

Is Attachment a Psychoanalytical Theory? A Research Proposal

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Abstract

Attachment theory, postulated by John Bowlby in collaboration with psychologists Mary Ainsworth and Harry Harlow, has been the subject of much discussion about its nature. The author considers it a psychoanalytical theory, but his peers in psychoanalysis at the time rejected this idea and offered criticism of his concepts, suggesting that they were not in alignment with the principles of psychoanalysis. At the same time, collaborators Mary Ainsworth and Harry Harlow have repeatedly questioned the necessity of Bowlby's choice of psychoanalysis as a basis for attachment theory, suggesting that it may not be the most appropriate approach. Lately, attachment theory has been used in many psychology courses and articles, without so much as a single mention to its psychoanalytical nature. This article presents a research proposal for an investigation of the nature of attachment theory on a conceptual level. It poses the question of whether the concepts used as a basis for attachment theory are consistent with psychoanalysis.

Keywords: attachment theory, psychoanalysis, John Bowlby

1. Introduction

John Bowlby (1907-1990) was a British psychiatrist and psychoanalyst, who is perhaps best known for his attachment theory, according to which he explained and categorized the nature of infant and child relationships with their parents. Bowlby developed an interest in psychoanalysis during his teenage years and began studying this subject while pursuing a medical degree (van der Horst 2011). He commenced his training in psychoanalysis shortly thereafter, at the Institute of Psychoanalysis (IPA) of the British Psychoanalytical Society, under the guidance of Joan Riviere (1883-1962) and later Melanie Klein (1882-1960). Bowlby was part of the Middle Group of British psychoanalysis, along with Donald Winnicott (1896-1971) and Michael Balint (1896-1970), a group of so-called 'independent' psychoanalysts who were not affiliated to the Anna-Freudian or Kleinian currents. The author suggested that the environment may have a greater influence on the formation of individuals' psyches than is commonly recognized in psychoanalytic circles, which tend to focus more on impulses and fantasies than on reality itself (van der Horst 2011).

2. Attachment theory and its historical background

Attachment theory has its roots in Bowlby's interest in the effects of child-mother separation on the child's psyche and development. During World War II, evacuation plans were conducted throughout England in the face of the bombings, with children being the first to be made to leave. This fact made separation a significant concern at that time, and Bowlby was aware of this, having been in contact with the works of Freud and Burlingham (1942, 1944) on the topic of children orphaned by the war. The earliest evidence of Bowlby's involvement in this topic can be traced back to the debate surrounding the prohibition of parents from visiting their children in hospital. This debate was initiated by the media, which prompted a series of discussions between parents and

doctors. In response to this, Bowlby proposed that the younger the child, the more visits they would require (Bowlby 1940a). In the late 1930s and during the 1940s, various studies were conducted on the consequences of hospitalization, institutionalization and overall separation of small children from their parents (Burlingham and Freud 1942, 1944; Spitz 1945, 1946; Bowlby, Miller, & Winnicott 1939, etc.). These studies contributed to an increased awareness of the topic. In the interim, the World Health Organization commissioned a report on the consequences of child-mother separation, with Bowlby himself responsible for its production. The 193-page report, published in 1951 under the title 'Maternal care and mental health' (Bowlby 1951), had a profound impact on Bowlby, prompting him to question the nature of the bonds formed by children with their parents and caretakers.

In the same year that the report was published, the Tavistock Clinic, where Bowlby was employed, welcomed a new member: Mary Ainsworth, who was to become a significant contributor to the field. There is an immediate affinity between the two, and Bowlby is able to obtain the necessary funding and permission to commence his own observational study on children separated from their parents or institutionalised, in collaboration with his new colleague. While Bowlby's initial engagement with ethology commenced with his reading of Lorenz's work and personal interaction with him and Tinbergen, he would conduct the majority of his studies and inquiries pertaining to the discipline in collaboration with Robert Hinde, who would subsequently become his life-long colleague and personal associate. Attachment theory not only describes the nature of mother-child bonds, but also attempts to 'rewrite psychoanalysis in the light of ethological principles' (Dinnage 1979: 325). In order to study the nature of affection bonds in the mother-child dyad via naturalistic observation, Bowlby and Hinde attempted to establish a colony of rhesus monkeys.

