Attachment, ethology and adult psychotherapy

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ABSTRACT This article discusses Bowlby’s development of an ethological-evolutionary perspective, and its implications for psychotherapy with adults. According to Bowlby, attachment behavior is instinctive, having emerged throughout the course of evolution to ensure protection and actual survival. Because the environment affects how attachment behavior unfolds, adverse experiences can divert developmental pathways away from resilience, toward dysfunction and emotional distress.

Psychotherapy offers the experience of an attachment relationship. Part of the process involves helping patients understand that feelings such as fear and anxiety are inherent responses to safeguard affectional relationships when they are endangered. As working models are re-appraised and revised, there is emphasis on clarifying the attachment experiences that may have intensified these natural feelings.

KEYWORDS: attachment theory – ethology – fear – attachment disorder – psychotherapy

INTRODUCTION

Attachment theory, credited to the work of John Bowlby, is increasingly seen as a significant addition to understanding human social behavior, not only in childhood, but across the life cycle. Once ostracized and dismissed as alien to psychodynamic thought, the approach is now regarded with respect and accepted as part of the mainstream. Drawing on concepts from ethology (the study of animal behavior), evolutionary biology, systems theory and cognitive psychology, as well as his training in psychoanalytic object relations, Bowlby advanced a point of view that emphasized the influence of affectional relationships and experiences on personality development, whether healthy or pathological. Early in his career, Bowlby (1953, 1957, 1960a) had noticed that disrupted relationships with family members led to emotional distress and, searching for a way to explain the processes involved, discovered Lorenz’s work on imprinting and the field of ethology. As he became familiar with the concepts and methods of investigation of animals, he saw their potential relevance to research and theory with humans, and with a scientific grounding that he thought was lacking in psychoanalysis. For example, Bowlby (1957, 1976) noted that ethologists, like clinicians, were concerned with subjects such as the nature of the bond that united mothers and their young, the effects of early experiences, conflict and defenses. Lorenz’s (1935) studies of goslings and ducklings and Harlow’s (Harlow & Zimmerman, 1959) experiments with rhesus monkeys found that forming bonds to a mother figure was not based on feeding, and they also showed that subjecting the
animals to separation or other adverse experiences could distort their normal development.

Bowlby used these kinds of ethological studies to reformulate traditional theory. He replaced Freud’s psychic energy and drive theory with an ethological perspective to explain that an infant has an instinctive tendency to seek proximity and form an affectional bond—or attachment—to its caregiver, not primarily for oral needs but for the biological function of safety, protection and reproductive success. He also used an ethological orientation to hypothesize a behavioral system of attachment to explain how an infant maintains the connection so essential to its actual survival.

This ethological perspective was unique to attachment theory. As Bowlby (1969) pointed out, even when theorists such as Fairbairn eliminated drive theory, they proposed no clear-cut substitution for it. Moreover, understanding attachment behavior in terms of its protective function changes how therapists conceptualize and treat a client’s distress: there is a definite shift in clinical thinking and technique.

The purpose of this paper is to explore clinical implications of Bowlby’s ethological-evolutionary perspective, beginning with a definition of ethology, followed by a brief overview of its history in Bowlby’s writings. Illustrations include attachment behavior of a family dog and psychotherapy with adults. An area of emphasis is the role that fear and anxiety have in assuring the security and protection of attachment. It is proposed that a grasp of Bowlby’s use of ethological concepts will help the reader have a fuller understanding, appreciation of, and ability to apply concepts from what has come to be called attachment theory.

ETHOLOGY AND ATTACHMENT

Lorenz (1978), considered the father of ethology, defined it as a ‘discipline which applies to the behavior of animals and humans all those questions asked and those methodologies used as a matter of course in all the other branches of biology since Charles Darwin’s time.’ (p. 1). Simply put, ethologists observe and study animals in their natural habitat in order to understand how their instinctive behavior contributes to adaption and actual survival. Borrowing from ethology, Bowlby proposed that attachment behavior has emerged over the course of evolution. He substituted the phrase instinctive behavior for the psychoanalytic concept of instinct to describe those behaviors that are common to almost all members of a species and are more or less resistant to environmental conditions. Instinctive behavior has four basic characteristics: (1) it is a pattern of behavior that is predictable and similar in most of the members of a species; (2) it comprises a sequence of behavior that generally runs a predictable course; (3) it contributes to survival of an individual or the species; (4) its development does not proceed from learning (Bowlby, 1969). However, though it can develop without previous learning, instinctive behavior is dependent on the environment and without the necessary responses, development can go awry. Lorenz (1935) demonstrated this when he disrupted the bonding behavior of ducklings and goslings.

