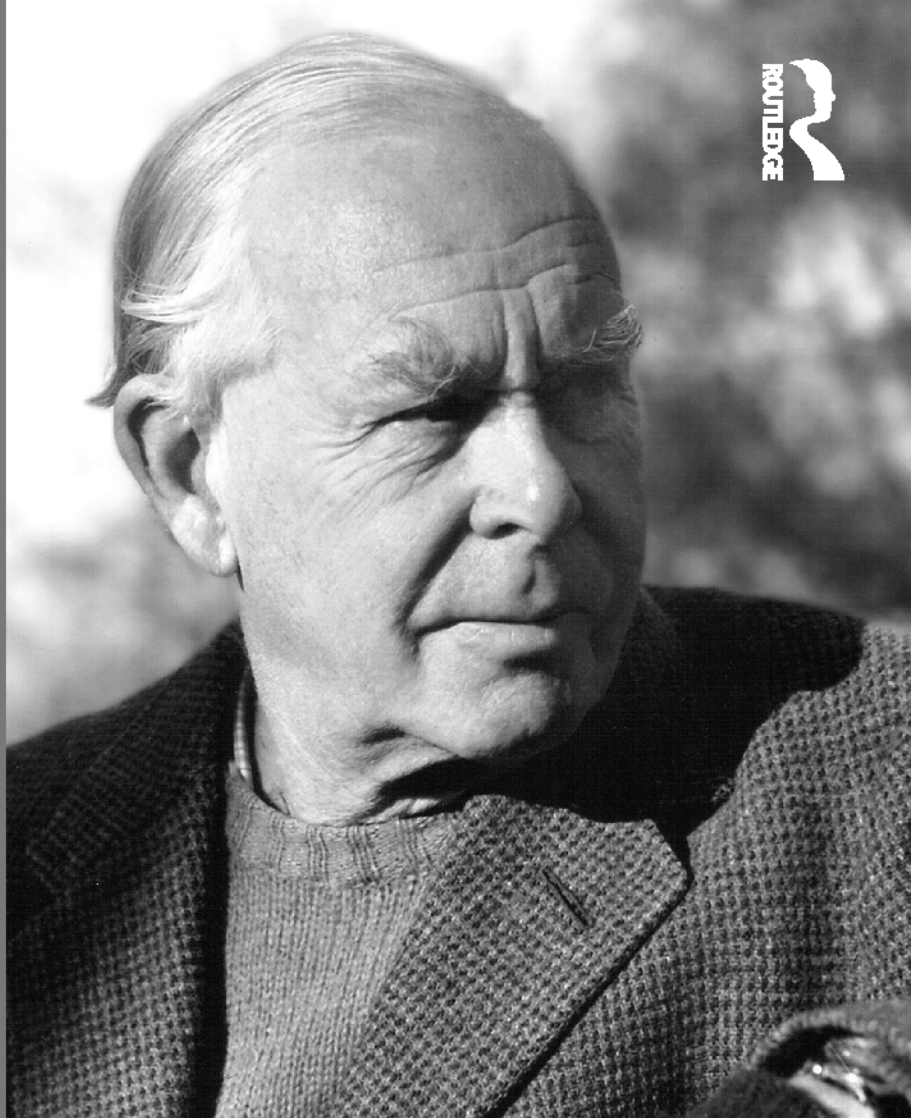


MAKERS OF MODERN PSYCHOTHERAPY



ROUTLEDGE

John Bowlby and Attachment Theory

Jeremy Holmes

SECOND EDITION

John Bowlby and Attachment Theory

John Bowlby is one of the outstanding psychological theorists of the twentieth century. This new edition of *John Bowlby and Attachment Theory* is both a biographical account of Bowlby and his ideas and an up-to-date introduction to contemporary Attachment Theory and research, now a dominant force in psychology, counselling, psychotherapy and child development.

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Jeremy Holmes worked for 35 years as a consultant psychiatrist and medical psychotherapist in the National Health Service. He is currently visiting professor at the University of Exeter, UK, where he set up a Doctoral programme in psychoanalytic psychotherapy. In 2009, he received the prestigious Bowlby-Ainsworth Award for his contributions to the field of attachment.

