Editorials

Struggling with Abandonment and Attachment in Relational Psychotherapy

Rachel Wingfield

Attachment theory is often accused of being 'too nice'. 'Where's the anger, where's the hate?' we are often asked by Kleinian colleagues, who tell us they 'go in deeper and come up dirtier'.

In fact, attachment theory sets out to understand and treat the most intense, dangerous, and terrifying aspects of human experience and emotion – separation, loss, isolation, betrayal and abandonment. To a human infant, isolation, separation, or abandonment means death. Proximity to the attachment figure is the only form of security, the only hope for survival. The attachment system is our key to staying alive, a desperate and ruthless mechanism for maintaining proximity to those on whom our continued existence depends. Rage, violence, and despair are all sequelae to the threat or experience of, abandonment and loss in which either physical or emotional annihilation – the very existence of the self – is threatened. In *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence*, Adrienne Rich describes the experience of betrayal, emotional abandonment by the Other, as this:

> For a while we are thrust back onto some bleak, jutting ledge, in a dark pierced by sheets of fire, swept by sheets of rain, in a world before kinship, or naming, or tenderness exist; we are brought close to formlessness.

Bowlby taught us that all children have to develop strategies to manage proximity and relating to the other. Whether secure or insecure, organized, or seemingly disorganized, what we witness in infants' relating to their attachment figures are *all* strategies for ensuring the continued existence of that relationship.

Felicity de Zulueta puts it this way: 'what researchers have come to realize is just how much human beings matter to each other, so much so that psychological trauma has been defined as 'the sudden cessation of human interaction''. She tells us that 'It is unfortunately through the experience of separation that we usually become aware of how much we matter to one another.'

Bowlby emphasizes that emotional abandonment – loneliness and lack of support – is as agonizing a deprivation as hunger. As we know, Bowlby worked with the Robertsons to illustrate the impact of abandonment, even temporary separation, on small children, in the now famous film, *A Two-Year-Old Goes to Hospital*.

Robertson describes the angry reproaches of Laura, a child of two years and four months, whom he had filmed during an eight-day stay in hospital for a minor operation. Some months after her return home, Robertson was showing an early version of his film to her parents, while Laura was in bed, believed asleep. As it happened, Laura awoke, crept into the room and witnessed the last few minutes of the film, in which she was seen on the day of her return from hospital, at first distressed and calling for her mother, later when her shoes are produced delighted at the prospect of going home, and finally departing from hospital with her mother. The film over and the lights switched up, Laura turned away from her mother to be picked up by her father. Then, looking reproachfully at her mother, she demanded, 'Where was you Mummy? Where was you?'

Bowlby describes this kind of anger as coercive anger – the anger of hope, a protest, and an anger that is part of a strategy to ensure the attachment figure does not desert us again. He also describes what he calls dysfunctional anger, the anger of despair, when a person is so intensely, persistently angry that the bond of affection is weakened by the anger, not strengthened. Clinically, we frequently meet clients who present with this kind of anger, and particularly so with clients labelled borderline or diagnosed with dissociative disorders or psychosis. Bowlby describes the anger of despair as follows.

> Instead of strongly rooted affection laced occasionally with hot displeasure, such as develops in children brought up by affectionate parents, there grows a deep-running resentment, held in check only partially by an anxious uncertain affection – at this point hot pleasure may in some circumstances become the cold malice of hatred.

Guntrip says the child feels, 'I wait for her and she never comes', I need her and she is not there, or worse 'they do not care what happens to me', 'they do not care if I die'. He describes this mental state of abandonment as love made angry, love made hungry.

For Bowlby, mourning – the grieving process – is nature's cure for the pain of loss. Often, in therapy, we meet clients who are frozen, who cannot grieve, who are stuck in a phase of the mourning process before the point of accepting the reality of what has happened. These clients continue to search for what was lost, protesting, determined that if they employ all the defence mechanisms at a child's disposal the lost, longed-for other will somehow return. Adults thrown back into this state feel faced with the risk of total loss and destruction, both of themselves and of those they love.

Loving seems to present them with a terrifying choice. If they let themselves be loved, this means that they themselves will inevitably get taken over by the other, insisting on their total compliance and swallowing them whole. The only alternative is to keep others at bay. A destructive force appears to intrude repeatedly into the relationship between therapist and patient: not innate aggression, but the violence of the perpetrator. The therapist is left in the countertransference with feelings of being devoured and overwhelmed, annoyed and confused.