However, the time required to produce results was deemed excessive¹. Consequently, upon learning of Harlow's research in 1957, Bowlby promptly wrote to him, initiating a close collaboration. Bowlby theorised about attachment behaviours, while Harlow designed experiments to test the hypotheses.

3. What is attachment theory?

The author's own way of explaining bond formation is attachment theory, which he contrasts with the psychoanalytical explanations available at the time. In his own words, attachment theory presents the hypothesis that postulates that the child's tie to his mother is a product of the activity of a number of behavioural systems that have proximity to mother as a predictable outcome. Since in the human child ontogeny of these systems is slow and complex, and their rate of development varies greatly from child to child (Bowlby 1969: 178).

In his theory, Bowlby describes attachment as an innate tendency to form emotional bonds, made up of a series of instinctive behaviours responsible for maintaining proximity to the mother, which develop and mature over time (Palombo et al. 2009). He proposes several periods in which attachment behaviours emerge and change, from birth to adulthood.

4. Points of dissidence with Freud's work

One of the key differences between attachment theory and Freudian psychoanalysis is the opposition to the dynamic and economic aspects of the psyche. The dynamic aspect concerns the instinctual forces present in all human actions, including the libido, sexual instinct, and the aggressiveness, destructive instinct. The economic aspect attempts

¹ In fact, the results on Hinde's research of rhesus monkeys would only come out in 1964.

to quantify these instincts through the concept of psychic energy. Consequently, psychic energy may be invested in favour of an instinct or against it, and it is essential for the satisfaction of an instinctual goal. (Rapaport & Gill 1959) Bowlby (1969) posits that the energy discharged in response to a stimulus must be replenished in some manner. This aspect is not addressed by Freud. To elucidate this phenomenon in the context of attachment theory, Bowlby employs and adapts the biological concept of feedback, whereby an external stimulus can trigger a plan that can be modified by new information, including that resulting from the action itself. The energy expended in this process is merely physical energy. Bowlby (1969) argues that this modification does not significantly diverge from the tenets of psychoanalysis. He maintains that Freud merely employed the concept of psychic energy to align with the prevailing scientific theories of the era, a practice he initiated prior to the advent of psychoanalysis. Moreover, during his lifetime, Freud was unable to identify a more suitable model.

5. Critical Examination of Psychoanalytic Schools of Thought

Bowlby's principal criticism addressed to psychoanalysts in general was that the environment exerts a greater influence on the formation of individuals' psyches than is recognised in psychoanalytic circles, which are more concerned with drives and fantasies and less with reality itself (Bowlby 1940b). This directly influenced another problem he had with psychoanalysts in general, namely that they failed to look for robust evidence to support psychoanalytic formulations. Furthermore, certain points needed to be reworked so that they could be tested and 'falsified' (Bowlby 1969). Bowlby believed that psychoanalysis should adapt itself to become a proper scientific discipline, as postulated by Karl Popper

in 'The logic of scientific discovery'² (Popper 1935/1959). Bowlby (1969) also rejected the explanation of ego psychology for the mother's connection with the baby, which would come from feeding and satisfying other needs. He jokingly referred to this as 'cupboard love'. According to him, the relationship with the mother, or the attachment to her, would be something innate. This closeness would originally provide protection against predators, and recognising its evolutionary origin would be fundamental to understanding it.

6. Psychoanalytic Criticism of Attachment Theory

In 1960, Bowlby published a paper that generated considerable controversy, entitled 'Grief and Mourning in Infancy and Early Childhood'. In this paper, he discusses the effects of grief and mourning on the behaviour of infants (aged between birth and 15 months) and young children (aged between birth and 4 years) who have been separated from their parents for a period of six months or more. He also considers the consequences of this on later development. Bowlby states that a total of five papers will be presented on the subject, which will address the complexity of the matter. In this inaugural paper, the author postulates that the behaviours of these separated children do not differ in any way from those observed in adults when they lose a loved one (Bowlby 1960a).