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John Bowlby and Attachment Theory

Second edition

Jeremy Holmes

Second edition published 2014
by Routledge
27 Church Road, Hove, East Sussex, BN3 2FA

and by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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First edition published by Routledge 1993

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Holmes, Jeremy, 1943-

John Bowlby and attachment theory / Jeremy Holmes. —

Second edition.

pages cm. — (Makers of modern psychotherapy)

1. Attachment behavior in children. 2. Bowlby, John. 3. Psychotherapy.

4. Attachment behavior. I. Title.

BF723.A75H65 2014

I55.4'18—dc23

2013026407

ISBN: 978-0-415-62902-7 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-0-415-62903-4 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-315-87977-2 (ebk)

Typeset in Times

by Swales & Willis Ltd, Exeter, Devon, UK

To Jacob, Matthew, Lydia and Joshua; also to Ben,
Polly, Matilda and Flora; and in memory of Tabitha

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Contents

| | |
|---|------------|
| <i>List of illustrations</i> | ix |
| <i>Acknowledgements</i> | x |
| <i>Introduction to the second edition</i> | xii |
| <i>Introduction</i> | xv |
| | |
| PART I | |
| Origins | I |
| 1 Biographical | 3 |
| 2 Maternal deprivation | 25 |
| | |
| PART II | |
| Attachment Theory | 45 |
| 3 Attachment, anxiety, internal working models | 47 |
| 4 Loss, anger and grief | 70 |
| 5 Attachment Theory and personality development: The research evidence | 85 |
| | |
| Part III | |
| Implications | III |
| 6 Bowlby and the inner world: Attachment Theory and psychoanalysis | 113 |

| | | |
|---|--|-----|
| 7 | Attachment Theory and the practice of psychotherapy | 134 |
| 8 | Attachment Theory and mental health | 162 |
| 9 | Attachment Theory and society | 185 |
| | <i>Epilogue</i> | 194 |
| | <i>Glossary of terms relevant to Attachment Theory</i> | 200 |
| | <i>Chronology of John Bowlby</i> | 208 |
| | <i>Bibliography</i> | 210 |
| | <i>Index</i> | 234 |

Illustrations

Figures

| | | |
|-----|--|-----|
| 2.1 | Developmental pathways from maternal deprivation | 39 |
| 3.1 | The attachment behavioural system | 62 |
| 3.2 | Patterns of insecure attachment | 65 |
| 5.1 | The evolution of attachment patterns | 107 |
| 5.2 | Anna and the holding environment | 108 |
| 6.1 | The anxiously attached infant | 127 |

Tables

| | | |
|-----|---|-----|
| 5.1 | The continuity of secure and insecure attachment | 105 |
| 6.1 | Classical, Object-Relations and Attachment Theories compared | 119 |
| 7.1 | Clinical aspects of insecure-avoidant and dismissive attachment | 147 |

Acknowledgements

The origins of this book can be traced to a phone call from Laurie Spurling asking me about whom I would like to write. John Bowlby sprang instantly to mind – so I must start by acknowledging my gratitude to Laurie for that invitation, and for his subsequent editorial help and suggestions.

The next ‘without whom . . .’ is to the Wellcome Trust, who granted me a six-month Research Fellowship which enabled me to concentrate exclusively on the book, free from my clinical and administrative responsibilities. Sabbaticals are becoming rare enough in universities, and in the National Health Service are almost unheard of. Mine was a blissful period which not only enabled me to devote myself to the book, but also provided a perspective from which I realised how stressful and exhausting most NHS consultant posts are. So the Wellcome has saved me from burn-out (or postponed it for a while) as well as enabling the book to get written. Never was a psychotherapist so professionally indebted to a pharmaceutical firm!

Next I must express my gratitude to my colleagues in the Department of Psychiatry at North Devon District Hospital, and especially to Doctors Roberts, Sewell and Van Buren, who gave their blessing to my absence, even though it meant more work for them; also to Dr Simon Nicholson, who cheerfully and efficiently took my place while I was away.

I am grateful to the Institute of Psychoanalysis for granting me access to their archives.