Bowlby first wrote about ethology in 1953, suggesting it might simplify and clarify psychoanalytic concepts: ‘the time is already ripe for a unification of psycho-analytic concepts with those of ethology, and to pursue the rich vein of research which this unification suggests’ (p. 32). Then, in the first of his three classic papers, The Nature of the Child’s Tie to his Mother, published in 1958, Bowlby introduced ethological
principles and an evolutionary point of view as an alternative way to understand the nature of the mother-child bond. In *Separation Anxiety*, published in 1960 (Bowlby, 1960a), he offered an ethological explanation of separation anxiety: a ‘biologically based’ (p. 94) response that arises ‘whenever an instinctual response system is activated but...is unable to reach termination’ (p. 96). For example, if a mother is temporarily unavailable, a young child could be in distress or danger and it would be a natural reaction to feel fear and anxiety. Because these responses are also affected by learning, adverse experiences, such as rejection or loss, can intensify emotions, resulting in pathological anxiety.

In this latter paper, Bowlby (1960a) explained that the new view of separation anxiety came out of observations and interpretations of the responses that Robertson (Robertson & Bowlby, 1952; Robertson & Robertson, 1989) had identified in young children who were separated from their parents for at least 1 week. The three phases – protest, despair, detachment – remain a cornerstone of attachment theory, especially for understanding the relationship between separation, loss and emotional distress.

In terms of loss, Bowlby’s (1960c) third seminal paper, *Grief and Mourning in Infancy and Early Childhood*, claimed that processes of grief and mourning are activated in both children and adults whenever an attachment figure ‘continues to be unavailable’ (p. 10) i.e. is permanently lost or thought to be so. As with separation, Bowlby emphasized that a dysfunctional outcome could be related to circumstances that divert successful adjustment. He cites as an example that if a young child is subjected to a succession of caregivers, he may become self-centered and less able to make close relationships in the future.

During this premiere period, Bowlby (1957, 1960b) published two other ethological papers and, by the publication of the first volume of his trilogy, *Attachment*, he wrote he was introducing ‘a new type of instinct theory’ (Bowlby, 1969, p. 17), based on ethology as well as control theory and evolutionary biology. The trilogy, completed with *Separation* (Bowlby, 1973) and finally *Loss* (Bowlby, 1980), is a comprehensive presentation of his theory, an ethological explanation of why attachment, beginning with the mother–child bond, is ‘a built-in necessity’ (Karen, 1994, p. 94), and how the disruption of affectional bonds can be deeply damaging to both emotional and physical well-being, from childhood throughout the life cycle.

**THE BEHAVIORAL SYSTEM OF ATTACHMENT**

According to ethological theory, an infant is born equipped with a number of instinctive behaviors that are gradually organized into increasingly complex behavior systems as it interacts with its environment and develops ‘working models’ of itself and others. At first, the baby will mostly cry or cling if distressed or frightened but later can call, crawl or employ a variety of more sophisticated measures to achieve its goal or ‘set-goal’ of comfort and safety. The system that Bowlby hypothesized mediates this attachment behavior is used to attain and retain a certain degree of proximity to attachment figures at any age, and with a flexibility that allows for accommodating to ever changing conditions (Bowlby, 1969, 1980). Holmes (1994) makes the point that psychoanalysis emphasized internal danger over external threat. But, just as in the environment of evolutionary adaptedness in which humans evolved, today’s young children can
also be at greater risk of injury if they are not within the protective range of an attachment figure (Bowlby, 1969). For this reason, attachment behavior takes precedence over exploration and even feeding (Main, 1999). We can survive some period of time without food but an external attack by a predator can be a sudden and fatal threat. Thus, attachment theory alleges that an infant is biologically predisposed to make and maintain attachments, and to especially seek them out at times of illness, fatigue or danger.

It is because the theory emphasizes the physical proximity of familiar persons and places, as well as emotional availability, that Holmes (1993a) contends it is both relational and spacial. Schore (2000) points out that it is also a theory explaining affect regulation because it is concerned with how individuals regulate both positive and negative feelings. A mother not only minimizes her child’s distress, but also responds to, and maximizes, its positive emotions. Furthermore, this ‘psychobiological attunement’ (Field, 1985) which includes both physiological and psychological provisions, is crucial to brain development and the capacity for affect regulation throughout life. When early experience is inadequate, for instance if there is a lack of stimulation or emotional contact, the neural structures critical to long-term stability do not develop the capacity for optimal internal self-regulation. In particular, Schore (2000) asserts that the vital social and biological functions of the attachment system are carried out by the right hemisphere of the brain. Because this hemisphere is dominant in the child’s first 3 years of life, early experiences are processed and stored here, specifically in the right cortex. Once these attachment interactions are encoded into memory, they endure as a substrate of thoughts and feelings, guiding expectations and behavior in later relationships. Fonagy (Fonagy, Moran, Steele, Steele, & Higgit 1991; Fonagy, 2001) has called the ability to reflect on one’s internal emotional states ‘reflective self function’ and considers it to be one of the evolutionary functions of the attachment behavior system.

