

The D. Winnicott Memorial Lecture

London 2004

2004

Fifty Years of Attachment Theory

Sir Richard Bowlby

I am not a psychologist, I like to design racing cars. I lived close to my father all my life: I lived with him, in the flat above him, in the house next door to him, shared a boat on the south coast and a holiday home on the Isle of Skye. I find that I remember more about my father than I once realized. It was a psychiatrist who told me that.

It is astonishing to me, as a layman, that Attachment Theory was not greeted with a great chorus of "Hallelujah!, at last we have seen the light." It was not like that. It was a real struggle to get this concept—one of the fundamentals of what makes us human—more widely understood so that society could benefit. It is solidly based on research and, after all, what is the point of doing research if nobody knows about it? That makes it a waste of time. Even when it is obscure, as much of it can be, research data is valuable. I have spent much of my life trying to clarify research findings in medical science and assist in their wider circulation. Eventually I quit my job to communicate Attachment Theory in what I hope is a more accessible way so that it could be more broadly understood.

What I want to do tonight is to recount some of the struggles that Attachment Theory has had in gaining a wider acceptance.

It is fifty years since my father wrote *Child Care and the Growth of Love*, and although Attachment Theory is now established as a valuable working model in child development and mental health circles, the general public's knowledge of the concept of attachment is notably lacking. From my position inside the family and outside the professions, I am taking a critical look at what prevents the dissemination of the valuable insights that Attachment Theory could bring to the general public. For some years I have been presenting recollections of my father's professional struggle to develop Attachment Theory, and some of the public's misunderstandings of what he wrote. Sometimes this has been because of the emotional difficulties that they have with his work, and there are also wider social issues which still prevent many people from accepting Attachment Theory.

Probably the largest group consists of people fortunate enough to have had a secure attachment, who have the confident expectation of repeating the cycle with their own children; for this group the whole subject is so self-explanatory and obvious that it hardly merits comment—unless things go wrong.

In a way I do not even like to call it Attachment Theory any more; I prefer to call it research into bonding. For many people "theory" means a vague, "anything goes", sort of idea; it does not have only the strict scientific definition which is to be found in the dictionary.

The origin of my father's motivation for working on this conundrum of the parent-child attachment relationship probably stems from a traumatic event when he was about four years old. In 1911 his father was a successful surgeon who lived in a large London town-house with his wife and six children. The normal arrangement for child-care at that time was to have a senior nanny—she was called Nana—and one or two nursemaids who helped out as more children were born. My father was the fourth child; he had a nursemaid called Minnie who had day-to-day responsibility for him. The children rarely saw their father, except on Sundays and holidays; and they only saw their mother for an hour a day between 5.00 and 6.00 in the evening. Effectively, these children had twenty-three-hour a day good quality and non-parental care. My father grew to love Minnie, who once told his sister that John was her favourite, and my guess is that Minnie was his surrogate, principal

wrote *Child Care and the Growth* theory is now established as a development and mental health concept of attachment inside the family and outside. A clinical look at what prevents the insights that Attachment Theory offers. For some years I have been aware of my father's professional struggle to overcome some of the public's misunderstandings; this has been because of the confusion with his work, and there are still things that prevent many people from

insights of people fortunate enough to have the confident expectations of their own children; for this group it is obvious and obvious that it hardly ever goes wrong.

Do not call it Attachment Theory any more, but call it bonding. For many people it goes "sort of idea; it does not exist in isolation which is to be found in the

preparation for working on this connection; that relationship probably stems from the time he was about four years old. In 1911, John was born who lived in a large London house with many children. The normal arrangement was to have a senior nanny—she was the fourth child; he had a day-to-day responsibility for the children, except on Sundays and on Saturdays for an hour a day between the children. Usually, these children had twenty-four hours of non-parental care. My father told me that his sister that John was her surrogate, principal

attachment figure in preference to his own mother. Then, when he was four, Minnie left the family to get a better job. When my father spoke of this event, he said he was sufficiently hurt to feel the pain of childhood separation—but was not so traumatized that he could not face working with it on a daily basis. All this is in print; it is not a family secret.

At the age of twenty-one, my father, a disenchanted medical student, was working at Priory Gate, a school for maladjusted children (that's what they were called—people were not very "PC" in those days). Here he met John Alford, a remarkable man for whom my father had great respect and who became a professor (in Canada, I believe). Alford had noticed that many of the disturbed children in the school came from very disrupted family backgrounds. It was he who convinced my father to complete his medical degree and study psychoanalysis; he also inspired his interest in maternal deprivation, the forerunner of his later work on attachment. I imagine my father identified the loss of his Minnie with the maternal deprivation experienced by the delinquent children in the school. He undertook his study of forty-four juvenile thieves before the Second World War and it was published in 1944. He found that seventeen of the group had suffered an early prolonged, or permanent, separation from their mother, or permanent mother substitute, during the first five years of their life—as compared with only two in the control group. In order that he could be absolutely sure of the disrupted childhood these children had experienced, he recorded only death, desertion, or divorce in the families; these were the only data that he could be absolutely sure were reliable.

