

YEAR 2 - INDIVIDUAL DEVELOPMENT AND CHANGE

Select a developmental or psychological theory/perspective that helps your understanding of people and their circumstances and informs your understanding of social work practice in a multi-cultural society. Summarise the main features of the theory and outline its strengths and weaknesses. Discuss, with example(s) about a particular life stage or event, in what ways the theory has applications for social work practice.

**Introduction**

This assignment will examine infant attachment, concentrating, in the main, on Bowlby's Theory of Attachment (1951) in order to examine the topic in some depth within the limited word count. Whilst aware that a number of people have written on this subject, such as, Ainsworth et al (1978), Fahlberg (1988), Howe (1995), Klaus and Kennell (1976), Rutter (1974) and Weiss (1991), the theory was originally developed by John Bowlby who has been described as 'the father of attachment theory' (Beckett, 2006. p.49) and it was for this reason that Bowlby's theory was chosen. The essay will briefly describe Bowlby's theory and critique its strengths and weaknesses, in addition examples from social work will be interwoven throughout the essay focussing on anti-discriminatory practice. The theory will be applied to practice using examples referring to particular life stages or life events.

**Attachment Theory**

Bowlby was a trained psychoanalyst and in 1950 was asked by the World Health Organisation to carry out a study on children who had been separated from their parents. During this study, he also interviewed adolescents and adults who had been separated from parents in childhood. He found a strong link between what he described as 'maternal deprivation' and troubles in later life, such as mental health problems, disturbances in behaviour and problems in parenting (Beckett 2006). Bowlby used the term 'maternal deprivation' to include loss or separation of mother or neglectful or abusive mothering (ibid).

Bowlby's 'maternal deprivation' theory was drawn originally from his study of 44 convicted juveniles in the London Child Guidance Unit who suffered from 'affectionless psychopathy', or the inability to feel affection for, or care about, the well-being of others. Over half of these children had been separated from their mothers for a period of at least a week during the first 5 years of life and Bowlby concluded that maternal deprivation was the cause of their delinquency and emotional problems (Bowlby, 1951).

In addition to this study, Bowlby also conducted research that examined the short term effects on infants when separated from their mothers, he discovered that children went through three distinct stages: –

1. Protest - this includes crying and screaming the child will probably try to look for their mother.
2. Despair – the child becomes lethargic and uninterested.
3. Detachment – the child does not seem interested in the missing parent and starts to participate in other activities; although the child may not be fully engaged in the activity.

(Payne, 2005).

Bowlby felt that in the ‘Detachment’ stage, the child’s defence mechanisms would initiate to exclude feelings of anguish, he saw that there could be a connection to his earlier findings associated with ‘maternal deprivation’. Although the child appears to be acting ‘normally’ they are suppressing their feelings of loss due to the separation from their mothers which in later life Bowlby believed could contribute to delinquent behaviour (Bowlby, 1951).

Bowlby used the term ‘Monotropy’ to describe the one strong attachment that children form, usually to the mother, he stated that this attachment forms during the first year of life and this is a ‘critical period’ in which attachment must take place, he stated that if attachment has not formed by age 3 then it is too late; even after 6 months it is difficult. He identified that babies have a number of reflexes and physical characteristics that are likely to cause a pleasurable response from their care givers and therefore, strengthen the attachment bond. Examples of these are soft rounded features making the infant appear attractive and responses such as smiling, crying, suckling clinging to the adult (Bowlby 1969) and staring at the adults face (Fantz, 1956).

Bowlby saw the necessity of a close bond between mother and child as a basic biological need, he stated ‘mother love in infancy and childhood is as important for mental health as are vitamins and proteins for physical health’ (Bowlby, 1951). He described this relationship as a primary need and part of our nature. Although Bowlby was strongly influenced by the work of Sigmund Freud (e.g. 1923, 1933, 1949,), he rejected Freud’s Secondary Drive Theory which focused on maternal relationships and child’s libido and primary need for food, but was drawn towards findings from Ethology (a branch of Biology concerned with studying the behaviour of animals in natural conditions). For example, Bowlby cited a study done on baby monkeys when they are separated from their mothers; both mother and baby became distressed and made attempts to get back to each other. Bowlby described this as ‘attachment behaviour’ (Beckett,2006). He felt that this behaviour has evolved for a particular reason; this being that it is the innate nature of infants to want to explore new things, however, the child also needs to remain close to its mother, on whom it relies for basic needs. The child wanders away to explore but still likes to stay in quite close proximity to its mother so that if

it feels danger or is scared, the mother will be its secure protection base. Separation between mother and child in the form of time or space produces anxiety in both parties and increases attachment behaviour (Weiss, 1991).

