

John Bowlby revisited – a retrospective review

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Abstract: This article is a retrospective review of the three volumes of Bowlby's trilogy, *Attachment and Loss*, where he set out his revolutionary view of attachment as the dominant drive behind human behaviour. Harris discusses the impact this has had on psychological thinking, in particular on ideas about mourning, and the connection with Darwinian evolution. Bowlby's concept of the secure base and ideas on the development of childhood attachment styles that can have a lifelong influence have crucial implications for all who work in the bereavement field.

Keywords: Attachment styles, Bowlby, mourning, depression, loss

It is nearly 40 years since John Bowlby published the first volume of his trilogy and close to 30 years since the appearance of the third volume. Those 10 years of consolidation are indeed a measure of the substantial nature of his contribution, its unflinching confrontation of the difficult theoretical and practical issues facing psychologists and psychotherapists, and its mission to unite professionals with a new, integrated worldview. The insight that was to achieve this was the understanding of the importance of attachment in human development: our tendency to seek proximity to safety with a protective caregiver.

Hitherto other motivations had been seen as the crucial explanatory factors for the human nature with which we are all born but which interacts subsequently with other experiences to make each of us unique. Among academic psychologists such basic motivators were related to the physiology of the nervous system, with fear and hunger enrolled to explain, for example, why Pavlov's dogs became conditioned. Among psychotherapists, the basic motivators were usually dubbed 'instincts,' principally the appetites for food and sex, with anxiety coming some way behind. On the importance of aggression, or the drive to fight rather than flee, there was considerable debate.

No one until John Bowlby had highlighted the possibility that one crucial motivation involved seeking out a protector, not fighting or fleeing for survival, but searching for a trusted haven of safety embodied in another person's care. This shift of

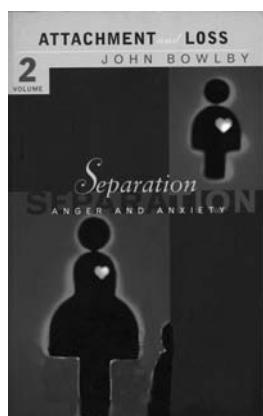
theoretical focus, from the instincts of the solitary individual to attachment as the dominant motive, proved one of the greatest changes in psychological perception in the 1970s. From the perspective of attachment, many human behavioural phenomena became simpler to understand.

There were two further areas where attachment theory made a welcome contribution. First, it provided a Darwinian explanation of why such bonding was so well developed among humans. This was, simply, that those for whom the proximity-seeking tendency was genetically strongest would be most likely to survive attacks by predators in infancy, and thus pass on their genetic characteristics to the next generation.

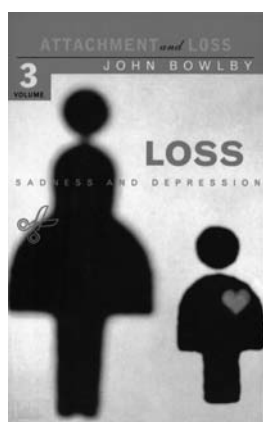
Second, for therapists it emphasised the importance of life events rather than focusing only on unconscious drives, in that for each individual the proximity-seeking tendency might have to adapt to events produced totally externally. Although the idea of a defence mechanism was already central to classical psychoanalysis, integrating this with attachment theory was of particular practical help. Instead of thinking broadly about why someone coming for therapy was so 'defended' against allowing themselves to feel things and so recognise, and begin to cope with, their emotions and their sources, the attachment focus pinpointed the way in which various types of frustration of the need for proximity (or emotional support or intimacy) led to **different** ways of relating to others, with their corresponding problems. These varying **attachment styles** represent different ways



Bowlby J (1969, 2nd ed 1982). *Attachment and Loss, vol 1: Attachment*. London/New York: Hogarth Press/Basic Books.



Bowlby J (1973, 2nd ed 1985). *Attachment and Loss, vol 2: Separation: anxiety and anger*.



London: Hogarth Press. Bowlby J (1980). *Attachment and Loss, vol 3: Loss: sadness and depression*. London: Hogarth Press.

someone has learnt since childhood to defend themselves against the pain and sadness of lacking a responsive caregiver, and counsellors and therapists need correspondingly different ways of helping clients as a result.