My father was not afraid to confront intimidating figures, which was to lead him into a series of conflicts throughout his career. It began with his protracted psychoanalytic training, when he would insist on arguing with his analyst, Joan Riviere, and his supervisor, Melanie Klein. He found it hard to accept their rigidly-held theories because he believed these failed to satisfy the scientific rigour he had learned at Cambridge when studying medicine. (I may say that Donald Winnicott was at Cambridge, too, and neither did he go much on the training; it was very rigid; there was no emotion involved; everything was very clinical.)

In 1949 the World Health Organization (WHO) invited my father to report on the psychiatric needs of the many homeless

children who had been orphaned because of the Second World War. The wide-ranging material that he gathered for the WHO report, called *Maternal Care and Mental Health*, was published in 1951. The main text of the report was used for his popular and controversial paperback *Child Care and the Growth of Love*, written in 1952 and published a year later. It used to be said about him: "Stick a pin in Bowlby and out comes maternal deprivation!" At this point he was still working with the material on orphans; he had not worked out Attachment Theory. On the first page of both books he outlined the conditions needed for the healthy development of children:

For the moment it is sufficient to say that what is believed to be essential for mental health is that the infant and young child should experience a warm, intimate and continuous relationship with his mother, or permanent mother substitute, in which both find satisfaction and enjoyment.

However, only in the paperback does he clarify his use of the words "permanent mother substitute" by adding: "one person who steadily mothers him". Nowhere did he clarify his use of the word "continuous", and this was to get him into a great deal of trouble later on. It is worth noting here that if you look up the word "attachment" in the index of *Child Care and the Growth of Love*, you will not find it. He had not worked it out in 1952, and did not use it in a publication until 1957.

Video clip of John Bowlby

What I noticed was that there were children who had been referred for persistent thieving, truancy, and what I spotted was that they had had very, very disrupted childhoods. A continuous relationship between a mother and child in which both find happiness and satisfaction, promotes mental health.

Notice again his use of the word "continuous"; he frequently used it but did not distinguish between what he meant by "the enduring relationship" from that of "unbroken contact".

Child Care and the Growth of Love was primarily addressing children's experience of complete maternal deprivation, or prolonged

because of the Second World War. Bowlby gathered for the WHO report, *Attachment and Loss*, was published in 1951. The report was his popular and controversial work. *Attachment and Loss*, written in 1952 and 1953, said about him: "Stick a pin in the heart of privation!" At this point he was talking about orphans; he had not worked out the concept of both books he outlined the development of children:

to say that what is believed to be the best for the infant and young child should be a continuous relationship with his mother or a substitute, in which both find satisfaction.

As he clarifies his use of the words "continuous" by adding: "one person who can provide for the child. He clarifies his use of the word "continuous" into a great deal of trouble by saying that if you look up the word "continuous" in *Care and the Growth of Love*, you will find it out in 1952, and did not use

John Bowlby

children who had been referred to as "deprived". What I spotted was that they had no continuous relationships. A continuous relationship is one in which both find happiness and satisfaction.

"continuous"; he frequently used what he meant by "the enduring relationship with the mother or other person in contact".

He was primarily addressing children who had experienced maternal deprivation, or prolonged

separation, when abandoned in orphanages; he saw this as being "foremost among the causes of delinquent character development". He clarified the term "prolonged separation" as being "complete and prolonged separation, six months or more, from their mothers or established foster-mothers." However, the phrase "prolonged separation" has been misrepresented and frequently used to suggest that Attachment Theory warns of grave consequences for the young child whose mother works outside the home. For example, in 1998, in her best-seller *Life after Birth*—which is about working mothers—Kate Figs adds a distorting twist to a passage from my father's paperback; she says:

He advises that mother should not work outside the home and warns that there is a very strong case indeed for believing that prolonged separation of a child from its mother or mother substitute during the first five years of life stands foremost among the causes of delinquent character development.

Figs equates the effect of mothers working outside the home for some hours a day with the effects of prolonged separation of six months or more, or even death. It is partly such confusion in popular books that has made Attachment Theory look so ridiculous that people dismiss it, along with Bowlby, out of hand.