Much gratitude is due to the many friends and colleagues who have taken time and effort to discuss Attachment Theory, and those who have read all or part of the manuscript and have made many helpful suggestions which have improved its quality: Anthony Bateman, Mary Boston, Peter Fonagy, Dorothy Heard, Matthew Holmes, Sebastian Kraemer, Brian Lake, Richard Lindley, Pat Millner, Oliver Reynolds, Glenn Roberts,

Charles Rycroft, Anthony Storr, and Robert and Lorraine Tollemache. To these, in 2013, I must add Arietta Slade, Peter Fonagy, and Mary Target, Howard Steele, Everett Waters, Maurice Eagle, Richard Mizen, and Jeremy Safran. Needless to say, the defects of the book remain entirely my responsibility.

I am very grateful for the help and encouragement I have had from members of the Bowlby family. By agreeing to be interviewed, and with their written comments, Ursula Bowlby, Mary Gatling, Sir Henry and Lady Phelps Brown, Juliet Hopkins and Marjorie Durbin gave me a fascinating window of reminiscence into their family and social life in the early part of the twentieth century.

My secretary, Patricia Bartlett, helped as always in countless ways to lighten the burden of my work and made my absence from the hospital possible by her combination of good humour, vigilance and efficiency.

Alison Housley and her staff in the library at North Devon District Hospital have been tireless in the promptness and enthusiasm with which they responded to my endless requests for references. Their contribution to making our hospital a true ‘periphery of excellence’ is incalculable.

Finally, I am grateful to Ros and Joshua Holmes, who, by providing me with a loving and secure base, enabled me to explore the world of Attachment Theory, and by expecting – without demanding – me to provide one for them, offered the necessary distraction without which one’s work becomes stale and unbalanced.

Introduction to the second edition

John Bowlby and Attachment Theory first appeared over a quarter of a century ago. Immodestly, I like to think that it was ahead of its time. Attachment Theory was of course well established and had spawned a huge amount of research in child development, but was still in its pioneering stage, far from the major force it has become today. In the field of adult mental health and psychoanalytic psychotherapy, attachment ideas had made little impact. There was even a mild tussle with the publishers over the book's title, as it formed part of the series 'Makers of Modern Psychotherapy', of whom the featured thinkers were to be designated only by their names. I insisted that Bowlby disliked the psychoanalytic cult of personality, and that what mattered to him was the robustness or otherwise of a theory and the evidence supporting it, not the status of its originator.

Thirty years on, much has changed. Attachment is recognised as a major psychological paradigm, forming part of the core curriculum in undergraduate and Masters-level psychology courses. Its research methods and theories inform doctoral and postdoctoral work across the world. Clinical applications are expanding rapidly in response to developmental difficulties in children, family dysfunction and breakdown, the sequelae of trauma and loss, and adult mental illness. Attachment Theory even plays a central role in contemporary psychoanalytic theory and practice; indeed, by the measure of citation index at least, Bowlby is the most cited psychoanalyst of all time (Steele, 2010).

Since the first edition of this book, therefore, its claim to be the only single volume exposition, with a specific focus on implications for psychotherapy practice, can no longer be sustained. The re-focused aims of this second edition are therefore, as before, to home in on Bowlby himself, his background and influences, but also to provide an accessible, up-to-date, survey of the field, with a particular emphasis on the contribution of attachment ideas to the practice of psychotherapy.

Since the book's first publication a plethora of attachment monographs and compilations have appeared, the majority from the admirable Guilford Press (for example, Fonagy, 2001; Brisch, 2002; Grossman, Grossman and Waters, 2005; Wallin, 2007; Mikulincer and Shaver, 2007; Steele and Steele, 2008; Obegi and Berant, 2009; Eagle, 2013); not to mention three by the present author (Holmes, 1997; 2001; 2010).

An indispensable volume is the magnificent *Handbook of Attachment: Theory, Research, and Clinical Applications* (2nd edition, Cassidy and Shaver, 2008), containing state-of-the-art review articles by the field's leading figures. The journal *Attachment and Human Development*, with its founding editor Howard Steele still at the helm, is an increasingly central venue for original work, while Slade and Holmes (2013) have attempted to bring together in six-volume format the key articles in the field from its inception, culled from a wide variety of journals and books.

Nevertheless, there remains a place for a small-scale introductory summary of attachment's main themes, research base and therapeutic implications. My aim in this revision has been to bring the text up-to-date and to incorporate significant contemporary findings and theoretical trends, whilst remaining true to the book's original framework and objectives. I hope it will continue to appeal to those wanting to familiarise themselves relatively rapidly with the field, and also to adult psychotherapists wanting to move beyond their habitual cognitive or psychoanalytic comfort-zone. An enduring aspect is Bowlby's biographical background, illustrating Jung's insight that psychological theories are invariably cryptic forms of autobiography.