A number of psychoanalysts contested Bowlby's (1960a) interpretation, citing several reasons why they believed he had misinterpreted either their works or the broader field of psychoanalysis. In her response, Anna Freud (1960) notes that, as analysts, she and Dorothy Burlingham did not align with the author's biological and behavioural ideas, as these ideas were not in conjunction with

² For Popper, psychoanalytic theories could not be falsified, and were therefore a pseudoscience.

metapsychology. Furthermore, she asserts that the terms employed by the author oversimplified psychoanalytical theory, and were, in fact, an entirely distinct theory. Furthermore, she contests that Bowlby's definition of the pleasure principle is erroneous, as it is not a drive representation. Instead, she asserts that it is 'a principle which governs all mental activity in the immature and insufficiently structured personality' (Freud 1960: 55). She then goes on to explain that, as a consequence, mother attachment and the pleasure principle are not phenomena of the same order, since the pleasure principle would govern it. She also responds to his assertion that narcissism is not present in infancy by stating that infantile narcissism is not a behaviour, but rather a phase of libido organisation. Moreover, she considered that the terminology employed by Bowlby was too straightforward and simple to encompass the complexity of the psychological dynamic (Freud 1960). Freud (1960) identifies a significant divergence from Bowlby's (1960a) ideas as follows. In the context of psychoanalytic theory, mourning is defined as the capacity to accept the loss of a loved one and to adapt one's inner world. This process involves withdrawing libido from the lost object and identifying with it. Both of these processes require a certain level of mental development, which is not yet present in infants, as they have not yet gained the capacity to engage in reality testing, apply the reality principle, or control their id. Freud argues that the infant's response to loss, as described by Bowlby, is controlled by the pleasure-pain principle. In his critique of Bowlby's (1960a) description of the loss of the mother figure, René Spitz (1960) highlights the lack of a dynamic perspective in the author's account. This is due to the fact that Bowlby's work fails to acknowledge the richness of the mother-child relationship during the first year of life. Additionally, he notes that the innate response patterns of newborns are not sufficient for the formation of bonds with the mother. Furthermore, the initial interactions impart both physiological and

psychological characteristics, which are essential for the establishment of a relationship within the dyad. For Spitz, the infant's response to the loss of those physiological and psychological aspects of the bond is to experience grief. He posits that a psychological organisation is essential for this process to occur, which does not emerge until around six months of life.

Spitz (1960) also notes that emotional and perceptual maturity are prerequisites to grief, both of which are not present at birth. Bowlby's assertion that hostility is manifest in the infant following the loss of the object is at odds with Spitz's observations³, which indicated that such behaviour was only observed at that age when the object was returned. Perhaps the most striking omission in Bowlby's text for Spitz (1960) was the absence of any acknowledgment of the significant differences in developmental levels between infants, toddlers and adults. Furthermore, the exclusion of structural and dynamic viewpoints would have been a significant departure from the established principles of psychoanalysis. Finally, Max Schur also wrote a response article (Schur 1960) to Bowlby. He addressed not only the paper about grief (Bowlby 1960a), but also other previous ones, where he discusses ethology and psychoanalysis (Bowlby 1958, 1959). Schur begins by noting that the 'explanatory formulations' in Bowlby's papers concerning psychoanalysis and developmental animal psychology (ethology) are entirely erroneous. Schur proceeds to discuss the concepts of instincts, instinctual drives, secondary drives, and so forth. Furthermore, according to Schur, Bowlby 'directly attacks many psychoanalytic concepts and extensively reshuffles present-day psychoanalytic terminology' (Schur 1960: 63), based on misconceptions. Both Schur (1960) and Spitz (1960) suggest that

³ Spitz mentions that this misconception may be due to the fact that Bowlby's observations never contemplated infants younger than 15 months old.

