled far away from laboratories and universities, and liberated his theorising. In 1666, in retreat from the great plague at his mother's home in Woolsthorpe, as tradition has it, Newton observed the fall of an apple in his garden, later recalling, "In the same year I began to think of gravity extending to the orb of the Moon." Something happened to these two young men that enabled them to think for themselves<sup>2</sup>.

Many years later, each was to formulate theories that changed our understanding of nature in fundamental ways. As Newton had, in his own words, seen further "by standing on ye shoulders of giants,"<sup>3</sup> so did Bowlby. He began his quest as a psychoanalyst both respectful and critical of Freud and his successors but then, after his encounters with Lorenz, Tinbergen, and Hinde<sup>4</sup> in the 1950s, placed the other foot on the shoulder of Darwin, whose successors they were. Mary Ainsworth (1990: 18) believed that "Bowlby's attachment theory began with a sudden flash of insight, sparked by ethology, that led to a scientific revolution, the understanding of personality development."

Yet Bowlby acknowledged that "... a great number of the central concepts of my schema are to be found plainly stated by Freud" (1969/1982: xvi). He noted at the same time that Freud had hoped to develop a theory that included other species. Freud saw human beings as impelled to relate to one another. His touching observation of a child's anxiety in the dark were made before Bowlby was born:

"I have to thank a 3-year-old boy whom I once heard calling out of a dark room: "Auntie, speak to me! I'm frightened because it is so dark." His aunt answered him: "What good would that do? You can't see me." "That doesn't matter," replied the child, "If anyone speaks, it gets light." Thus what he was afraid of was not the dark, but the absence of someone he loved; and he could feel sure of being soothed as soon as he had evidence of that person's presence" (Freud, 1905/1953: 224).

Freud did not see this as evidence of a distinct (and, in mammals, universal) drive as Bowlby was to do (Bowlby, 1973). This was the paradigm shift, stepping away from Freud's tragic view of human nature to define the immature or helpless creature's need for protection as essential in its own right, and adaptive in evolutionary terms. What is thereby left out of the attachment story is the parallel life of dreams, where truth is turned upside down, and where irony, desire, and wickedness play under cover of darkness. The child psychotherapist Juliet Hopkins, Bowlby's niece, said in the 1980s that "attachment theory is the acceptable face of psychoanalysis." At the centenary conference, Judith Trowell described her work as a child and adolescent psychiatrist with the most profoundly abused children and showed that, while attachment methodology is required for systematic research into the damage done, modern psychoanalytical psychotherapy practice, including a respect for the most unpleasant emotions that can be experienced by perpetrator, victim, and therapist alike, is required in its treatment (Trowell, 2004; Trowell et al., 2002).

Attachment theory is now 50 years old. Its founding parents are dead. Their personal and intellectual lives absorbed the culture and science of the early twentieth century, including relatively harsh child rearing practices based on ignorance and behaviourism, and the immeasurable influence of Freud. Unlike Freud, Bowlby had access to concepts and evidence from

---

<sup>2</sup> One could almost describe attachment as an ethological gravitational force.

<sup>3</sup> "What Des-Cartes did was a good step. You have added much several ways, & especially in taking ye colours of thin plates into philosophical consideration. If I have seen further it is by standing on ye shoulders of Giants." [Newton to Hooke, 5th February, 1676.] Kepler and Galileo were the scientists he is thought to be referring to.

<sup>4</sup> Konrad Lorenz and Nikolaas Tinbergen shared the Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine with Karl von Frisch in 1973. Robert Hinde was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society the following year.

systems theory, ethology, and cognitive science. His theory is now established as a scientific giant of its own, with applications from social policy (Rutter & O'Connor, 1999) to infant mental health (Juffer, Bakermans-Kranenburg, & van IJzendoorn, 2008), and adult psychotherapy (Holmes, 2001); the outcome of Bowlby's polymathic scholarship was an account of the long-term influence of early caregiving experiences precise enough to be tested empirically, and flexible enough to be compatible with diverse scientific fields. These fields include developmental and ethological science (Stevenson-Hinde, 2007), child care (Belsky et al., 2007), child psychotherapy (Rustin, 2007), couple therapy (Clulow, 2001), psychoanalysis (Fonagy & Target 2007) and the brain sciences (Schoore 2010).