Schore’s (2000) extension of attachment theory as a theory of affect regulation is supported by Polan and Hofer’s (1999) experiments with rat pups which found that proximity and interaction with their mothers not only provided protection but actually regulated different behavioral and physiological systems. Rat pups learn to recognize certain features of their mothers and develop ‘expectancies’ from repetitive interactions with them that alter the offspring’s attachment behavior. If then subjected to separation, the pups lose these ‘hidden’ regulatory processes, resulting in changes that parallel the ‘protest’ and ‘despair’ phases of the separation response identified in young children.

Polan and Hofer are careful to state that they are not attributing a complex mental life to rodents but that the animals have some representation of experience that suggests mental functioning may not be unique to humans. The researchers posit that cognitive processes may have evolved across species, within the context of ongoing interactions with the mother. A continuity of representations would explain how the young of many animal species, like young human children, respond to disruptions such as separation. In thinking about people, however, it is important to realize that separation responses are not confined to childhood. Because the function of attachment is to assure safety and security, the attachment system is liable to be activated whenever an attachment figure is absent or unavailable. Whereas certain behavior in adults, such as fear of being alone following a frightening event, might traditionally be
seen as childish or over-dependent, attachment theory perceives distress upon separation or threat of disruption as an adaptive response for forming and maintaining affectional bonds for protection, especially in the face of danger.

FEAR AND ANXIETY

The concept of a behavioral system explains how attachment behavior is organized to maintain proximity to affectional figures and also provides a theoretical understanding of the fear and anxiety that is elicited when these bonds are temporarily disrupted or permanently severed. According to Bowlby (1973, 1982), humans, like animals, will inherently respond with fear in certain circumstances, not because the circumstances are necessarily dangerous but because they signal an increase of risk of danger. Separation from an affectional figure is considered one of these naturally occurring clues that warns of potential peril, and motivates movement away from the situation and toward a haven of safety. Other natural fears include being alone and isolated, unfamiliarity, heights, changes in light or sound, looming objects or sudden movements (Bowlby, 1973). Research has shown that children become sensitive to separation when they become mobile and, by the age of 3 or 4, develop fear of heights, open spaces, and darkness, conditions that would have been especially dangerous during evolutionary history (Simpson, 1999). But even now, in terms of protection and adaption, it makes good sense to respond to these conditions with some type of action, for example, seeking safety in the company of another person. Therefore, protest and distress about being alone, or separated from a potentially caregiving figure, are natural fear responses that have evolved to preserve attachment and protection.

There are research studies of both people and animals that have found that separation from or loss of an attachment figure could, by itself, cause fear and anxiety, affecting both attachment and exploratory behaviors. Harlow (1958), who separated infant rhesus monkeys from their mothers and raised them on mother surrogates, demonstrated that the monkeys who had cloth mother surrogates were terrified when placed in a strange environment and did not explore their surroundings if their cloth-dummy mothers were absent. If the cloth-dummy mother was present, however, the infants would first cling to it and then begin to move about.

These results with primates were similar to those reported by Ainsworth (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978) in the 1 year-old children she studied in the Strange Situation procedure. Simpson (1999) notes that her test confronts the child with two natural clues: being left alone, and being left with a stranger. When the mother was present, the children used her as a base from which to play and explore. However, when the mother left the room, a majority of the children were distressed and restricted their exploratory behavior. While the mother was away, they cried and searched for her, and also responded more intensely to frightening situations such as the entrance of a stranger (Ainsworth & Bell, 1970). In a situation like this, where the child is alone, and with a stranger, anxiety is apt to intensify because natural fears are ‘compounded’ by more than one clue to danger. Moreover, in contrast to the belief that separation desensitizes children (or adults!) to later separation, attachment theory alleges that the effects of separation can be cumulative. Not only does behavior following reunion experiences reflect separation, it tends to persist. For example, children exposed to repeated experiences of separation are likely to grow more
sensitive than others to any kind of separation or loss. In addition, as adults, they
could be frightened and anxious in a variety of situations that do not appear alarming
to others (Bowlby, 1973).

Bowlby (1982) defined separation anxiety as ‘anxiety about losing or becoming
separated from someone loved’ (p. 670). It reflects our ‘basic human disposition’
(p. 671) to respond with fear and anxiety ‘when an attachment figure cannot be found
or when there is no confidence that an attachment figure will be available and
responsive when desired’ (Bowlby, 1973, p. 407). The affect of anxiety is a natural
instinctive response, an adaptive attempt to recover or restore an affectional
relationship. The premise that there is a genetic bias to maintain attachment, and
also to respond to separation or loss marks a modification of psychoanalytic theory,
and together with the concept of natural clues, brings a new perspective that clinicians
can use to understand and help their patients. Another aspect of this innovative
approach that was actually the beginning of attachment theory is Bowlby’s
delineation of the stages of response to separation.