Bowlby underestimated the significance of orality in child development and the developmental processes occurring during the first months of life. In discussing the paper on grief, Schur asserts that the choice of using the term mourning instead of depression does not serve the purpose of the author, namely, to say that mourning is not a severe kind of depression. Instead, one must understand mourning as the process of restitution of the lost object, if using psychoanalytic terminology. The responses to Bowlby's paper about grief were harsh and his works continued to attract attention and criticism over time. In 'The Nature of the Child's Tie to His Mother' (Bowlby 1958), he presents the first iteration of attachment theory, employing a synthesis of psychoanalysis and ethology. The response from psychoanalytical circles was not uniformly positive. In addition to the introduction of new terminology and references to animal psychology, Bowlby's negative views on cupboard love theory also contributed to the overall ambivalence (Karen 1994; Hrdy 1999).

7. Criticism of Bowlby by His Associates

The critique of attachment theory did not originate solely within the psychoanalytic community. His own associates also expressed reservations about the reliance on psychoanalysis. Mary Ainsworth argued that the integration of ethology with a psychoanalytic perspective could have deleterious consequences for his career, in addition to being a challenging foundation for a scientific theory (van der Horst 2011). Robert Hinde publicly expressed his conviction that the psychoanalytic understanding of libido and the concept of instinct was erroneous in its fundamental tenets, particularly with respect to Freud's theories. According to Hinde, Bowlby expended a considerable amount of effort to align himself with psychoanalytic theory, only to be subjected to criticism for his views within the British Psycho-Analytical Society (*Ib.*). In one of his interviews, he stated that he was not well-

versed in psychoanalysis and that upon reading the manuscript for Bowlby's attachment trilogy, he inquired, 'What do you intend to say with all this stuff about psychoanalysis anyway?' (van der Horst et al. 2007: 330).

As Harry Harlow's studies with rhesus monkeys progressed, he concluded in 1963 that infants that grew up only among peers did just fine socially, and that the bond with a mother was not essential for healthy development (Vicedo 2009a). Despite the numerous criticisms from both sides, Bowlby considered himself a psychoanalyst. Indeed, he maintained that the foundation of his attachment theory was firmly rooted in psychoanalysis, as evidenced by the numerous references to this discipline throughout his works.

Because some of my ideas are alien to the theoretical traditions that have become established, and so have met with strong criticism, I have been at some pains to show that most of them are by no means alien to what Freud himself thought and wrote. On the contrary, as I hope to show, a great number of the central concepts of my schema are to be found plainly stated by Freud (Bowlby 1969: 23).

Recently, the value of Bowlby's work of interdisciplinary cross-fertilization has been highlighted, enriching psychoanalysis with ethology, and ethology with psychoanalysis (van der Horst 2011).

8. Freudian Views and Attachment Theory

Bowlby claims to avoid terminology related to dependence, as they refer to the theory of cupboard love, which maintains that the bond between mother and child begins because of the care of the infant's physiological needs. Bowlby distinguishes between dependence and attachment. In the initial stages of life, the infant is dependent but not yet attached. This transition occurs around six months of age. Dependence would then be a functional term, while attachment would serve as a purely descriptive behaviour. Moreover, the term

'dependence' can be perceived as pejorative, whereas 'attachment' connotes a laudable quality (Bowlby 1969). Bowlby posited that the term dependence was a source of confusion when used to describe behaviour that maintains proximity. He further suggested that this was a reason why other authors sometimes refrained from using the term: It is not without interest that, despite their adherence to the theory of secondary drive, both Sigmund Freud and Anna Freud nonetheless employ the term 'attachment' (Freud 1931; Burlingham and Freud 1944). Other terms that have been used are 'cathexis of object' and 'affiliation' (Bowlby 1969: 228).

The precise intention behind the Freudian use of the term 'attachment' to avoid the implication of dependence remains unclear. It is also uncertain whether the term bears any resemblance to the definition formulated by Bowlby.