The trilogy

Before going into the content in detail it is probably useful to outline something about each volume and how it relates to the main theme. Volume 1 is perhaps the most theoretical, introducing attachment as a fundamental motivation. Bowlby carefully spells out ways he sees his position as differing from Freud and from other psychologists, describing the function and origins of instinctive behaviour as a whole, and of attachment behaviour in particular, and highlighting children's reaction to separation as a key issue to be explained. Characteristically, he includes a range of compelling descriptions of his observations of such reactions, linking them convincingly with detailed accounts of corresponding behaviours among birds and mammals.

Particularly interesting is his discussion of how an infant 'focuses' on an attachment figure and the processes leading to the selection of such figures. He argues persuasively that babies are capable of distinguishing their primary caregivers from strangers well before the age of eight months (an age suggested by previous researchers). An appendix to volume 1 considers how the child's tie to his mother has previously been viewed, though by the time of the second edition, 13 years later, this is omitted to make way for a new final section on 'old controversies and new findings', with stimulating discussion of studies that have emerged in the intervening time. These followed infants assessed as securely or insecurely attached at 13–15 months through to nursery or primary school. A key section involves the development at about four years of age of what he calls 'conceptual perspective taking,' or the ability to understand things from others' points of view, a harbinger of

a concept (mentalisation) which is nowadays a crucial element in psychotherapy.

This enthusiasm of Bowlby's for keeping track of research examining attachment theory hypotheses was a key feature in inspiring many who agreed with his ideas to seek out data to prove (or disprove) them. Today many of the five-year-olds mentioned in the second edition of volume 1 have reached adulthood and have confirmed many of his predictions about secure infants being better able than insecure ones to develop as resilient and more responsive adults.

Volume 2 moves into a more particular focus on the anxiety, along with the protest and ambivalence, observed to result from separation or threats of separation. Again, convincing observations of children in various family contexts demonstrating differing varieties of school avoidance are paralleled by detailed descriptions culled from field observations of fear behaviour among chimps and rhesus monkeys. Bowlby had also combed the literature for relevant research about adults and their developmental history. One important section deals with 'overdependency and the theory of spoiling,' a topic on which he could be almost fierce face-to-face. He comments: '... so long as terms such as "overdependency" and "spoiled" attribute the condition [of such individuals] to an excess of gratification during their early years ... they will meet with scant sympathy or understanding.' What was needed was 'to recognise that the condition is one of anxiety over the accessibility or responsiveness of attachment figures.' A neat little appendix deals with how terminology such as 'phobia' can reify emotions (that is, dehumanise them by turning them into a separate abstract object) and thus reduce empathic understanding.

For readers of this journal, volume 3 is probably the most interesting since in it Bowlby does for loss and depression what volume 2 had done for separation and anxiety. There are three broad sections: the first describes the place of loss and mourning in mental illness, with one classic chapter on 'an information processing approach to

defence.’ This built on experiments with subliminal, or subthreshold, perception to introduce the notion of **defensive exclusion** (the ability of the mind to exclude from conscious awareness information which the person shows by behavioural tests that subliminally they do know). Bowlby goes on to discuss its similarity to Freud’s defence mechanisms and its adaptiveness (or maladaptiveness).

After that the book falls into two sections, on the mourning of adults and on the mourning of children. Many of the insights about adults emerged from work by one of Bowlby’s closest colleagues, Colin Murray Parkes. For adults Bowlby identifies four typical phases of mourning (numbing, yearning, disorganisation and reorganisation) and goes on to discuss how these vary in other cultures. He outlines two main disordered mourning styles among adults: chronic mourning and prolonged absence of conscious grieving. He describes three personality types prone to disordered mourning – those with a disposition to make anxious and ambivalent relationships, those with a disposition to assert independence of affectional ties, and those with a disposition towards compulsive caregiving – and explains the childhood experiences likely to have produced these dispositions. The empathy of his descriptions in the many case examples that he gives to illuminate these differences brings to life his message: counsellors need to respond to each bereaved client in the light of their individual characteristics, and to be aware of not only the context of the current bereavement but also the unique development of the client’s own attachment history, the pains they may have suffered and the defences they have had to build to protect themselves. For readers of this journal, these are probably the most relevant and inspiring pages.

The chapters on mourning in childhood faced more controversy because, well past the mid-20th century, the belief persisted that children cannot respond to the loss of a parent with healthy mourning. As Bowlby emphasises, there were few observations available before the book’s publication, but he had collected together a fair

number of case histories from colleagues who had started on such work over the previous decade and today we can see how right his interpretations of these have proved. He challenged views of therapists who attributed to immaturity the failure of teenagers to mourn, rather than looking for explanations in their previous history. His discussion of the concept of **person permanence** here strongly supported the likelihood that children can go through a process of healthy mourning much younger than had been proposed. Work in the decade following the publication of volume 1 on child development by his lifelong colleague Mary Ainsworth, who had been closely observing infants separated from their mothers in the Strange Situation Test, was important in confirming his perspective here.

The epilogue to volume 3 aptly sums up the message of the trilogy:

‘Intimate attachments to other human beings are the hub around which a person’s life revolves not only when he is an infant or a toddler or a schoolchild, but throughout his adolescence and his years of maturity as well, and on into old age. From these intimate attachments a person draws his strength and his enjoyment of life and, through what he contributes he gives strength and enjoyment to others. These are matters about which current science and traditional wisdom are at one.’

We may therefore hope that, despite all its deficiencies, our present knowledge may be sound enough to guide us in our efforts to help those already beset by difficulty and above all to prevent others becoming so.

Implications of the trilogy today

The various forms of disordered mourning, and how to help people through them, detailed in volume 3 are emerging as relevant for all sorts of psychological disturbances whose treatment is now built on the concepts introduced in the trilogy. What Bowlby described as the **internal**

working models of relationships are the semi-conscious expectations that we all carry within us about how others will relate to us and have become a key focus for work in psychotherapy or bereavement counselling. These models stem from our earliest experiences of relating, and in turn determine how we currently treat others (our **attachment styles**). Attachment styles may have new labels but closely resemble the **dispositions** Bowlby described in accounting for different styles of mourning.

The anxious ambivalent style, when used of adults, is nowadays referred to as **preoccupied/enmeshed**. The tendency to assert independence of emotional ties is known as **dismissive avoidant**, because such people dismiss the value of intimacy, mistrusting others to be able to offer anything of use to help and judging that the best way forward is to rely exclusively on themselves. Another avoidant disposition, **fearful avoidant**, describes people who do actually value intimacy, but may never have managed to build any truly supportive relationships out of fear, normally of rejection, but sometimes of engulfment. Such individuals have usually been subjected to frequent rejection or overpowering interference by parental figures in early life, and learnt that the best way to handle this is to expect no emotional support, and just to keep away. For them avoidance of intimacy with others has become a way of defending against the pain of being ignored, over-controlled or rejected.

As people grow up these expectations (internal working models) are transferred onto new relationships, so fearful avoidant individuals never risk confiding fully in others and as a result often only have acquaintances rather than close friends and feel isolated and anxious. In a similar way the early caregivers of dismissive avoidant people have usually been **consistently unresponsive** so the developing children have learnt not to expect support from others and protect themselves from anxiety with a kind of character armour of defensively high self-reliance.

By contrast the early caregivers of those with a preoccupied/enmeshed attachment style have usually been **inconsistently responsive**, sometimes offering real emotional help but often not being there for the child, who thus learns to cling more strongly and protest louder to gain their wandering attention. Sadly many marriages fall into a pattern where the partners seem to reinforce each other's insecure behaviour, with enmeshed wives clinging to dismissive husbands with vociferous complaints about their not taking their feelings seriously, and avoidant husbands becoming less and less willing to engage with such noisy emotional talk.

Of course many people who seek support have secure attachment styles and may have been knocked off balance by some peculiar combinations of life stresses rather than by their insecure working models of relationships. After all some 60% of the general population have been found *not* to have one of the insecure attachment style outlined. Here Bowlby's insistence that we all have a need for close emotional ties, and that this is not a sign of weakness or vulnerability, permits a more healing atmosphere to prevail, while for those who do have an insecure style, his vision of attachment and development has provided an incomparable update of the psychological model.

Bowlby's emphasis on the crucial role of the secure base in enabling people to be calm enough to function adequately highlights ways in which all who offer psychological support can modify their approach so that they provide their clients with a safe haven. His understanding of the links between past and present relationships builds on classical psychoanalysis, but highlights the importance for all of us of constructing a life-history narrative illuminating links between our own personal experiences. For it is only when we have reflected in detail on our past that we can feel fully ourselves and so face the future with equanimity and hope. ■