RESPONSES TO SEPARATION FROM AN
ATTACHMENT FIGURE

Robertson (Robertson & Bowlby, 1952) found that young children, separated from
their parents and placed in substitute care, manifest an agitation and anxiety that
Bowlby came to call protest. This marked the first of the three phases the children
passed through during the limited time they were separated. During the stage of
protest, fear and anxiety are prominent, indicating an urgency to search out and bring
back the missing person. The next phase of despair is more subdued and, though there
is still preoccupation with reunion, hope fades and the child becomes withdrawn and
less active, as though in a state of mourning. Whereas in the protest stage the heart rate
accelerated, in the despair phase it decreases. From an evolutionary perspective, this
restraint conserves energy, whether for the young child who is in danger of becoming
exhausted or the animal in the wild who must remain unobtrusive and hide from
predators until its mother returns (Gilbert & McGuire, 1998; Hofer, 1995). Finally, if
separation is prolonged, or if conditions during the separation are severe, attachment
feelings may close off defensively, leading to an emotional detachment. This
deactivation of attachment is especially evident in reunion behavior where the child
seems to no longer care about the mother, and refuses to acknowledge her presence or
accept her comfort. If the separation has not been too lengthy or exacerbated by
difficult circumstances such as inadequate substitute care, detachment does not persist
and attachment is renewed. If the interruption is prolonged or repeated, however,
detachment can persist indefinitely, even into adulthood (Bowlby, 1973).

In identifying these responses to separation, Bowlby saw similarities to
descriptions of adult bereavement (see Marris, 1958; Parkes 1972), and later revised
the stages to describe grief and mourning. In the revision, he added an initial phase he
called numbing, referring to a brief time during which a person becomes dazed and
distant in order to enable the shock of permanent loss to be absorbed a little at a time
(Bowlby, 1980; Parkes, 1972). Subsequent stages of grief and mourning-yearning and
searching, disorganization and despair, and then eventual acceptance-resemble the
separation process, part of our biologically programmed effort to retrieve absent
figures, which is only gradually relinquished with time and the realization that the
loss is irreversible. With either separation or loss, and whether in young children or adult clients, the portrayal of responses as lying along a continuum, and including the possibility of anger at any phase, makes it possible to explain a fluctuating variety of emotions. Moreover, Bowlby’s (1973) position that childhood reactions such as emotional detachment could persist and have long-term detrimental effects on personality formation made it possible to begin to connect childhood separation and bereavement to later psychological disturbances.

FELI, THE GOOSE; BEAULY, THE FAMILY DOG

When we meet an adult client who appears to manifest a pattern of insecure attachment behavior, we attempt to piece together the experiences that may have led to the current distress. Because clients themselves do not usually have a conscious line to some of the relevant thoughts and feelings involved, the process of therapy provides a setting and opportunity to access and speculate about past events and the meaning given to them. An ethologist, Helga Fischer-Mamblona (2000) who is also trained in psychoanalysis, has alleged that research with geese has implications for theory as well as treatment. Feli, a female goose, illustrates the possibilities.

At the time she was hatched, Feli was put into isolation for 8 weeks and then set free. By then, even though she was allowed to join the other geese, she was a ‘bundle of anxiety’, with her behavior typical of a ‘fugitive on the run’ (p. 10). If approached by other geese or humans, she would run back to her enclosure. Sometimes she behaved inappropriately, for example, approaching a family of geese who would chase her away. Although Feli did eventually mate, she was unresponsive to her gosling and it soon died. Fischer-Mamblona hypothesized that without an early attachment figure, the balance between attachment and fear was skewed, with fear dominating Feli’s behavior to such an extent that her capacity to approach other animals to make new bonds was blocked. She also developed a ‘symptom’ of shaking and preening when she seemed to want to greet geese but was simultaneously motivated to escape. Ethologists call this behavior a displacement activity that occurs when the conflict cannot be resolved. Finally, when she was 6 years old, the researchers replaced Feli’s eggs with duck eggs, which hatched and were more insistent in snuggling up to her. Feli’s behavior began to change and she started responding to the youngsters. While walking with them, she was approached by an older gander. They remained a pair for 4 years, during which time they had goslings once and were able to rear them normally.