In her autobiography, *After Silence: Rape and My Journey Back*, Raine describes 'The Desire to hide, disappear or die' as a very important feature in shame – a shrinking of the body.

She tells us,

> I hated and blamed the parts of myself that had failed to protect me from overwhelming loss – those maternal aspects of myself that had once been capable of providing comfort and coherence but that had abandoned me. Although the Greek poets did not tell us what Persephone felt in the underworld after her abduction, I sometimes feel I know. She felt her mother had failed her. Her mother did not love her and had never loved her. She was so bad that even her own mother had abandoned her.

Bowlby teaches us that we need a secure base in order to love, but also in order to let go.

Finally, then, in the words of the poet Mary Oliver:

> In Blackwater Woods
> Every year
> Everything
> I have ever learned
>
> In my lifetime
> Leads back to this: the fires
> And the black river of loss
> Whose other side
>
> Is salvation,
> Whose meaning
> None of us will ever know.
> To live in this world
>
> You must be able
> To do three things:
> To love what is mortal;
> To hold it
>
> Against your bones knowing
> Your own life depends on it;
> And, when the time comes to let it go,
> To let it go.

The Great British Childhood Robbery

Simon Partridge

Last June, following the Brown Cabinet reshuffle, the Education *Guardian* carried a spread 'Under new management' on the new departmental arrangements for education and children – see http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2009/jun/09/schools-14–19-education. What leapt out at me then was the sentence, 'The government's ambition [is] to make the UK the best place in the world to grow up'. The rhetoric seemed to have lost all contact with reality: I would settle for moving from last place in the UN Children's Fund industrial countries assessment to about half way up – from twenty-first to, say, tenth. According to the *Observer* (2 August 2009), thirty children have been murdered or died as result of abuse in the two years since the Baby P scandal.

I have come to the conclusion that we British live in a culture which is almost totally out of touch with the emotional needs and creativity of childhood – but we only notice when there's a Baby P, or a young girl starves to death in her own home. How did *nobody* notice: neighbours, school, GP? I happened to be explaining to a Belgian child psychologist about my critique of boarding schools, and we got around to the young age at which children here start schooling – whether day or boarding. In Belgium it is six; in Scandinavia it is seven or eight. My Belgian friend said, 'It's tough on teachers as well as kids.' No argument. We were left with the question as to why it goes on.

Perhaps we can get some stronger language about this, something along the lines that children should not be *robbed* of their childhood by a society and pedagogy which prioritizes the convenience of [some] parents and industry over the developmental needs of children.

I have been re-reading John Bowlby's *A Secure Base* – his marvellous collection of accessible lectures. The one on 'The origins of attachment theory' is the best short introduction I know, and ends with a fine résumé of the research findings:

> The literature is now enormous . . . a comprehensive and critical review of the field has been published by Rutter [1979] who concludes by referring to the 'continuing accumulation of evidence showing the importance of [parental/emotional]

deprivation and disadvantage on children's psychological development' and expressing the view that the original arguments 'have been amply confirmed'.

It is no accident that Bowlby was strongly opposed to sending young children off to boarding schools: 'I'm very much against young children going to boarding school'.

The Boarding Schools Association has not really got a leg to stand on – and in her heart, director Hilary Moriarty knows it. When pressed, she agreed with me on Radio 5 Live ('Are boarding schools good for children?' *The Richard Bacon Show*, 28/29 May 2009) that she would not send her own young children off. The knowledge has been around for 30+ years – the expanded Department for Children, Schools and Families please note! (Such views are echoed in the recently published Cambridge Review of primary education, and apparently immediately dismissed by Ed Balls the Secretary for Education.)

Not NICE
Science and Psychoanalysis Yet Again

Joseph Schwartz

Before becoming a psychotherapist, I had a career as a physicist. My boss in Berkeley, Luis Alvarez, led a group consisting of some twenty physicists, fifteen graduate students, and over 200 technicians who built new experimental equipment. For that work, Luis won the 1968 Nobel Prize in physics for discoveries of new elementary particles.

This was big science in every sense of the word. It bore very little relationship to the romantic stories of the string and sealing wax physics of Rutherford's McGill–Manchester–Cambridge discovery of the atomic nucleus, or to Faraday's wire and batteries discovery of the dynamo in the early nineteenth century.