Bowlby's initial aims were relatively modest. In an early paper (Bowlby, 1940a) he presented his experiences of working in Child Guidance Clinics to his fellow psychoanalysts, hoping to persuade them that it was 'as important for analysts to study the early environment as it is for a nurseryman to make a scientific study of the soil' (a typically Bowlbian homespun trope). As he put it later, 'in 1956 when this work was begun I had no conception of what I was undertaking' (Bowlby, [1969b] 1971). It is now clear that this 'undertaking' was a first step towards the establishment of a new paradigm, with far-reaching implications for child development, psychiatry, parent-infant research, child rearing practices, and psychoanalysis. The drive to relate – to hold, to cling, to play, to explore, to provide safety – Bowlby came to see, was an entity in its own right, needing new theories and research.

Some paradigm shifts leave one dumbstruck, like Keats, 'silent, upon a peak in Darian'. Others feel so familiar that one thinks 'why had no one thought of that before?' Today, attachment is part of the air we

breathe. None of this would have been possible without Bowlby's courage, persistence and synoptic vision. He bemoaned the divide between 'biological' and psychodynamic psychiatry, insisting that his ethological–developmental model was rooted in evolutionary biology. As we shall see, modern genetics, contemporary neuroscience, together with attachment-informed developmental research, are increasingly converging. Psychological science may be on the brink of another paradigm shift, to be led, I fancifully like to think, by one or some of the younger readers of this text. Wherever and whenever it emerges, it will, I feel sure, have John Bowlby's posthumous blessing. For him, ironically, the author of a theory in which the themes of finding and losing play a central part, 'a science that fails to forget its founding fathers is lost' (Whitehead, 1916). True to that spirit, the aim of this text is both to honour deeply and to stimulate transcendence of its founding father and his inestimable contribution.

Introduction

When people start writing they think they've got to write something definitive . . . I think that is fatal. The mood to write in is 'This is quite an interesting story I've got to tell. I hope someone will be interested. Anyway it's the best I can do for the present.' If one adopts that line one gets over it and does it.

(Bowlby in Hunter, 1991)

This book has four main aims. The first, and simplest, is to present the story of attachment – and we shall hear much about stories in the course of the book – in a condensed and coherent way. Bowlby was a lucid and prolific exponent of his own views, but the very comprehensiveness of his work, described by one critic as having a 'Victorian monumentality about it' (Rycroft, 1985), can be daunting. Despite the clarity of his thought and the charm and epigrammatic flair of his literary style, the 1500 pages of the *Attachment and Loss* trilogy (Bowlby, 1969b; 1973a; 1980), covering as they do every aspect of the subject in immense detail, are hard going for the fainthearted. His later works, *The Making and Breaking of Affectional Bonds* (Bowlby, 1979) and *A Secure Base* (Bowlby, 1988), are more accessible, but as collections of essays they do not necessarily pull his theories together into a coherent whole. So there is a need for a condensation of Bowlby's work, and also – here is a second objective – given that it is well over half a century since he published his first papers, a need to take an historical perspective on the evolution of attachment.

One product of that reappraisal is the realisation that Attachment Theory was, almost from the start, a joint conception. Without Mary Ainsworth's empirical cast of mind perfectly complementing Bowlby's synthesising and theoretical skills, and her position in the burgeoning

world of academic psychology in the USA, the project might have been stillborn, or confined to the backwaters of psychoanalytic in-fighting.

The past half-century has seen second and third generations of researchers, the majority of whom can trace their inspiration to Bowlby's writings, and their educational lineage to Ainsworth. These 'post-Bowlbians' have developed Attachment Theory into a major framework of developmental psychology, with clinical implications highly relevant to psychotherapy and mental health services generally.

This leads us to a fourth justification for this work. This is the attempt to come to grips with a curious enigma which surrounds Bowlby's contribution. Apart from Freud and Jung, Bowlby is one of the few psychoanalysts who have become household names and whose ideas have entered the vernacular. The ill effects (or otherwise) of maternal deprivation; the importance of bonding between parents and children; the need for a secure base and to feel attached; the realisation that grief has a course to run and can be divided into stages – these are concepts with which people far removed from the worlds of psychology and psychotherapy are familiar. All may be traced, in whole or in part, to the work of John Bowlby.

