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Essay question: Evaluate the
contribution of John Bowlby to the
development of the theory of
attachment.

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“Bowlby drew the model of branching developmental pathways (a tree lying on its side) wherein change is always possible but is constrained by the branching pathways previously chosen”
(Sroufe, 1986) p.842.

This rather basic analogy helps understand that for development to be successive, an early base of good upbringing (pathways) is to be needed. Our early experiences can be of great importance as each successive adaptation is a product of new situations and our development to that point. The ability to differentiate between adults in infancy is the start of attachment, and it is attachment where John Bowlby believes great importance should be emphasised to develop stable mental health. Bowlby is considered to have built upon earlier psychoanalytical work and could be seen as a *“coherent part of the theoretical evolution begun by Freud”* (Sroufe, 1986). Bowlby began his research on the effect of separation from parents on children during the Second World War, be it through death or being an evacuee (Pervin, 1997). From his studies, Bowlby was to make two hypotheses: (1) That the quality of any attachment relationship depends on the quality of care experienced with that partner and (2) that the quality of primary attachment relationships strongly influences early personality organisation, especially the child's concept of self and others (Sroufe, 1986). Bowlby stressed that this child/caregiver attachment is different to any other attachment the child may form.

Bowlby believed that traditional theories did not explain why an intense attachment to the mother occurred and why separation caused such dramatic responses. Controversy was to surround Bowlby (1953) with his assumption that the mother of an infant should be the sole caregiver/attachment figure. What does seem apparent today is the suggestion that almost anyone can become the attachment figure. This appears commonsensical when it is realised that grandparents, single fathers etc are now not uncommon to be the sole caregiver. Studies in Zaire also point to evidence for multiple caregivers (Tronick *et al*, 1985). Observations were made on the Efe pygmies of Zaire and it was noted that when the mother gives birth, the child is then passed around to several women. The child is also breast fed by whoever is lactating; this resulted in the children developing multiple attachments. Possibly in later life, Bowlby conceded and withdrew his earlier proposals of the mother staying at home to give care to the child. Bowlby probably saw alternatives to the mother in the modern society, but initially his interest was aimed at the consequences of separation on attachment at an early age of the infant and caregiver. These consequences were the suggestion that any individual with any kind of psychiatric disorder always show a disturbance in their social relationships and this is caused by a disturbed bonding in childhood.

Bowlby (1969) was to describe three stages of behaviour that would develop if they were separated from their 'secure' attachment: protest, despair and detachment. Further support for Bowlby was gained by Mary Ainsworth's 'strange situation' experiments (1978). Harlow (1958) is another name that appears synonymous with any discussion on attachment. Harlow was to produce further support for Bowlby by experimenting on Rhesus monkeys. In this case the infant/caregiver separation

resulted in the infant becoming disturbed, aggressive and withdrawn. Further prolonged separation brought irreversible effects including the female growing to replicate this behaviour to her own offspring. From these experiments a possible question arises: should a mother always meet her baby's demands? Bowlby (1988) was to answer this by saying that evolution has provided babies with signals and gestures that promote healthy development. Furthermore, he goes on to say that parents should follow their impulses and respond to these gestures naturally and allow the child to pursue their own interests with the knowledge of a secure base for them to return.

A possible problem arises with this idealistic approach: individual differences. These differences can always negate any study; Bowlby included. Field (1996) noted this flaw:

“...a problem with the model is that, as in a circular process, attachment has been defined on the basis of those behaviours directed to the person referred to as the attachment figure during an impending separation (such behaviours as crying and clinging) and following reunion (proximity-seeking and greeting behaviours).”

It seems Bowlby could have possibly been over emphasising the attachment between mother-infant; further experiments could have been carried out on the behaviours of children separated from peers or siblings. Would the stages proposed earlier be apparent in an adult relationship? Bowlby assumes that the primary attachment relationship will be the prototype for all future relationships; does his theories allow for this assumption? This could be a major criticism against Bowlby, as adolescence and adulthood attachments are not accounted for in his work, although Bowlby (1980) suggested that attachment behaviour is *“less readily activated”* in older individuals but,

these individuals do seek the “*stronger and wiser*” in times of stress. This is not far removed from the infant/mother theory. However, Bowlby does detail in his theory why stages occurred; explanations can be missing from other theories. Sroufe (1986) believed that the two hypotheses’ proposed by Bowlby at the beginning of this essay were “*amply supported*”, this is another positive outcome that Bowlby’s theory provides; it is testable, as explained earlier (Ainsworth, 1978 and Harlow, 1958).