It also bore no relationship whatsoever to the tidy little fables of 'scientific method'. Physics was a lot of hard work, was entirely opportunistic in its methods, not easily summarized in a few simple words, and was filled with conflict, often irreconcilable. Physics is an observational science. But there is no such thing as simply looking through the telescope to see what is there. When the stakes are high, no one initially agrees about what is being seen.

Galileo saw four fuzzy flecks of light in his 20× telescope. Seventy years after Galileo observed four moons circling Jupiter, the Royal Observatory in Greenwich still found it necessary to reassure visitors that what they saw in the telescope was not simply something within the instrument.

An example closer to home in time and space is infant observation studies, where what is seen is to a great extent influenced by what one believes one is looking at. If we compare what Kleinian baby observation yields versus, say, Dan Stern's babies, or Colwyn Trevarthen's babies, we see that what they observe and interpret is different: on the one hand, innate aggression, on the other a drive for relationship.

Usually, we think these differences are due to the imprecision of the psychoanalytic project. But, in fact, they are simply the psychoanalytic version of what happens in laboratories all over the world. Consider the complete revision of the fossils of the Burgess shale by Conway Morris, with the placing of the human being not at the top of an evolutionary tree, but at the side of an evolutionary bush, a mere twig in a theory of contingent evolutionary history.

Thomas Kuhn is often quoted for his idea of the paradigm shift introduced in 1962. Kuhn, a theoretical physicist, was concerned to put the record straighter than it had been. His distinction between so-called normal science, when everything proceeds within uncontested frameworks, and revolutionary science, when the paradigm is up for grabs, was helpful in demystifying an idealized scientific method. But Kuhn did not describe the painful, bloody, and bloody-mindedness of real paradigm shifts as they actually occurred historically – the high ideological stakes, the fights, the irreconcilable enmities, and the suicides: Boltzmann, originator of statistical mechanics, in 1903; Ehrenfest, an architect of quantum mechanics and Einstein's best friend, in 1932. The post-positivist literature on science from the 1970s on is good on all this.

What are the real issues in the question of science and psychoanalysis, again? Where has NICE (National Insitute for Clinical Excellence) got it wrong?

One way to understand at a deeper level the nature of the psychoanalytic project is to recognize the similarities and differences between physics and psychoanalysis.

In fact, both disciplines are relational.

Physics is a set of narratives (the scientific literature) about our relationship to the physical world of inanimate matter, coming from our experience of making things like steam engines, or by making special instruments for

explorations in laboratory settings. Psychoanalysis is a set of narratives about our relationships to each other, coming from our experience of talking to each other in the highly structured, specially designed space of the analytic hour, Freud's great invention.

Some colleagues have taken the stance that psychoanalysis is not a science but a hermeneutic discipline, concerned with meaning rather than truth. But the question of whether the theories and observations of psychoanalysis are scientific is a distraction. The important question is whether they are any good. Such a question is not going to be resolved either by donning a white coat and calling oneself a scientist, or by wearing whatever one wants and calling oneself a hermeneut.

The difficulty of finding a disciplined form of discourse inside our field with which to engage difference rather than breaking off into sects is one of the factors that lie behind the difficulty of our believing in the legitimacy of psychoanalysis as a serious, effective discipline. It is, in part, our own lack of confidence that leads us to being abused as being unscientific. Peter Fonagy has pointed out that psychotherapy is an extremely effective treatment: only one in 128 persons suffering from atherosclerosis (heart disease) is helped by daily aspirin, whereas one in three people are helped by psychotherapy.

The rubric of so-called evidence-based practice is a thinly disguised attack on the talking cure. The NICE guidelines have been informed by the values of academic psychology, a discipline which, throughout its history going back to Edwin G. Boring's *History of Experimental Psychology* (1929), has been a discipline that has too often seemed to be more concerned with Being Scientific than with finding out anything of interest or value to the human condition.

As many colleagues have pointed out, what we need is practice-based evidence, not evidence-based practice. Why, if, as is now clear, psychotherapy is an extremely effective treatment, are we not learning from what we actually do rather than being subjected to the abusive claim that we are not scientific? It is time to make a better fist of what we have learned from over 100 years of effective clinical experience. We need practice-based evidence. Not the evidence-based practice of our insecure, ideologically motivated colleagues.