Yet despite Bowlby's familiarity and acceptance by the general public and his influence in a number of specialist fields such as paediatrics, developmental psychology, social work and psychiatry, his influence within the domain of psychotherapy remains muted. In his chosen profession of psychoanalysis he is still honoured more often in the breach than the observance. Between the papers he delivered in the late 1950s and early 1960s to psychoanalytic societies in Britain and the States, and polite obsequies of the early 1990s, there was a resounding silence from the psychoanalytical movement in response to the challenges and opportunities which his work represents. A major aim of this book is to try to understand the discrepancy between this public recognition and professional avoidance, and the attempt to remedy it by showing how Attachment Theory can inform and enhance the practice of psychotherapy.

The details of the relationship between Bowlby and psychoanalysis will emerge gradually in the course of the book but, as an overture, a brief summarising overview now follows. The answers to the riddle of Bowlby's rift with the psychoanalytic movement can be found at three distinct but interrelated levels: Bowlby's own personality, background and outlook; the atmosphere within the psychoanalytic society just before, and in the aftermath of, Freud's death; and the social and intellectual climate in the years surrounding and including the 1939–45 world war.

John Bowlby, described in an obituary as ‘one of the three or four most important psychiatrists of the twentieth century’ (Storr, 1991), came from a conventional upper–middle class background. Cambridge educated, very ‘English’ in his reserve and empiricism, a ‘nineteenth-century Darwinian liberal’ (Rycroft, 1985), he entered a psychoanalytical society in the 1930s that was riven between two warring factions led by Melanie Klein on the one hand and Anna Freud on the other (Grosskurth, 1986). Klein, a Berliner, divorced and separated from her children, the great innovator, faced the unmarried Viennese Anna, devoted to the orphans in her Hampstead nursery, defender of the true Freudian faith. Klein was powerful and domineering, but with a helpless side that meant that she depended on utter loyalty from her supporters. Anna Freud, meanwhile, was shy and diffident, but with a steely determination not to be done down, and the confidence of her father’s blessing.

The battle between the two women was ostensibly about theory. For Freud the Oedipus complex was the ‘kernel of the neuroses’ and he had had little to say about the early mother–infant relationship. Klein put the mother on the psychoanalytic map, arguing for the importance of phantasy in the early weeks and months of life; the primacy of the death instinct as an explanation for infantile aggression; and the need in therapy to lay bare and put into words these primitive impulses of infancy. Anna Freud – Antigone to her father’s Oedipus – questioned Klein’s speculations about the mind of the infant, continued to see the Oedipus complex, arising at the age of two to three years, as the starting point for the neuroses, and saw the role of therapy as strengthening the ego in its efforts to reconcile id and superego.

Bowlby struggled to find his bearings in the charged atmosphere of a psychoanalytic society riven by the antagonistic rivalry of these two ‘daughters’, legitimate and illegitimate, each vying for supremacy. With characteristic independence he steered a course between them, trying to work things out for himself. He took his stand on two main battlefields: the scientific status of psychoanalysis, and the role of the environment in the origins of neurosis.

Although both sides invoked the name of science in support of their ideas, this was, in Bowlby’s view, little more than a genuflection to Freud’s insistence that psychoanalysis was a new science of the mind. Bowlby saw both women, and most of their followers, as hopelessly unscientific. Neither Klein nor Anna Freud had any kind of scientific background. Both argued from intuition and authority rather than subjecting their claims to empirical testing. Neither had made any attempt to keep abreast of contemporary developments in science, or to revise Freudian

metapsychology in the light of emerging ideas about information processing and feedback which were to have such an impact on academic psychology and ethology. Rejecting Bowlby, his psychoanalytic critics felt that he had restricted himself to a narrow definition of science – to what could be observed and measured – and that he was thereby missing the whole point of psychoanalysis. Any so-called ‘science’ of the mind which did not take account of the inner world of phantasy, they claimed, was worthless and had no place within psychoanalytic discourse. This is a debate that continues to rage with equal passion today (Hoffman, 2009 and 2012; Safran, 2012a).