Was Bowlby for or against psychoanalysis? Garelli (2000) points to a contradiction Bowlby made claiming that throughout his work his frame of reference has been psychoanalysis. However, Garelli also observed that Bowlby criticises the method in which psychoanalysis gathers data for its conclusions: end -product backwards. This is to say that older participants are interviewed and studied and a conclusion is derived from their statements. Memory, aversion, repression and ‘eye-witness testimony’ are just a few aspects that can render psychoanalysis impractical. Garelli (2000) also states that:

“Where psychoanalysis relies on memories, attachment theory distrusts them. Where psychoanalysis asserts the natural site to perform research is the consulting room, Attachment theory declares research must be done out of the psychotherapeutic premises. Where psychoanalysis works retrospectively, trying to reconstruct the patients infancy, attachment theory is determined to see by its own eyes what goes on during infancy and early childhood directly, dispensing with untrustworthy informants”.

From these proposals does Bowlby’s’ research warrant his suggested model of attachment? Only stressful situations were observed; a more expansive observation of

how a mother and infant interacts in non-stressful and natural surroundings could possibly allow further understanding of attachment.

So, Bowlby was to only study overt behaviour; Field (1996) was to investigate physiological changes that occur in infants during separation. Laundenslager et al (1982) and Reite et al (1981) provided Field with evidence for physiological changes in monkeys. Field suggested that protest and despair, formulated by Bowlby, was apparent in these monkeys during separation from an attachment figure; Field deemed it agitation and depression. Increased motor activity and frequent distress calls characterises protest, whilst depression was observed as slow movement, diminished play and a decrease in REM (rapid eye movement) sleep. This could be seen as a more modern, positive outlook on Bowlby's work; unfortunately no explanation is given for Detachment.

Garelli (2000) tells of other reasons for Bowlby's investigations. Bowlby was seemingly unhappy with a previous view that 'infantile narcissism' prevents the child from feeling grief upon loss of a love object. Bowlby believed that grief and mourning appear when an attachment as been made and the attachment figures are no longer available. Main (1996) stated:

"Bowlby proposed that the child's insistence on maintenance of proximity to protective (parental) figures was attributable to the activities of an attachment behavioural system which regulates primate safety and survival". p. 237.

This 'infantile narcissism' was developed by, the now, much -criticised Freud and adopted by his daughter, Anna. As can be imagined, Bowlby came under great

opposition when he was to adopt his 'active child' theory, but this insistence by the child on proximity is constantly stressed in Bowlby's work.

Sroufe (1986) firmly believes that Bowlby expanded on earlier psychoanalytical work by Freud (developmental stages) but "*broadened and extended*" each phase and concentrated more on the quality of care in infancy. Sroufe (1986) also suggested:

"Finally, the mechanistic view of the person motivated only by the desire to keep tension at its lowest possible level, is replaced by the view of the active person, adapting, coping and seeking synthesis of experience." p 842

Sroufe also states that continuity and change had been a problem that was never really addressed in early developmental study. Bowlby, along with others, was to banish the idea of the individual being characterised by a "*collection of static traits, which manifest themselves with constancy across time and situation*" (Sroufe, 1986). This idiographic approach to development seems to be in-vogue in today's research.

So would Bowlby be recognised today in a psychological world that is interested in empiricism and scientific method? Acceptability of results and objectivity of approach are just two concepts of scientific study. Objectivity relates to the attempt to observe the reality of an event and not allow preconceived views, whilst acceptability indicates whether observations and experimentation is reproducible. Bowlby found an agreeable conclusion to his previously mentioned hypotheses' through his observations. Was it a valid and objective study? This is still cause for much argument today as researchers

today are criticised for possibly swaying to a prevailing view and looking for causality. Bowlby is not exempt from this type of condemnation.

What are the implications of the contributions by John Bowlby? It seems that Bowlby provided a basis for what is good/bad attachment and from this inferences can be made about how a child will develop and also maybe provide an understanding of why some adults are the way they are. In addition, his work has provided us with characteristics of 'good' parenting and why, from this, problem behaviour occurs. Bowlby (1969) noted an example of this: avoidance. Research had shown Bowlby that after long-term separations, a clear avoidance of the mother was seen in the child's behaviour. Bowlby interpreted this as repression. Main (1996) has elaborated on this research and proposes that it is actually the mother/caregiver who has been the contributor to the child's behaviour through her own behaviour: avoiding actual contact and rejecting attachment. This once again tells us the benefits of having access to much earlier work and more advanced scientific methods.

Bowlby's pioneering work on the effects of maternal deprivation possibly lead to childcare in hospitals and other institutions being revolutionised. What is still left unclear and is the cause for many debates is what the implications are on behaviour in later life. Sroufe (1986) claims that Bowlby had the advantage over Freud with twentieth century advances in scientific theory and fifty years of basic research in developmental and comparative psychology. If John Bowlby were alive today it would be interesting to see if he could develop a more generous model of attachment that could account for multiple attachments and ongoing attachments that occur through life. Possibly though, Bowlby's greatest contribution to attachment theory was to involve the

child and allow them to be seen as an interactive human who requires a caregiver that will help them develop their own attachment behaviour to others.

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