In drawing parallels to psychotherapy, Fischer-Mamblona concluded that a fear of closeness can slowly be overcome within a ‘climate of trust’, which, as it becomes ‘the beginning of a new attachment’ (p. 19), can help resolve the fearful effects of earlier trauma. To unblock attachment behavior can be a lengthy process and is further illustrated by the story of Beauly, a Shetland sheep dog (‘Sheltie’) who was bred and born in the kennel of a private dog breeder. When I first saw her, Beauly was 4 weeks old. As I picked her up, she stiffened and looked at me with a blank stare and once put down, quickly darted away, standing alone, away from the commotion of the other dogs. She briefly followed her father, who ignored her. At 10 weeks, when I returned, Beauly’s behavior hadn’t changed, and she hid in the back of a crate, resisting efforts to pull her out. Without feeling drawn to Beauly as I was to a more engaging pup, who was jumping up on me, with tail wagging, I nonetheless decided to take them both.
On the stop home to be checked at the veterinarian's, Beauly shrieked with such fear that it was suggested she was 'peculiar' and I should consider returning her. I did not return her and though she shied away from human touch and company, preferring to be with the other dog, Skye, she showed a quick ability and willingness to learn.

From his observations of dogs, Scott (1963, 1987) speculated that dogs who prefer other dogs to humans and who run away and hide when a stranger appears, as Beauly did, had a lack of exposure to humans during a critical period of development. Fischer-Mamblona (2000) refers to this as 'a break in the early attachment process' (see Note).

Beauly's disturbed attachment was especially evident in her exploratory behavior. She had a curiosity for things such as bushes on a walk, and a tendency to wander off, e.g. if a door to the street was left open. Her behavior resembled the 2-year old children that Lieberman and Pawl (1990) described as reckless and accident-prone and which endangered the children's safety. The authors attributed this to a deficiency in self-protection that leads to giving the exploratory behavioral system 'full sway' (p. 382) both at home and in unfamiliar environments. Lorenz (1978) noted that the tendency of animals to explore every strange situation as if it is 'biologically relevant' (p. 327) can be dangerous. There are experiments with dogs, for example, that found that puppies raised in confined environments would indiscriminately explore novel situations to an extent that was perilous and maladaptive to survival (Bowlby, 1969).

Beauly's brash behavior nearly cost her her life. One summer night she came in from our fenced-in canyon yard, and began jumping around. When I tried to examine her she ran away and it was only as her face started to swell soon thereafter and she became listless that I realized the urgency of her condition. By the time I got her to the veterinarian to learn she'd been bitten by a rattlesnake, I was told she was beyond saving. However, although she was terribly ill for several weeks, she did survive.

At the time she was bitten by the snake, Beauly was 3 years old and in spite of allowing me to care for her, her avoidant behavior continued for another year. Then she would occasionally approach, facing away from me, to pet her. It was another year before I could reach directly toward her face without her bolting away.

Beauly is now 7 years old. She does come around to be petted, is keenly aware of routines and quickly responsive to activities such as eating or going for a walk, but stays mostly to herself. If I approach her, she gets up and moves away and when I return home or someone she knows visits, she barks and wags her tail, but keeps her distance. Usually she disappears when others are around, though sometimes she retreats to a corner where she can observe what is going on. At these times her behavior seems to parallel Main's portrayal of avoidant children who stay within range of the caregiver so that they can attain proximity at a time of need. However, her attachment behavior is still insufficient, for example, when she did not appear recently when the ground shook with three small earthquakes (the other dog came running to me).

To view this from the opposite perspective, there is now impressive evidence of the many physical and emotional health benefits that companion animals, in particular dogs or cats provide to people. I have proposed that family pets provide an element of attachment that may help explain our devotion to them (Sable, 2000). Beauly's undeveloped attachment behavior could be discouraging, in its lack of responsiveness, to an owner, especially if she was the only pet in a household. The tendency of others to gravitate to the friendlier dog also suggests how a dismissing pattern of attachment behavior can inhibit and discourage social interaction. If we see avoidance in clients,
one can surmise the effects this kind of defensive exclusion has had, and is having, on their relationships. With other clients, the defensive response to hurtful affectional experiences may be manifest in a developmental pathway of anxious attachment, but in either pattern there is a distortion of attachment behavior. And, as with Feli, an alternative attachment, such as can be provided by a therapeutic bond, may facilitate change in a person’s attachment behavior and inner working models, leading to greater self-reliance and confidence in the ability to form more fulfilling relationships.

