

# TWO ATTACHMENT CONFERENCES reviewed

The week of 22nd June, 1987 saw two remarkable international conferences in London, both honouring John Bowlby on his 80th birthday. The first was a small workshop for 25 research workers from many parts of the world. They came from various disciplines but have in common a deep interest in 'Attachment' (i.e. love). The second conference, at Regent's College, enabled a much larger audience to hear about the research that has been done in this field. Having attended both conferences I now have the task of editing a book which will be an update of an earlier volume 'The Place of Attachment in Human Behaviour', (Tavistock Publications 1982. Ed. C. M. Parkes & J. Stevenson-Hinde) which arose out of a similar conference eight years ago.

## Toddlers

So what is new in the field of Attachment? Students of the earlier research will recall that important work had been carried out observing the behaviour of toddlers in a standard 'Strange Situation'. The American psychologist, Mary Ainsworth, who developed this test was present at both conferences as were several other researchers who have been using and developing it. Ainsworth showed that while many toddlers, on being separated from their mothers for short periods in a strange room, cry but do not become distraught; when mother returns they cuddle and welcome her back, then carry on playing reasonably happily. These babies are 'securely attached'.

Two other patterns are found among babies who are 'insecurely attached'. In one, the babies become excessively upset on separation. When mother returns they either cling intensely or attack her. In the third pattern the babies take little notice of mother's departure, when she returns they pointedly avoid her. The earlier research suggested that the child's behaviour reflects the mother's style of mothering. Mothers who are sensitive to their babies' bids for attention, who respond to the child's needs in an objective, coherent and consistent way while encouraging it to play and explore its world, will tend to have securely attached babies. Mothers who are themselves anxious, over protective or inconsistent in responding to their babies, have insecure 'clinging' babies, while mothers who cannot stand closeness or who reject their babies' advances tend to have avoidant babies. Thus the baby learns to cope with the mother.

While these results fit well with John Bowlby's theories about the nature of child-mother attachments, there was much uncertainty regarding the importance of these findings; were they peculiar to the USA, would they predict how the child would behave towards father and other people, would they predict how the child would develop later in life and which, if any of these patterns, would indicate vulnerability to later behaviour problems?

## Follow-up studies

Recent research has now answered these questions and evoked some new ones. Perhaps the most interesting finding is Ainsworth and Main's discovery of a fourth pattern of behaviour in the Strange Situation Test. In the original research there was a small group of infants whose behaviour was deemed 'unclassifiable' because it was variable and inconsistent. Follow-up studies at the age of six indicate that all four patterns of behaviour predict

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how the mother-child relationship will develop. Secure babies remain secure, clinging babies are now controlling their mothers, avoidant babies appear self-reliant and independent of mother. It is the fourth group that are behaviourally disturbed: anxious youngsters who seem very unsure in their relationships with others. Closer examination of eight of these children revealed that in seven cases the mother had suffered 'an unresolved grief reaction'. This seems to have resulted in highly inconsistent mothering which left the baby confused and uncertain in its response to its mother.

The findings in America have now been replicated in Germany by the Grossmans. Relationships with fathers have also been studied and it is reassuring to find that a child with an unsatisfactory relationship with its mother often has a satisfactory relationship with its father. Although relationships with father are less important than those with mother they do help to mitigate any harmful influence which she may have.

## Parenting

An Adult Attachment Interview has now been developed by Kobak which attempts to measure the quality of childhood attachments retrospectively. American college students who reported their childhood attachments as 'secure' were more likely to be said by their colleagues to be resilient, able to cope with distress and less anxious and angry than those who rated their parental attachments as 'insecure'. Among the 'insecurely attached' group those who had avoided contact with parents were more 'hostile' at college and those who were rated as 'preoccupied' with their parents were more 'anxious' at college.

This study confirms the part which parenting can play in producing trust in oneself and trust in others. Four configurations are possible:

- 1 High self-trust and high other trust.
- 2 High self-trust and low other trust
- 3 Low self-trust and high other trust.
- 4 Low self-trust and low other trust.

The first of these patterns seems to result from secure parenting, the second from anxious, over-protective parenting, the third from indifferent parenting (which results in the child having to stand on his own feet from an early age), and the fourth from chaotic parenting.

The importance of these attachment patterns in bereavement is confirmed in my own clinical studies of 54 people who attended my psychiatric clinic for the treatment of psychiatric problems after bereavement.

## Stress and bereavement

Among the other papers, Liotti showed the importance of insecure attachment in the origin of agoraphobia, and Adam, its importance as a precursor of parasuicide (so-called 'attempted suicide').

Tirril Harris (whose work with Brown on the relationship between life events and

clinical depression is justly famous) reported independent confirmation (by Kendell) of her earlier finding that the death of a mother in early childhood increases vulnerability to major (psychotic) depression in adult life whereas loss of a mother by other causes (separation, divorce etc.) predisposes to neurotic depression in adult life. Loss of a father is less likely to have this effect.

The explanation for these findings is to be found in the lack of adequate substitute care which is provided for children after the death of a mother and the feelings of helplessness which result. Seligman's theory that predisposition to depression results from 'learned helplessness' is supported by this research. Understandably these influences were greater if the death occurred before the age of six than they were if it occurred when the child was older.

Interestingly, loss of a mother, with consequent feelings of helplessness, was also associated with higher rates of premarital pregnancy.

## Attachment concepts

There is no space here to review all of the rich and complex theorising and the detailed analysis of the underlying nature of human attachments which took place at these two conferences. Robert and Joan Hinde provided us with well argued insights into the biological origins of attachment and two sociologists, Marris and Robert Weiss, have successfully linked our theories of attachment in childhood with theories of social relationships in adult life. John Byng-Hall demonstrated how useful attachment concepts can be when used in family therapy, Wolkind and Trowell demonstrated their value in helping the courts to decide upon issues relating to the care and custody of children in the face of divorce and other situations, Pound and Mills had found attachment concepts of value in explaining the success of an organisation, New-Pin, which provides emotional support to young mothers.

## Communication

John Bowlby, without whose work much of the research would never have been possible, added his own gloss to the events. He focused on communication as an essential component of attachment. A child, in communicating with his attachment figures much of the time and in a free way, will also be communicating within himself. The parent confirms, amplifies and enables the child to understand himself. Thus external communication facilitates internal communication. In psychotherapy and counselling we set out to establish communication. Increased 'freedom of communication' could be a good measure of the effectiveness of therapy.

The workshop was supported by the King's Fund who have first option on the publication of a book which will contain further details of most of the projects which I have mentioned and much else besides. It will probably be titled 'Attachment across the Life Span'.

## "ARE MOTHERS REALLY NECESSARY?"

Dr. Bowlby reflects on his controversial theories on mother-child bonding in an ITV 7-part series of Health & Family Matters, Mondays, 11.30 a.m. from 30th November, 1987.