A similar polarisation took place around the role of the environment in neurosis. Bowlby was struck by the extent to which his patients had suffered from privation and loss, and horrified by the apparent disregard of real trauma as compared with an emphasis on the importance of endogenous phantasy in the Kleinian approach. Matters came to a head when Bowlby presented to the psychoanalytic society his famous film made with James Robertson (Robertson, 1952; Bowlby and Robertson, 1952b) documenting the distress shown by a small girl when separated from her parents on going into hospital. While Anna Freud to some extent endorsed Bowlby’s views, although maintaining he was saying nothing new (A. Freud, 1960), the Kleinians in the audience were unimpressed, and felt that the girl’s distress was due more to her unconscious destructive phantasies towards her pregnant mother’s unborn baby than to the separation itself.

Bowlby was in an unusual position within the psychoanalytic society in that he was someone with non-Kleinian views who had been analysed and supervised by members of the Kleinian group (Joan Riviere and Melanie Klein herself). Finding himself stuck in his analysis he decided to change to a non-Kleinian analyst, but extreme pressure was placed on him not to do so, to which, uncharacteristically, he submitted (Grosskurth, 1986). He was cited by the Kleinians as evidence that they were not out to brainwash or convert all psychoanalytical candidates to their persuasion. As someone with evident ability and reputation he would have been quite a catch for whichever group he chose to join.

Both sides, however, had reckoned without Bowlby’s originality and ambition and his preparedness to go out on a limb. His discovery of ethology in the early 1950s – his friend the distinguished biologist Julian Huxley had lent him an advance copy of Lorenz’ *King Solomon’s Ring* – provided the opportunity he was looking for to put psychoanalysis on a sound scientific footing. His World Health Organisation monograph (Bowlby, 1951), and later observations of children separated from their

parents, gave him ample evidence for the importance of environmental trauma as a cause of neurosis and character disturbance. Attachment Theory was born, but rather than illuminating and strengthening Object Relations Theory, as Bowlby had hoped, it was perceived by many analysts as a threat or even a betrayal. Bowlby had hoped to reconcile the warring factions within the society with his new theory, but instead they were, for the most part, united either in outright opposition or polite indifference to his ideas. Unsurprisingly, Bowlby gradually drifted away from the society, while Attachment Theory became a self-standing new paradigm, owing much to psychoanalysis, but with links to ethology, systems theory and cognitive psychology, and making a contribution as much to family and cognitive therapies as to psychoanalysis.

In retrospect, the splits within the British Psychoanalytical Society seem comparatively trivial. As Pedder (1987) puts it:

an innocent might . . . ask what all the fuss was about. Because really it could be argued that there was not a lot of disagreement. They argued about phantasy: how wide the concept should be They argued about . . . how early the Oedipus complex starts, whether at two or three or sooner They argued about the emphasis that should be placed on aggression and the death instinct, and whether neurosis is precipitated by the frustration of libido, as the Viennese thought, or [as the Kleinians saw it] by the awakening of aggression All these could be seen as matters of degree which you might think reasonable people could well discuss.

(Pedder, 1987)

As every psychotherapist should know, however, things are rarely that simple. The psychoanalytical movement was still struggling with the death of its founder, searching for new directions. The polarisation between those who idealised the dead leader (the Anna Freudians) and those who dealt with their depression by a kind of manic triumphalism, celebrating Klein's originality, can be understood in terms of the very concepts that those two groups espoused. A female principle was needed to balance the phallocentrism of the earlier Freudian movement. 'The King is dead, long live the Queen' might have been their slogan. But which queen should it be? The battle for psychoanalysis was going on against a backdrop of world war, of death, dislocation and genocide. The Kleinian emphasis on autonomous phantasy, on the death instinct, on the power of psychoanalysis to heal, irrespective of environmental factors, can be seen as a desperate attempt to bring some sense of order and the

possibility of control – at times omnipotently – into a world in which one could not but feel powerless and helpless. Anna Freud’s emphasis on strengthening the ego was equally an effort to hold on to reason and sanity in the face of the irrational destructiveness unleashed by war.

