Editorial by Members of the Editorial Board

Attachment theory, twenty-five years since the death of John Bowlby: still keeping it real

Kate Brown

“It’s better to be on the side of humanity.”

Don McCullin, 2012

This second of two special editions of the Attachment Journal, marking twenty-five years since the death of John Bowlby is both a celebration of attachment theory and its founder’s life’s work, and an opportunity to reflect on the application of attachment theory in 2015. The first edition contained a transcript of the last known interview with John Bowlby. Deborah Rodriguez’s careful and scholarly thematic analysis of the transcript identified the overarching theme of the importance to him of real life events. The implication of this observation stretches far beyond the application of attachment theory in clinical practice in the confines of private individual consulting rooms—to its impact on social, political, economic, and global policy.

Those who find value in the stress on the importance of real life events might feel that this comes with the call to be more socially and politically active, wanting to address the social injustice, inequality, and real life circumstances Bowlby stressed were so damaging to mental and physical health. We might find that we become “therapist/activists” or “activist/therapists”. If we acknowledged the impact of real life events, we may at times feel compelled to act, and need to make our understanding accessible to those in the “real world”—beyond the familiarity of our professional circles, and beyond our comfort zone.

In the news recently there have been heart-breaking stories of thousands of refugees compelled out of desperation to risk their lives attempting to cross oceans in overcrowded rubber dinghies. There has also been the closure of the charity Kids Company, accident and emergency departments, maternity wards, older people’s day centres, and psychiatric wards. Some have gone so far as to argue:
disorganized attachments and associated complications in self-organization can occur, at least in part, because society has relinquished its caretaking function, demolished its institutions for supporting emotional development, and shifted its priorities from the mental and emotional to the material. (Fonagy, 1999, pp 23–24)

I suspect Bowlby’s message to us, that we matter to each other, and that we are as inter-dependent as we are vulnerable is as relevant and important for us to heed in 2015 as it was in the post war period when Bowlby began his life’s work.

Bowlby’s message to the next generation of attachment theorists? I suspect that the themes may remain the same. To carry on stressing the importance of real life events, to be courageous in the face of dismissal, to seek a community of like-minded peers who are able to recognise the importance of real life experience—and keep exploring the impact of real life events in the clinical work. 2015 can feel very bleak at times, and the far reaching implications of attachment theory may only just be being realised or articulated and there is much work to do. I feel extremely privileged to have seen this celebration of Bowlby’s life work and look forward to the possibility of reading the fiftieth anniversary edition of this journal and seeing the developments of attachment theory over the next twenty-five years.

References


Letter to John Bowlby

Orit Badouk Epstein

I have always wanted to write John Bowlby a letter, and so, what would be more appropriate than to seize the moment and write about my own reverence for this great man, when we are currently commemorating the twenty-fifth anniversary since his death, a man who was a pioneer of the theory of the mind and who profoundly shaped the quality of my life as well as the lives of millions of others.
Dear John,

When one person’s ideas make an impression on another person, irrespective of time or place, the imprint of that idea will remain within us for as long as we live. I clearly remember, that winter sunny Saturday morning in 1992, when I came across an article in *The Guardian* about attachment theory. I was relatively new in this country, having just become a mother and, as you can imagine, having to make a lot of adjustments to my life. Reading about separation anxiety and the impact of mourning and loss on our everyday life filled me with tears but also gave me a sense of exhilaration and elation. This was the first time that, I faced my own personal grief.

Embedded in empirical analysis, unlike any other previous social theory, attachment theory deeply resonated with my inner and outer experiences, organising the many doubts that used to preoccupy me. I was constantly searching for words that could narrow the gap between my implicit knowing and explicit language. Finding attachment theory, felt like matching the right lyrics to a powerful tune, or like applying accurate subtitles to my emotional state, moreover it felt like coming home; a theory that goes right to the core and is a centre of exchange for ideas about us as human beings and our relationship with others. I liked Anthony Storr’s endorsement of you in the first first volume of your “Trilogy” *Attachment and Loss*. He wrote: “his contribution has given psychoanalysis a shot in the arm and a biological perspective that was sadly lacking.”

Suddenly everything made sense! Just as you never forgot little John’s sadness when you lost your nanny Minnie, or when you faced separation while attending boarding school, little me has always remembered the pain of separation, rejection, and loss from my own caregivers. Your sharp intellect and the manner and the profusion of detail with which you wrote the trilogy on attachment reflects your own deep understanding and insight about the way in which loving attachment relationships define us and how in the absence of such relationships, only fear will replace them. Nevertheless, attachment theory is a theory of hope since we possess an emotive power that can strengthen as well as weaken our sense of security in the world. As you wrote: “Two main characteristics of man are his versatility and his capacity for innovation. Exercising these gifts he has in recent millennia extended the environments in which he is living and breeding to include extremes of natural conditions.” (Bowlby, 1997, p. 58).

It is now the year 2015, with the help of technology, your theory has finally been exposed to wider society. The other day I heard someone on the radio saying that we are currently going through the “revolution of kindnesses” and empathy is mentioned on every agenda and in scientific debate. The seeds of attachment theory are sprouting rapidly across the globe. Sadly, these are also times of economic austerity, joined with the current refugee crisis in the Middle East and Africa. We are still at the mercy of a myriad of external factors that disrupt the growth of secure attachments.
On my recent summer vacation, I read Japan’s celebrated author Haruki Murakami’s latest novel *Colourless Tsukuru Tazaki and His Years of Pilgrimage*. In this mournful journey, the manner in which the author depicts the protagonist’s emotional suffering is haunting and painfully describes his feelings of separation, loss, and the universality of insecure attachment; our fear of abandonment and the enduring need for others. He writes:

Like a young tree absorbing nutrition from the soil, Tsukuru got the substance he needed as an adolescent from this group, using it as necessary food to grow, storing what was left as an emergency heat source inside him. Still, he had a constant, nagging fear that someday he would fall away from this intimate community, or be forced out and left on his own. Anxiety raised its head, like a jagged, ominous rock exposed by the receding tide, the fear that he would be separated from the group and end up entirely alone. (Murakami, 2014, p. 12)

and again:

Something must have happened, something had taken place while he was away to make them create this distance. Something inappropriate, and offensive. But what it was—what it could possibly be—he simply had no clue.

He was left feeling like he’d swallowed a lump of something he shouldn’t have, something he couldn’t spit out, or digest. He stayed home the whole day waiting for the phone to ring. His mind was unfocused and he was unable to concentrate. He’d left repeated messages with his friend’s families, telling them he was in Nagoya. Usually his friends would call right away and cheerfully welcome him back, but this time the phone remained implacably silent. (Murakami, 2014, p. 25)

In the face of similar urban alienation described in the novel, we also see the digital industry’s efforts to try very hard to meet our attachment needs and provide us with apps that facilitate love. But so far, advances in technology coupled with insecure attachment, have not been able to prevent the break up and heartaches that follow our yearning for a genuine connection. I could go on writing more about this topic but sadly it is time for me to conclude since I have already exceeded my word limit for this editorial.

In your last interview, which we are all excited to see published at the upcoming conference and special issue of this journal, when asked about endings in therapy, with the conviction of your wisdom, you said: “It’s a silly idea!” And so now that my explicit knowledge has integrated with the implicit; knowing that human reason and the capacity for love can reform the world around us, my relationship with attachment theory, hence with you, will always remain a big part of me.

I give you my gratitude,

Yours,

Orit
Thoughts about the work of John Bowlby and its significance to me

Emerald Davis

I was not explicitly aware of John Bowlby’s work in the early years of my nursing career. However, I often wondered about the impersonal and institutionalised care patients received and often thought that there must be another way.

Looking back, I now appreciate the relevance of Bowlby’s understanding of attachment, separation, and loss to that thought process.

On the 1st October 1958, I arrived in the UK from Guyana to embark on a psychiatric nurse training. The UK’s appearance was cold and grey, a stark contrast to the warmth and colour of the homeland I had just left. The experience was very traumatic to say the least and I struggled to mentally and emotionally stay afloat. The food tasted awful and the nights were unbearably cold. I always went to bed with my hot water bottle, which was earthen ware, only to be awoken in the middle of the night with the sensation of being in a freezing cold river. In addition to that physical shock were feelings of frustration and anger. I discovered to my horror that I was being made to work as a domestic instead of pursuing my psychiatric training.

It was during my general nurse training, while working on the children’s ward that I could not help seeing the distress of the children. They had been separated from their parents and were only allowed to see them during short visiting hours. Their experience of separation and loss resonated with my own, particularly when I emigrated to the UK.

Much later, working in the community as a District Nurse I encountered the sadness and loneliness of the elderly. They were often isolated and out of touch with their own children. It deepened my understanding of the pain of separation and highlighted the importance of attachment throughout the life cycle.
The next phase of my journey “officially” introduced me to Bowlby’s work. I began my therapeutic training at the Institute of Self Analysis (the forerunner to The Bowlby Centre), which I enjoyed immensely, particularly as I recognised the value of attachment. We were actively encouraged to promote bonding between students and teachers. Oh how I enjoyed the paired walks we had on Hampstead Heath followed by “Circles” where we shared our insights in a very empathic way.

That experience brought me full circle from my implicit awareness to a more explicit understanding of John Bowlby’s work. I was so delighted that we held a twenty-fifth anniversary conference to celebrate his life and work in September 2015. It helped demonstrate to me the universality of his theory and that it remains as relevant today as ever.

John Bowlby and his influence and impact

Yvonne Forward

I first became aware of Bowlby’s work at an open day at the Centre for Attachment Based Psychoanalytic Psychotherapy (now known as The Bowlby Centre).

Susan Vas Dias spoke of attachment theory and the importance of the relationship between a baby and his or her primary caregiver and everything she covered resonated with me on a personal level.

It became clear how we innately seek out relationships and will attach to our primary caregivers regardless of the quality of the relationship. Compromises are made if the quality is not as attuned or as caretaking as needed to enable a secure attachment.

When working with clients I regularly see the fall out from those early relationships playing out in their relationship difficulties as adults. Disorganised, ambivalent, avoidant, and occasionally secure attachments with early caregivers are often the starting point and also the axis around which the work that my clients and I enter into play out.

Bowlby’s attachment theory and his writing on loss and mourning are at the very core of my working methods and without these I am not sure what kind of therapist I would be.
I am grateful to Bowlby for his work both on a personal and a professional level—that Open Day proved to be a life changing one for me and opened the door to a new world, understanding myself and others better.

It seems more and more clients are also finding resonance with Bowlby’s work as increasingly those seeking therapy have selected me on the basis that I am an attachment-based psychotherapist.

There is much to celebrate as I remember and reflect on Bowlby’s work twenty-five years after his death.

The work goes on . . .

Gülcan Sutton Purser

John Bowlby would be so pleased to see that attachment theory is being applied and incorporated into so many different areas and is so widely used to solve many important issues.

In the preface to Exploring in Security, Jeremy Holmes writes: “The task of therapy is both to explore insecurity, its origins and ramifications, and to provide a space where a person can explore in security” (Holmes, 2010, p. ix).

In this contribution to our group editorial, I would like to look at how I evolved as an attachment based psychotherapist since my training at The Bowlby Centre, and what it took to be authentic and more relational.

When I completed my training, I was told by my registration interviewers that I was very relational. My training was just the beginning and it took a further ten years before I could fully appreciate how to be genuine and relational as a psychotherapist. I came to learn that knowing something and experiencing it are two different things. I learnt the difference between understanding, which comes from knowledge, and realisation, which comes from direct experience. Knowledge has no heart, it does not sustain or nourish. I came to learn that life requires more than knowledge, it requires constant energy and feelings.

Training in attachment theory can equip us to be relational psychotherapists, but after all, we are all wounded healers, we have all probably been insecurely attached, hopefully now “earned secure”. We mostly work in isolation, we may often deny our need for others, for support and care, and we may then become antisocial or isolated while lecturing others about the importance of social interest and play.
Being a truly attachment-based therapist is to see the child in our clients, not to keep them as the child. I have been blessed with many teachers and influences in my life. The ones that had a long lasting effect were the ones who engaged with me, who smiled warmly, who held my hand as well as who let me go, who let me be, who saw the child and validated her, welcomed me, who stood steady in the face of the teenager, validating her struggle, challenging gently . . . and who respected me. This is a tough job, a tall order but it is rewarding to be a good parent/therapist for insecurely attached attachment-based psychotherapists.

So please hold this in mind, as our pioneer John Bowlby shows and inspires us that the work to be relational and authentic goes on . . .

Reference