**CLINICAL IMPLICATIONS OF AN ETHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE**

Bowlby (1973, 1991) perceived emotional disturbance as a distortion of the attachment behavior system. Those who exhibit symptoms of anxiety, depression and/or anger have internalized certain adverse affectional experiences, both present and past, which have diverted developmental pathways away from resilience and competent functioning and toward dysfunction (Sable, 1997b). That attachment disorders are seen as evolving out of interpersonal experiences reflects Bowlby’s belief that feelings such as fear and anxiety arise naturally, part of our innate equipment whose purpose is to preserve vital connections of attachment. Under stress, however, they may become maladaptive, either intensified to excessive and persistent anxiety and distress, or excluded and/or redirected to other persons or situations. Gilbert (2001) sees these ineffective strategies as evolutionary trade-offs because they offer adaptive advantages but also disadvantages such as loss of flexibility in meeting changes in the environment. Moreover, when chronic, defensive activity can damage organs of the body such as the brain.

Harris (1997) alleges that individuals are motivated for therapy when their instinctive needs to feel safe and protected are not being met. From my experience as a therapist, I have found that most patients come for treatment feeling confused or troubled by some aspect of an attachment relationship and want relief from their discomfort and uncertainty. In therapy, they are helped to talk about their affectional relationships and experiences, sorting through memories and the meaning attributed to them. Bowlby (1988) emphasized that clients’ versions of their experiences should be affirmed, while at the same time considering if they may now be seen in a new light. With the therapist’s support, encouragement and occasional guidance, it may be possible to reassess the past and rearrange working models so that they are more in line with current knowledge and circumstances. Holmes (1999) describes the narrative process of restructuring working models as story-making and story-breaking; patients learn to tell a coherent story of their lives by sifting through events like a jigsaw puzzle, and reassembling them until the pieces fall into place.

A therapist applying attachment theory to treatment sees her role as providing a protective setting with a safe person who helps clients put together a scenario of their affectional experiences. The approach contends that it is only through establishing a secure base with the therapist that it is possible to investigate and re-experience various aspects of one’s life, some of which would be too painful to think about without a reliable and ‘trusted companion’ (Bowlby, 1988, p. 138.) As patients come to feel what a relationship of secure attachment is like, they can allow transference to surface, and begin to compare and contrast those feelings with other relational experiences.
Since individuals are in distress when they seek professional help, therapists are in a natural position to fulfill the role of an attachment figure (Kobak & Shaver, 1987). The therapist offers an emotional availability, a comforting presence, and a regulated affect, all of which increase the opportunity for attachment to develop (Mallinckrodt, Gantt, & Coble, 1995). Though patients presume the therapist will be helpful, and may even see the therapist as ‘stronger and wiser’, it usually takes time for an authentic attachment to develop (Farber, Lippert, & Nevas, 1995). Fischer-Mamblona’s (2000) observation that Feli’s fear of closeness was overcome by the demands of the young ducklings is consistent with attachment theory’s concept that attachment forms over time in response to ongoing interaction and familiarity. Moreover, a major feature of attachment-based treatment is helping clients understand their evolutionary predisposition for attachment behavior, what Schore (2002) describes as ‘a biologically prepared positive developmental thrust.’ The anxiety of separation, the sadness and despair of loss, or anger, therefore, are inherent responses, built in for attaining and maintaining affectional bonds when they are in jeopardy.

By noting the interpersonal nature of emotions, defensive strategies are perceived as attempts to deal with ‘unmet attachment needs’ (Karen, 1994, p. 386). Therapy affords clients the opportunity to approach thoughts and feelings that have been locked away, and begin to put missing pieces together. Earlier experiences of emotional or physical abuse, parental rejection, or inconsistency can be linked up to current attitudes and behavior. So too can prohibitions from parents, for example, to misconstrue or fail to register what actually took place. Schore (2002) explains how the affect dysregulation of psychopathology often results from earlier relational trauma when a child’s immature neurobiological system is not able to regulate stress efficiently. He states that the goal of attachment-focused treatment is to restructure strategies of affect regulation, and this is accomplished by repetitive affective interactions that take place during sessions. Schore describes the therapist as accepting of a patient’s communications, and attuned in a way that modulates affects and promotes more adaptive strategies of affect regulation. Schore attests to the benefits of therapy when he notes that it can expand right brain systems that are involved in coping with stress.

Like Schore’s work on affect regulation, Siegel’s (2001a,b) work on cognitive development emphasizes that a therapist assists in processing events and feelings so that recollection and memories can be reexamined and reassembled. Siegel expands Bowlby’s original hypotheses about real experiences by noting that the past is remembered in terms of the present, that is, an individual’s recall of past events is not absolute but is filtered through existing working models and is also influenced by current social interactions. Similarly, Kobak (1999) contends that an adult’s appraisal of earlier experiences is influenced by the quality and security of his current relationships. He asserts that attachment theory has not given enough attention to the relevance of these current bonds and experiences, especially in adult psychotherapy.