Bowlby was perhaps the perfect scapegoat, with his cool Englishness, his social and intellectual powers, his espousal of a narrow version of science cut off by the empirical English channel from the cultural breadth of the Jewish–European intelligentsia, his comparative insulation from the full horrors of war, and his Whiggish belief in the possibilities of progress based on social and scientific reason. Psychoanalysis was not yet ready to open up to other disciplines. Bowlby threatened the closed world of psychoanalysis and, offered a cold shoulder, like others before him (Jung, Adler, Ferenczi, Reich), he gave up the fight after a while and moved away to follow his own interests.

The loss was both his and psychoanalysis’s. There is perhaps something in the kernel of psychoanalysis which Bowlby did not fully assimilate. Attachment Theory may seem pale in comparison with Freud’s and Klein’s passionate world of infantile sexuality. To those unaccustomed to the furious protest of infants when parted from their caregivers, the wonderful capacity of secure base parents to soothe that distress, or the torment of the Disorganised infant’s failure to find such succour, Attachment Theory may seem somewhat bland.

Failing to appreciate the power of phantasy, and the complexity of its relationship with external reality, is perhaps a real lacuna in Bowlby’s work, but in eschewing the scientific rigour which Bowlby saw it so badly needed, psychoanalysis was held back in its development as a discipline and a therapy, a handicap from which it is only just beginning to recover (Shedler, 2010; Holmes, 2012c). Perhaps there was something in the climate of the 1950s which made such a split inevitable. The divide between the ‘two cultures’ epitomised by the belief in the possibility of progress based on science advocated by Snow, and Leavis’s moral condemnation of an illiterate and degenerate society was just too great to bridge (Holmes, 2013a). Psychoanalysis became increasingly identified with ‘culture’ – with the imagination, linguistics and the moral and aesthetic dimension (Rycroft, 1985; Rustin, 1991), while Attachment Theory gathered momentum as a new paradigm in developmental psychology, taking root in the United States, less riven than the UK by the split between art and science.

Times have changed. The old certainties no longer hold. Psychoanalysis has lost its dogmatism and is much more open to empirical evidence and to cross-disciplinary influence. The debate about the scientific status of psychoanalysis, and the role of the environment in neurosis continues

(Safran, 2012b), but it is no longer a matter of life and death. Each side can claim partial victories. Klein was right in her emphasis on the developmental importance of early weeks and months of life – there is abundant evidence of psychic life from the moment of birth (Stern, 1985). She was probably wrong in her insistence on the universality of the paranoid–schizoid position – it seems likely that splitting and projection predominate mainly in Disorganised Attachment and highly anxiously attached infants. She was right to emphasise loss and separation as central themes in character formation from the earliest years, but wrong in the concreteness of her thinking – she believed that bottle feeding could never substitute for the breast and that the events surrounding weaning were critical determinants of character. It seems likely that it is the style and general handling of the infant that matters, not the specific events, unless these are overwhelmingly traumatic.

In therapy Klein was right to emphasise the central importance of the relationship between therapist and patient, but wrong in her belief that only ‘deep’ interpretations would be effective: the strength of the therapist–patient attachment is a crucial determining factor in therapy outcomes, but the nature of the interpretations, so long as they are reasonably sensible, coherent and brief, is probably not (Wampold, 2001). Early trauma – abuse, sexual and physical, and/or neglect – is increasingly seen as a major factor in the etiology of personality and other psychiatric disorders (Lyons-Ruth *et al.*, 2005); thus Bowlby’s emphasis on the importance of the environment as a determinant of pathology appears to be vindicated. He also tended, however, to be too concrete and specific in his hypotheses; Rutter (1981) convincingly argues that it is not the loss of a parent *per se* that is pathogenic – as opposed to sad and grief-provoking – but the family discord or disruption surrounding it that causes the damage.

Klein showed how individuals’ inner worlds shape their perception of the object, and how, through projective identification, the object is coerced into feeling and behaving according to the projections it receives. In contrast, Bowlby is concerned primarily with the impact of the object on the self. The self, which in his theories tends to be somewhat passive, is moulded by the inadequacies and absences of the object. We shall explore how the *interactive* view of self and object postulated by Winnicott (1965) and Bion (1978) and observed by developmental psychologists like Stern (1985) and Brazelton and Cramer (1991), and developed more recently in Relational psychoanalysis (Mitchell, 1993; Safran, 2012b) offers the possibility of reconciliation and new understanding.