Bowlby described the mother as a 'secure base' on which the child can depend (Bowlby, 1951). Attachment behaviour is a way of restoring the security if there is a threat to it. 'Attachment behavioural system' was the term used to describe the different attachment behaviours that children would use in their individual situations. For those children who had no real sense of a 'secure base', Bowlby used the term 'in a state of dissuagement', which he describes as constantly having an unsatisfied need, here he said that the child will look for ways to reduce anxiety and receive care. He felt that this will be carried through to later life and inform future relationships. It is here where Bowlby puts forward the connection between attachment and the development of individual personalities (Beckett, 2006).

Confidence in the availability of an attachment figure, or lack of it, is built up slowly during the years of immaturity – infancy, childhood and adolescence – and.... whatever expectations are developed during those years tend to persist relatively unchanged throughout the rest of life' (Bowlby, 1998a. p245).

In order to recognise whether or not an infant has a secure relationship with their caregiver, Bowlby introduced the "Internal Working Model" (Bowlby, 1997). This consists of two sub models, the 'self' and 'other'. It suggests that when a child has a secure attachment with its caregiver, it sees itself as worthy of attention and love. The infant also sees the caregiver as someone who meets their needs. Whereas, if an infant has an insecure attachment, it would see itself as unworthy of attention and the caregiver as unreliable in meeting its needs (ibid).

### **Strengths**

Bowlby's work was very influential in making a number of positive changes in dealing with the care of children, for example, parents in the 1950's and 1960's were requested not to visit their children in hospital as it was upsetting for the child, however, Bowlby's work regarding the three stages of separation 'Protest, Despair and Denial' demonstrated that this was nonsense and in fact children felt safe to express distress when parents were there and that hospital visits were very positive (Beckett, 2006). Bowlby's work also affected putting young children into institutional care as it highlighted how harmful this was (Bowlby 1952) and influenced the growth in foster placements. The work of Bowlby was also very influential in placing children in temporary care placements as it emphasised the need for long term plans and continuity of care (Mussen et al, 1984). Bowlby through his research also influenced the negative practice of separating mothers and babies immediately after birth and this

practice is now discouraged giving mothers and infants time together to bond (Bowlby, 1998b). It could also be surmised that Bowlby has influenced the practice of adoption in that children are now encouraged to keep in contact with their birth parents where practical and possible.

The work of Bowlby has repercussions in the present day as his research on the importance of a child's early years is apparent in Government schemes such as Sure Start and the number of parenting programmes that can be seen on television. Also the number of infant and junior places at boarding schools has decreased over the years as awareness of the negative effects of separation in early childhood has infiltrated into common knowledge (Beckett, 2006).

### **Weaknesses**

Bowlby's views have been widely criticised by feminist writers for stating that the mother is the only attachment figure and should therefore stay at home with the baby. The dominant ideology was "A woman's place is in the home; it is her natural role". This is clearly discriminatory as it discourages women from working and also men from child care. The political economic agenda at the time when Bowlby's work was published was to rebuild family life. Men had returned from the war and needed jobs that women had taken over. Thus forcing women back into domestic roles (Pascall, 1986). The Ministry of Health argued that nursery provision was detrimental to the child. The male ministers of that time, citing the opinions of Bowlby and other social scientists, viewed nurseries as harmful, whereas only a few years previously during the war, the reverse was proposed that children should be placed in nurseries leaving mothers free to work in the factories (ibid).

A child relying too heavily on its mother may in itself be damaging, for example, if the mother feels under pressure, tired or is ill and cannot provide the attention needed by the child. Also with such emphasis on the role of mother, other important relationships are forgotten, for example, the father, grandparents, siblings, aunts, foster parents etc. This model of child care focuses on the European/North American nuclear family and ignores other styles of communal childcare which are regarded as norms in other parts of the world, such as Kibbutz in Israel (Beckett, 2006). Further research has thrown additional doubt on Bowlby's work, Rutter (1974) proposed that babies do form attachments with people other than their mothers. Family members can all play an important part, and can equally provide a safe continuous relationship; so the biological duty that Bowlby gave exclusively to mothers can actually be shared. Rutter (1974) believes that good quality day care does not disrupt a child's emotional bonds with its parents, the child continues to prefer his parents to other carers, so attending nursery is not as traumatic as Bowlby suggests. Another study conducted by Schaffer and Emerson (1964) on 58 infants showed that by 18 months old, 87% of the children had a secure attachment with more than one person, which also disputes Bowlby's work.