Bowlby looked forward to a time when children's rights would be respected universally without the need to "champion" them, a task to which he was uniquely suited by his life experience, his endowment, and his distinguished nature. Bowlby's enduring legacy is the welding together of tradition with innovation. He was almost Victorian in his belief in the power of reason, his paternal kindness, and the sheer monumentality of the paradigm shift that he created. At the same time, he courageously anticipated the growth points of our contemporary era: eclecticism, respect for evidence, the importance of incorporating brain science into psychological understanding, and a search for overarching theories which transcend and encompass sectarian allegiances.

### References

- Ainsworth, M. (1990). John Bowlby. *The Tavistock Gazette*, 29, 18.
- Belsky, J., Vandell, D. Burchinal, M. Clarke-Stewart, K.A., McCartney, K., Owen, M. and The NICHD Early Child Care Research Network (2007). Are There Long-term Effects of Early Child Care? *Child Development*, 78, 681-701.
- Bowlby, J. (1958). The nature of the child's tie to his mother. *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, 39, 350–373.
- Bowlby, J. (1973). *Attachment and loss. Vol. 2: Separation: Anxiety and anger*. New York: Basic Books.
- Bowlby, J. (1981). Perspective; a contribution by John Bowlby. *Bulletin of the Royal College of Psychiatrists*, 5, 2–4.
- Bowlby, J. (1969/1982). *Attachment and loss. Vol. 1: Attachment* (2nd ed.). New York: Basic Books.
- Bowlby, J., Miller, E., & Winnicott, D. (1939). *British Medical Journal*, 1202 – 1203.
- Clulow, C. (Ed.). (2001). *Adult attachment and couple psychotherapy*. London: Brunner-Routledge
- Fonagy, P & Target, M (2007) The Rooting of the Mind in the Body: New Links Between Attachment Theory and Psychoanalytic Thought. *J Amer Psychoanal Assoc.* 55(2); 411-456.
- Freud, S. (1905/1953). Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality (1905). In *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol VII, pp. 123 – 245*, London: the Hogarth Press and Institute of Psycho-Analysis.
- Holmes, J. (2001). *The search for the secure base: Attachment theory and psychotherapy*. London: Routledge.
- Juffer, F., Bakermans-Kranenburg, M., & van IJzendoorn, M. H. (eds.) (2008). *Promoting positive parenting: An attachment-based intervention*. New York: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Rustin, M. (2007) John Bowlby at the Tavistock, *Attachment and Human Development*, 9(4):355-359
- Rutter, M., & O'Connor, T. G. (1999). Implications of attachment theory for child care policies. In J. Cassidy & P. R. Shaver (Eds.), *Handbook of attachment: Theory, research, and clinical applications* (pp. 823 – 844). New York: Guilford.
- Schoore, A. (2010) Relational trauma and the developing right brain, in (ed) T. Baradon. *Relational Trauma in Infancy*. London: Taylor & Francis.
- Stevenson-Hinde, J. (2007) Attachment theory and John Bowlby: Some reflections. *Attachment & Human Development* 9(3); 337-42.
- Trowell, J. (2004). Reflections on 'an attachment-based treatment of maltreated children and young people'. *Attachment & Human Development*, 6(3), 279 – 283.
- Trowell, J., Kolvin, I., Weeramanthri, T., Sadowski, H., Berelowitz, M., Glaser, D., & Leitch, I. (2002). Psychotherapy for sexually abused girls: Psychopathological outcome findings and patterns of change. *The British Journal of Psychiatry*, 180, 234 – 247.
- van Dijken, S. (1998). *John Bowlby: his early life*. London: Free Association Books