Bowlby was always careful to distinguish between the scientific and therapeutic aspects of psychoanalysis, and the importance of their

synergy: 'no research without therapy; no therapy without research' was his slogan. As a scientist he was struggling for simplicity and clarity and for general principles, while therapy inevitably concerns itself with complexity and concreteness of the individual case. Much of the disagreement between Bowlby and psychoanalysis appears to rest on a confusion of these two aspects. Bowlby's main concern was to find a firm scientific underpinning to the Object Relations approach, and Attachment Theory. His attempt to bring ethology to bear on the developmental ideas of psychoanalysis, can be seen in that light. Although couched in the language of science, psychoanalytic therapy is today seen by many as a hermeneutic discipline, more concerned with meanings than mechanism, in which patient and therapist collaboratively develop a coherent narrative about the patient's experience. Such objectification and coherence are in themselves therapeutic, irrespective of the validity or otherwise of the meanings that are found. An extreme illustration of this comes from the finding that schizophrenic patients with complex and coherent delusional systems are better able to function socially than those who lack such meanings, however idiosyncratic (Roberts, 1992).

As we shall see later, Main's (1995) development of the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI) has created a conceptual bridge between the narrative approach of contemporary psychoanalysis and the science of developmental psychology. There is a strong link between the kinds of attachment patterns found in infancy and the narratives that people tell about themselves several years later. Put briefly, securely attached children tell coherent stories about their lives, however difficult they have been. Insecurely attached children, by contrast, have much greater difficulty with narrative competence, either dismissing their past or remaining bogged down in it, and in neither case are they able to talk objectively or in ways that are emotionally apposite. The therapeutic implications of this suggest that effective therapy, like good parenting, provides the security and space within which a healing narrative can begin to emerge.

Psychoanalysis, perhaps more than it would care to admit, is influenced by the prevailing cultural climate. The Oedipus complex, with its emphasis on castration anxiety, reflected the patriarchy of its day. With the weakening of paternal power within the family came the rise of the female principle within psychoanalysis. The Society which Bowlby joined in the 1930s was dominated by strong women: Melanie Klein, Anna Freud, Joan Riviere, Sylvia Payne, Susan Isaacs, Paula Heimann. Ernest Jones's power was waning, and Glover's grip on the Society was gradually being loosened. The main theorists of the post-war period – Klein, Bion, Winnicott and Bowlby – were all concerned with the role

of the mother. Today a new phase of deconstruction has begun which emphasises the reciprocities of reader and writer, social, cultural and racial pluralism. Today two main countervailing trends can be seen. Therapeutic co-constructionism – far removed from the *ex-cathedra* interpretations of classical therapy – delineates how therapist and patient collaboratively build up a picture of their world and history. This can perhaps be seen as a move from the father principle, through the maternal, to the era of the sibling, in which, however different in their roles, there is a fundamental symmetry, albeit ‘lopsided’ (Holmes, 2012b; Barratt, 2012) between patient and therapist. The second trend is that of relational neuroscience (for example, Fonagy *et al.*, 2004; Renn, 2012; Holmes, 2013a) which is beginning to build bridges between the ever-expanding world of brain science and the minutiae of intimate relationships.

This brings us to a concluding note about the nature of biography. A biographer is, in a sense, both patient and therapist in relation to his chosen topic. As Gathorne-Hardy (1992) points out, there is an inevitable positive transference to one’s subject; how else could one justify the long hours spent (far exceeding any psychoanalysis, however interminable) reading, studying, thinking about them? Biographers identify with their subjects, just as patients identify with their therapists, and see them in a way that is inevitably influenced and may be biased by their own themes and preoccupations. At the same time, biographers as ‘therapists’ have an opportunity to see their subjects as they really are: but with that privilege they must also take into account their own counter-transferential tendencies towards voyeurism, prurience, envy, denigration and idealisation. Biographers should approach their subjects in the same spirit in which therapists see their patients: compassionately without over-involvement, with objectivity but without excessive detachment, with a sense of the uniqueness and specialness of the individual, but without indulgence. The aim of this book is to form a working alliance with Attachment Theory and its originator – to see them in their strengths and limitations, their possibilities and blind spots. And although this book is not primarily a biography, some biographical preliminaries are therefore inevitably needed, and it is to them that we now turn.

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Part I

Origins

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