ATTACHMENT STYLE AND PSYCHOTHERAPY

According to Bowlby (1977), attachment experiences are gradually internalized and organized into patterns of personality that regulate and guide later adult relationships and behavior. These patterns, or attachment styles, were first identified as secure or insecure (or anxious) attachment and then Bowlby further delineated insecure
attachment as anxious-ambivalent (or anxious attachment), compulsive self-reliance, compulsive caregiving (although I prefer the terms insistent self-reliance and insistent caregiving) (Sable, 1992) or emotional detachment. Although these classifications have been modified and expanded by infant and adult research, the basic view that attachment behavior is either over-activated or deactivated in the insecure patterns remains the underlying premise for understanding the defensive strategies of insecurity. It is important to note that the patterns are not equivalent to psychopathology but suggest a continuum of certain personality compromises or characteristics that render adults more prone to develop disturbance at times of stress.

For therapists, understanding a client’s attachment style is a distinctive feature of attachment-based treatment. A person’s pattern of attachment behavior offers a perspective on how she relates to others, including the therapist, how emotion is regulated and memories are retrieved. The patterns are also associated with self-reflection and the ability to compose a coherent narrative about life experiences (Slade, 1999; Siegel, 1999). For example, a semi-structured interview, the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI), devised by Main and colleagues (Main, 1995) to explore the meaning adults give to their childhood experiences, has found that security is related to the coherence of the subjects’ interviews, and not their actual experiences. In contrast to a securely attached person who is able to reflect on his/her history with what Holmes (1994) calls ‘autobiographical competence’, insecure attachment is characterized by an incoherent narrative: either sparse and unrevealing (avoidance or dismissing); or rambling, exaggerated, and over-involved with issues of the past (preoccupied or anxious ambivalent) (Holmes, 1999; Slade, 1999). There is another classification, unresolved/disorganized, that is an attempt to explain a greater degree of defensive exclusion of attachment thoughts and feelings.

Main’s work on narrative supports a principal tenet of psychotherapy: giving words to emotions and experiences can alleviate uncertainty and distress. This suggests that helping clients gain perspective on their styles of responding and relating can lead to greater understanding of why they feel and behave as they do. Throughout the therapeutic process, an attentive, appropriately responsive therapist acknowledges that feelings are ‘real and reasonable’ (Warren, Huston, Egeland, & Sroufe, 1997, p. 643), while a history of how they developed is also clarified. For example, someone with an avoidant attachment style may not recognize the impact of a threat of separation, and shuts off feelings of fear and anger. It is possible this person grew up in a family that did not allow expression of feelings or gave contradictory and inconsistent messages, but is unable to identify the feelings or events that engendered emotional distancing from others because of defensive exclusion.

Therapists serve as a secure base from which to help clients map out their attachment experiences. It is through experiencing a new kind of attachment, together with composing a more consistent narrative, that a person may be able to change working models to feel more confident and deserving of better relationships in the real world beyond therapy.

**DISCUSSION**

The premise that attachment behavior is instinctive is at the core of attachment theory and its application to understanding and helping our patients. Bowlby believed that humans, like animals of many other species, are biologically designed
to make and maintain attachments, and to protest and take action to protect them if their continuity is threatened or disrupted. The propensity to form affectional bonds is so strong that infants will attach to abusing or inadequate parents, just as an adult, once attached, will not easily leave a relationship even if it becomes violent and dangerous.

From an evolutionary standpoint, separation or loss of attachment can be perilous to humans and animals alike, especially early in life. Research is showing, however, that attachment has profound effects at every stage of the life cycle. For example, individuals in close relationships live longer and are healthier; loss of these ties is associated with psychological and physiological disturbance, including susceptibility to accidents and substance abuse (Gilbert, 2001; Hazan & Shaver, 1994; Konner, 1982). Some years ago, Brown (1982), in large community studies of depression in women, found that women with close bonds were less prone to become depressed after events that were known to increase the risk of depression. More recent brain studies have augmented research on relationships by finding that social contact leads to the release of opioids that in turn reduces the distress of separation (Cassidy, 2001; Nelson & Panksepp, 1998). This suggests that the presence of another actually regulates affective levels. Furthermore, observation studies of animals, such as Feli, the goose, demonstrate that attachment behavior is not confined to humans. Stern (2000) said that hearing about Feli reinforced his belief in the ‘force’ of attachment in humans, and has also influenced his clinical thinking. Schäppi (2000) adds that Feli supplied evidence of a ‘feeling’ he had about the relevance of ethological principles to psychotherapy. His hunch is also supported by brain studies that locate attachment in the limbic system that we share with all mammals (Allen, 2001). Rutter, however, (1997), cautions that though there are parallels between people and animals, concepts such as imprinting and sensitive period in humans have been modified by research. With dogs, such as Beauly, the period between 2 and 16 weeks after birth sets a personality that lasts throughout life. For example, a dog like her that is shy of humans can make some progress with attention and training but will always be shy and wary (Coppinger & Coppinger, 2001). Attachment behavior in people is obviously more varied, complex and flexible, but its instinctive origins are still there.

The ethological-evolutionary framework of attachment introduces a perspective into psychotherapy that rests on a biological foundation (Holmes, 1993b). It builds bridges between the biological and the psychological and also between research and theory that broadens the view of personality development, and provides guidelines for therapy. For example, we can help our clients gain an understanding of their attachment behavior and experiences. We can help them understand, for example, that separation anxiety, loneliness and grief are biologically based, natural responses, elicited at times of stress, illness, separation or loss, to keep affectional bonds intact. This therapeutic stance can be both affirming and relieving to clients. I have found that explaining this to bereaved or fearful individuals eases fear and self-blame and furthers discussion without compounding distress. For instance, I point out that a specific part of the brain (possibly the amygdala) may have evolved solely to register fear when there is danger.

This view of attachment’s ‘evolutionary continuity’ (Gilbert & McGuire, 1998, p. 100) illustrates what Harris (1997) writes may be the most important implication of attachment theory for psychotherapy- that attachment behavior is instinctive. When alarmed, we not only move away from threat, we move toward those people
and places that offer safety and security. Hesse and Main (2000) note that though Bowlby made a close connection between fear and attachment, this has mostly been overlooked. They suggest, for instance, something quite important, that adult anxiety disorders may be a sequel to earlier states of disorganized attachment. In terms of symptoms that would meet specified DSM-IV criteria, I have proposed that the excessive anxiety of post-traumatic stress disorder represents an intensification of attachment behavior, where proximity to a safe base takes priority over exploration at times of trauma or danger. Likewise, the anxiety of agoraphobia represents such terror of exploration away from base that the person may become afraid to leave home (Bowlby, 1973; Liotti, 1991; Sable, 1994). In individuals whose defensive exclusion is greater, for instance, those whose symptoms fit a diagnosis of borderline personality disorder, a marked degree of insecure attachment is exhibited, with extreme vacillations between wanting and dreading engagement, as well as disturbances in affect regulation and cognitive functioning (Sable, 1997a; Schore 1994). Stevens and Price (1996) depict the ambivalence over relationships as ‘a linking and spacing disorder’ (p.121) and hypothesize that it reflects an imbalance between a disposition to be connected to others and a disposition to maintain self-reliance and autonomy. Jellema (1999) describes the dilemma in terms of an approach-avoidance conflict, explaining that an evolutionary-based need for security moves a person toward an attachment figure at times of stress. Paradoxically, however, if the attachment figure is the cause of the stress, there is a natural inclination to escape the destructive relationship, but at the same time attachment behavior is activated and intensified, resulting in an exaggerated ‘pull’ back to the frightening figure.

Attachment-based research has identified a variety of interpersonal experiences that can undermine the resilience of adult functioning. Parental threats to abandon or withhold love, hostile punishments and illogical constructions of reality, as well as separation or loss, can intensify instinctive reactions to natural clues and undermine personality development. Attachment-based treatment offers a background against which the histories of adult clients can be untangled and sorted through, and with a language that brings clinical work closer to clients’ actual experiences. Communication is simple and direct, without jargon.

For now, attachment theory is thriving, and has truly become a ‘life-span development theory’ (Crowell, Fraley, & Shaver, 1999, p. 434). There is still more to learn about adult attachment, however, including how it functions, how it is linked to early childhood and to the development of psychopathology (Berlin & Cassidy, 1999; Grossman, Grossman, & Zimmerman, 1999; Insel, 1997). We need to give more attention to the significance of current relationships, both in research and clinical practice. Because affectional bonds are conceived as existing in, and affected by, the larger social world (Marris, 1982, 1991), attachment theory offers a context for examining these issues.

In conclusion, the science of ethology frames the theory of attachment. It was Bowlby’s vision to see that it could improve research strategies, as well as explain how an intrinsic need for connection is thwarted if affectional bonds are disrupted or broken. His conviction about ethology is apparent in an interview he gave almost 25 years before the end of the 20th century:

We are now moving fast towards a unified paradigm. By the end of the century, we will get one... Now in my view, it is the ethologists who have the strongest
paradigm of all, because the biological and evolutionary substrate they bring to
the field, is immensely powerful.

(Evans, 1977, p. 7).

Therapists do now have a biological basis for conceptualizing emotional
development as well as emotional distress. And, they have a way to help clients
toward understanding how their experiences have built on natural inclinations to have
enduring ties with others.

NOTE

1 Because detailed information about Beauly’s early environmental experience is lacking, the
possibility of neurological damage or over-breeding is acknowledged.

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