9. Outlines of a Research Proposal

As we have previously discussed, the history of attachment theory has included a number of controversial points. Bowlby himself expressed reservations about Freudian theory, including the replacement of dynamic and economic aspects in his theory, the rejection of the idea that the bonds between mother and baby are established by a position of dependence on physiological needs, and the insertion of an ethological-observational vocabulary to replace psychoanalytic terms. His divergence from the prevailing psychoanalytic paradigm of the time led to a considerable degree of criticism and even skepticism regarding the classification of his work as psychoanalytic. Furthermore, his colleagues were reluctant to utilise psychoanalysis as the foundation for a scientific theory. The question then arises as to whether attachment theory can be considered psychoanalytic. This issue has been the subject of historical, epistemological and personal opinion debate amongst psychoanalysts. Some argue that the question is

unjustified, given that attachment theory is currently employed by numerous branches of psychology, including psychoanalysis. In order to answer this question, it is proposed here that a systematic conceptual investigation be carried out, comparing the concepts conceived and adopted by Bowlby with classic metapsychological concepts and with the foundations of Freudian theory, which Bowlby ultimately claims to follow. The objective is to analyse the utilisation of psychoanalytical concepts in the works of Bowlby and his closest associates (Ainsworth and Harlow) and to compare this utilisation to the definitions found in psychoanalytical material, with a specific focus on the works of Sigmund Freud. Concurrently, the concepts originated in attachment theory and their adaptation to psychoanalytical theory will be examined.

Methodologically, this work will be carried out in accordance with the parameters of historical research in psychology, as proposed by Laurenti et al. (2016), utilising both documentary and bibliographic sources. This research also aligns with the methodological approach proposed by Campos (2021) for research on psychoanalysis. This approach involves analysing the selected works in a theoretical and conceptual manner, with a focus on the development of key concepts within the theories under examination (for instance, the concept of attachment). This approach assumes the interdisciplinary nature of psychoanalysis, whereby its theories are interconnected with other fields of knowledge.

The primary bibliographic material comprises:

1) John Bowlby's works on attachment theory. (Bowlby 1951, 1953, 1957, 1958, 1960b, 1960c, 1961, 1963, 1969, 1973a, 1973b, 1976, 1980, 1981, 1982, 1991; Bowlby et al. 1956; Bowlby et al. 1986).

2) Mary Ainsworth, Robert Hinde and Harry Harlow contributions and commentaries on attachment theory. (Ainsworth 1978, 1979, 1989;

Ainsworth & Bowlby 1991; Ainsworth et al. 1978; Ainsworth & Marvin 1995; Harlow & Zimmerman 1959; Hinde 1982, 1991, 2005; Meyer et al. 1975)

3) Freud's metapsychological works and other works discussing psychoanalytic thinking within a Freudian framework (Freud 1895, 1905, 1910, 1914, 1915a, 1915b, 1917, 1920, 1921, 1922, 1926, 1940; Rapaport & Gill 1959).

The supplementary bibliographical material comprises texts on attachment theory, which discuss the psychoanalytic or non-psychoanalytic nature of this theory (Eagle 1997; Fonagy 2001; Fonagy & Target 2007; Fonagy & Campbell 2015; Holmes 2000; Palombo et al. 2019; Ramires & Schneider 2010; Slade 2000; Tidd 1960; van der Horst 2008, 2011; Vicedo 2009b).

10. Concluding Remarks

Attachment theory has a profound impact on the history of psychology, featuring prominently in most introductory psychology textbooks and playing a pivotal role in developmental psychology. Indeed, a survey conducted by Garfield (1978) revealed that until 1978, John Bowlby was the most cited author in the Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI) across all disciplines. Nevertheless, those who encounter attachment theory in these works are unlikely to be aware that it is a psychoanalytic theory and that John Bowlby was himself a psychoanalyst. Attachment theory has today an impact that extends beyond human development, with citations in research from other fields in psychology having recently multiplied. For example, a Google Scholar search using the terms 'cognitive behavioural therapy' and 'attachment theory' reveals approximately 11,700 results. In light of the aforementioned data, it can be observed that there has been a growing dialogue between attachment theory and other approaches. While attachment theory is still intensely debated and researched by

psychoanalysts, possible reasons for this are the interdisciplinary nature of the theory, the lack of psychoanalytic terminology in the texts, and the fact that some psychoanalysts do not identify it as psychoanalysis.

Given the significance of attachment theory and its apparent dissolution among other psychological knowledge, the present research proposal is justified as an attempt to delineate the boundaries of attachment theory and to contribute to studies in the area.

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