In 1958, five years after *Child Care and the Growth of Love* was published, my father wrote a pamphlet called *Can I Leave my Baby?* I think he wrote this to clarify his position and to answer some of his critics, but the damage had already been done in the widely-read paperback and his pamphlet was only a minor publication:

Mothers sometimes ask: "Then can we never leave our small children?" I do not believe that anyone has ever suggested they should not. It is an excellent plan to accustom babies and small children to being cared for, now and then, by someone else—father, for instance, or Granny, or some other relation or neighbour; in this way mother can have some freedom too, for an afternoon's shopping in peace, visits to the doctor or dentist, the cinema or tea with friends.

Leaving small children whilst you go out to work needs much more care. If your own mother is living nearby or a dependable

neighbour can be daily guardian, it may work out all right. But it needs regularity, and it must be the same woman who cares for him.

It is the same with nannies. Nannies are valuable people, provided they are good ones and provided they stay. It is the chopping and changing of people in charge of a young child which upsets him. If a mother hands over her baby completely to a nanny (as my father was) she should realise that in her child's eyes, Nanny will be the real mother figure, not Mummy. This may be no bad thing, always provided that the care is continuous, but for a child to be looked after entirely by a loving nanny and then for her to leave when he is two or three, or even four or five, can be almost as tragic as the loss of a mother.

That's straight autobiography! I do not think he realized it was the word "continuous" that was the cause of the misunderstanding in the first place. I think his own loss of Minnie must have created a complete blind spot for him; otherwise, considering that the prime purpose of his pamphlet was to clarify what he meant by "continuous care", he would surely have defined the word "continuous". I suspect he was so deeply affected by this experience of a discontinued relationship that, to him, the meaning of a continuous relationship was so blindingly obvious and of such overpowering significance that it never even occurred to him that it might need defining. I would define his use of "continuous" (when applied to a relationship) as an enduring relationship, lasting many years, where periods of separation are shorter than would cause the child distress or trauma. The length of the period will depend upon the age of the child, the person with whom they are left, where they are left, how often they are left, and also the child's temperament and the quality of his relationship with their principal attachment figure—that is, the person who is leaving him.

The following video clip of my father is a bit confusing because he makes a Freudian slip, an example of a lack of coherent narrative: he refers to his mother as his grandmother.

Video clip of John Bowlby interview

Interviewer: "Do you think a nanny intervenes in the relationship between a mother and her child?"

may work out all right. But it is the woman who cares for him.

are valuable people, provided they stay. It is the chopping and changing of child which upsets him. If he is attached to a nanny (as my father was), Nanny will be the child's eyes, Nanny will be the child's life. It may be no bad thing, always, but for a child to be looked after by her then for her to leave when he is older can be almost as tragic as the

not think he realized it was the cause of the misunderstanding in the case of Minnie must have created a sense of loss, considering that the prime reason for what he meant by "continuity" was the experience of a discontinuity of a continuous relationship and of such overpowering loss to him that it might need to be "continuous" (when applied to a relationship, lasting many years, rather than would cause the child's attachment period will depend upon the environment they are left, where they are, the child's temperament and their principal attachment figure, leaving him.

There is a bit confusing because of a lack of coherent narrative and mother.

John Bowlby interview

"How does she intervene in the relationship with her child?"

John Bowlby: "Not necessarily; only if one is jealous of the other . . . but if each have their own role and the parents see plenty of the children, there is no problem. I think one of the problems nowadays is that nannies don't stay. I mean, in my day I had a nanny. I was one of six children. Nanny came when my elder sister was a baby and stayed until my grandmother died at the age of ninety. She was part of the family, you see. That was a way of life which has long since ceased; I happened to notice just the other day that the Princess of Wales' nanny had left after she was with the family for four years; she has now left and that, I am sure, is very unsettling for the two princes. Nannies leaving can be very traumatic, especially if the children have become very attached to them."

Interviewer: "So time is the important thing rather than . . .?"

John Bowlby: "Continuity is one very important thing, and the personal relationship between nanny and mother is the other critical thing. If they each have their own role it's all right; if they compete, it's all wrong."

A fundamental principle of Attachment Theory is that people of all ages show a preference for one primary attachment figure above all others; this will usually shift from the primary attachment figure, usually the birth mother but not necessarily, to a romantic partner over time. For babies older than a few months, the primary attachment figure is almost always the biological mother but it could be anyone else who takes on the long-term commitment of raising the child. My father told me how the arrangement of someone's attachment figures can be described as a pyramid: friends and familiar neighbours at the base, secondary attachment figures above them, and the primary attachment figure at the top. In *Attachment* (Volume I) he comments that it may be confusing to refer to all of them as "attachment figures", and to all the behaviour as "attachment behaviour". He was keen to emphasize that we need *multiple* attachment figures, but that they are arranged in a hierarchy. In *Separation* (Volume II) he says: