

Lecture Twelve

Bowlby and Ainsworth's Attachment Theory



Spend a little time to reflect on what you think are the functions of a strong parent-baby attachment.

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- This lecture introduces attachment theory by first describing John Bowlby's history, including his early psychoanalytic training and his concern with explaining how children react to the loss of a loved one and their need for protection.
- It then describes Mary Ainsworth's history, including her work in Uganda; her concern with explaining how we can have connectedness and independence simultaneously; and her associations with, and influence on, Bowlby.
- The lecture discusses the importance of the concept of a secure base, for which the theory was famous.
- The lecture concludes with a discussion of the functions of an attachment system for the adaptation of the species.

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A crucial factor for optimal child development is that an infant becomes connected to other people, especially to her parents. We have already seen that Freud and Erikson both addressed the issue of how parent-child relationships are formed. Erikson, in particular, described the development of trust as the foundation of all subsequent developmental accomplishments. However, these two theorists did not focus primarily on the formation of this early and important relationship.

Two researchers, John Bowlby and Mary D. S. Ainsworth, developed a theory of parent-child attachment that focused entirely on the process of how and why this attachment develops in children and what happens when a healthy attachment does not develop.

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John Bowlby is considered the primary founder of attachment theory, which has led to thousands of scientific studies and changes in important policies of child care, including how children are treated in hospitals and even changes in childbirth procedures.

Bowlby was born in 1907 in England and died there in 1990.

- **1.** He was a physician and child psychiatrist who worked in the Freudian psychoanalytic tradition; however, he became dissatisfied with Freudian theory, especially as he tried to explain how attachments develop. He found psychodynamic theory inadequate in dealing with real relationships in a child's life.
- **2.** Instead, Bowlby used the newly developed ethology theory to explain why we need a strong attachment system and how it develops. We will discuss ethology theory in the next lecture.
- **3.** He published his first paper laying out his theory of attachment in 1957.
- **4.** Bowlby was greatly influenced by the independent theoretical work of Ainsworth. It is now difficult to separate entirely which parts of attachment theory came from which theorist.

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- After World War II, several child researchers and child therapists took a keen interest in the ravaging effects on children of being deprived of their parents.
- **1.** For example, another psychoanalyst, Rene Spitz, studied children (often in orphanages) who did not have consistent caregivers and, consequently, suffered from depression and a failure to thrive.
- **2.** Bowlby and his colleagues did research on children in hospitals who were separated from their parents and children who suffered the loss of their parents.
- **3.** They described how a child suffering from separation from a parent went through stages of detachment, similar to the adult mourning process. The stages were protest and anxiety, withdrawal and depression, and finally, detachment and lack of connections. This process explained chronic losses, as well as temporary losses (such as those leading to homesickness).
- **4.** All of this research pointed to the conclusion that strong parent-child attachment was not just important, but it was necessary to the survival and healthy development of children.
- **5.** These conclusions, coming from a research field independent of Erikson, were in agreement with Erikson's view of the first stage of development. However, whereas Erikson merely described general development, Bowlby (and Ainsworth) laid out the specific mechanisms and processes that would bring about attachment, and they provided empirical evidence for how it developed.
- From 1969 to 1980, Bowlby published a trilogy of books on attachment, separation, and loss. These books have become his most important publications on his theory and research.

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- Mary Ainsworth, first working independently of Bowlby, then in conjunction with him, influenced attachment theory to such an extent that she became a cofounder of the theory and some of its primary research methods.
- **A.** Ainsworth was born in 1913 in Ohio and died in 1999 in Virginia.
 - **1.** She did her undergraduate and graduate work at the University of Toronto and received her Ph.D. there in 1939.
 - **2.** During World War II, she served in the Canadian Army and rose to the rank of major.
 - **3.** In 1950, Ainsworth joined Bowlby for the first time, with an accompanying interchange of ideas and influences on each other's theory. Throughout the rest of her life, she repeatedly reconnected with Bowlby in developing further theoretical ideas and sharing data.
 - **4.** After the war, Ainsworth moved to Uganda, where she completed intensive studies of mother-child interactions and discovered three main patterns of attachment, which we will discuss later.
 - **5.** In 1956, Ainsworth went to Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore and carried out an intensive investigation of mothers and children in that city. She used the classifications she had discovered in Uganda and found that they applied to American families, as well.
 - **6.** In 1976, she moved to the University of Virginia and stayed there until her retirement. Her later work focused on attachments beyond infancy and into adulthood.

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- Ainsworth's main ideas developed while working with her advisor in graduate school, William Blatz, who had developed a theory for the role of security in humans.
- **1.** Ainsworth used this theory to develop the idea of a secure base in infant attachments.
- **2.** Ainsworth argued that having a strong attachment provided the child not with a dependent and helpless relationship to the parent but a sense of security as a base. From this secure base, the child could then explore, take risks, and in fact, behave more independently, rather than being dependent and helpless.
- **3.** Once again, one can see a convergence of views from independent sources. The view of a secure base coincides with Erikson's view of autonomy and initiative being made possible by a foundation of trust.
- **4.** Ainsworth argued that one can never be too securely attached because attachment continues to be adaptive throughout one's life, while dependence does not. Dependence is not the same thing as attachment.
- In 1978, Ainsworth, with some of her students, published an influential book, *Patterns of Attachment*, which lays out the most important points of her theory and research.

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- In the joint theory of Bowlby and Ainsworth, humans have evolved a built-in attachment system that is necessary for the survival and adaptation of the species.
- **A. Humans have the longest period of immaturity of any species and the longest proportion of the life span spent in immaturity.**
 - **1.** This period of immaturity allows humans **to learn** and be influenced by the environment and culture and, thus, develop flexibility, rather than having everything “hard wired” into the nervous system or controlled by instincts.
 - **2.** However, such a period of immaturity requires an equally long period of intense parenting and care to ensure that the immature offspring are **protected.**
 - **3.** How does nature ensure that the adults of the species will care for the offspring and the offspring will stay with the parents? This connection is maintained through **reciprocal attachment** of the child to the parent and the parent to the child.
 - **4. Attachment can be defined as the strong preference of a person to be in close proximity to another specific person and to feel comfortable when close to the person and distressed when separated from the person.**

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- **What does this reciprocal attachment system accomplish for the child? What adaptive functions does it serve?**
- **1.** First and most important, this reciprocal attachment guarantees that **the basic needs of the child are met**, that is, the needs for food, warmth, shelter, and protection from harm. In return, for the parent (or parent substitute) meeting these needs of the child, some needs are met as well, such as those for physical contact, social stimulation, the need to nurture, and the need to feel needed.
- **2.** Second, this attachment gives the child a **sense of security and trust** and quells the child's fears.
- **3.** Third, it facilitates **exploration and independent functioning in the child**.
 - a. The two motivations of seeking security and exploring the world seem to be opposites of each other.
 - b. The paradox of the system is that this may be the only way that the child can meet both of these needs. Development of a secure base gives the child the consistency by which she can take risks in exploring or trying out new behaviours.)

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- 4. Fourth, attachment to another person **focuses the child's attention on that person** (through positive emotional arousal, eye contact, and proximity) so that the child is primed to learn from the attached person. For example, attached individuals become the best teachers for children.
- 5. Fifth, attachment provides a **model and experience with relationships for the development of future relationships**, such as friendships and love relationships. We will discuss this primary function later.
- In the next lecture, we will discuss how nature ensures the formation of a secure attachment so that these needs can be met.
- <http://psychology.about.com/od/loveandattraction/ss/attachmentstyle.htm>
- <http://www.cyc-net.org/cyc-online/cycol-0304-bowlby.html>