Another criticism is that the main attachment figure does not have to be the mother or even a woman at all. In a case where two gay men adopt or foster a child, then the primary care giver would be male and it is now seen that the same level of attachment can be formed as with a female carer. Bowlby's theory placed so much emphasis on the mother/child bond that it was discriminatory against any carer other than the mother.

Clarke and Clarke (1976) were also critical of Bowlby's theories, they believe that the whole of childhood is an important time, with the formative years of no more importance than middle or later childhood. They argued that positive interventions of work with children can be made later in life with equal success. They cited the Study of Twin Boys (Koluchova 1972) where their mother had died in childbirth leaving the father as the primary care giver. The father found this difficult and quickly remarried with the sole intention of the stepmother being the primary caregiver. The stepmother locked the children away in the attic and this continued until they were 11 years old. At this time, a neighbour contacted Social Services and someone visited the house where the father revealed what was happening. The twins were taken away and placed in an orphanage, where it was discovered that they demonstrated severe developmental problems including poor locomotion, own unique language of communication between themselves, refusal to be separated, incapable of forming relationships and intellectually immaturity. Over the next four years, their mental capabilities and language skills developed, their intelligence became average and social development improved. The Koluchova twins cast severe doubt on the evidence of 'critical periods' because they recovered and led a normal life.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, Bowlby's work has been very influential on children and care giving. Although it is not without its faults, not least of which is its emphasis on placing the role of carer exclusively on the biological mother to the detriment of equally effective care givers. However, his theory has also influenced child care in many positive ways. Children are now encouraged to have hospital visits by parents, overnight day care has been reduced with children now being preferably placed in foster care with a view to continuity and long term goals. It would appear that Bowlby's work was a product of the time in which he studied, but the importance of early attachment and continuity of care cannot be faulted and his studies have since been developed and refined to fit in with other theorists and ideologists. However, it can still be clearly seen that John Bowlby was indeed the father of Attachment Theory.

## **References**

- Ainsworth, M., Blehar, M., Athers, E., Wall, S. (1978). *Patterns of Attachment: A Psychological Study of the Strange Situation*. Hillside, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Beckett, C. (2006). *Human Growth and Development*. London: Sage.
- Bowlby, J. (1951). *Maternal Care and Mental Health*. Geneva: World Health Organisation.
- Bowlby, J. (1969). *Attachment Volume 1: Attachment and Loss*. New York: Basic Books.
- Bowlby, J. (1997). *Attachment*. London: Pimlico.
- Bowlby, J. (1998a). *Separation*. London: Pimlico.
- Bowlby, J. (1998b). *Loss*. London: Pimlico.
- Clarke, A.M., Clarke, A.D. (1976). *Early Experience Myth and Evidence*. London: Open Books.
- Fahlberg, V. (1988). *Fitting the Pieces Together*. London: British Agencies for Adoption and Fostering.
- Fantz, R.L. (1963). 'Pattern vision in newborn infants', *Science*, Volume 140, pp 296-297.
- Freud, S. (1923). *The Ego and the Id*. *Standard Edition Volume 19* London: Hogarth Press.
- Freud, S. (1933). *New Introductory Lectures in Psychoanalysis*. *Standard Edition. Volume 22*. London: Hogarth Press
- Freud, S. (1949). *An outline of Pschoanalysis*. London: WW Norton and Co.
- Howe, D. (1995). *Attachment Theory for Social Work Practice*. London: Macmillan
- Koluchova, J. (1972). 'Severe Deprivation in Twins: A Case Study' cited in Clarke, A.M., Clarke, A.D. (1976). *Early Experience Myth and Evidence*. London: Open Books.
- Klaus, H.M., Kennell, J.H. (1976). *Maternal Infant Bonding*. St Louis; Mosby.
- Mussen, P.H., Conger, J.J., Kagan, J., Huston, A.C. (1984). *Child Development and Personality, Sixth Edition*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Pascall, G. (1986) *Social Policy : A Feminist Analysis*. London: Tavistock.
- Payne, M. (2005). *Modern Social Work Theory*. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Rutter, M. (1974). *Maternal Deprivation Reassessed*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Schaffer, H.R., Emerson, P.E. (1964) 'The development of social attachments in infancy'. *Monographs of Social Research in Child Development*. Volume 29, No, 94.
- Weiss, R.S. (1991). *The Attachment Bond in Childhood and Adulthood*. In Parkes, Stevenson-Hinde and Marris (1991) *Attachment Across the Life-Cycle*. London: Tavistock