
Bowlby
A Secure Base

# A Secure Base

**'One of the most influential forces in child psychiatry and psychology, Dr. Bowlby challenged basic tenets of psychoanalysis and pioneered methods of investigating the emotional life of children.'**

*The New York Times*

**'John Bowlby was a towering figure in general psychiatry, child psychiatry and psychoanalysis. More than anyone else he demonstrated the importance of real-life childhood events for the development of later psychopathology.'**

*The Independent*


Routledge Classics contains the very best of Routledge publishing over the past century or so, books that have, by popular consent, become established as classics in their field. Drawing on a fantastic heritage of innovative writing published by Routledge and its associated imprints, this series makes available in attractive, affordable form some of the most important works of modern times.

For a complete list of titles visit
www.routledgeclassics.com

John

# Bowlby

## A Secure Base

Clinical Applications of Attachment Theory


London and New York

First published 1988 by Routeldge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, OX14 4RN

First published in Routledge Classics 2005
By Routledge

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
270 Madison Ave, New York, NY 10016

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group*



Typeset in Joanna by RefineCatch Limited, Bungay, Suffolk
Printed and bound in Great Britain by
TJ International Ltd, Padstow, Cornwall



*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*
A catalog record for this book has been requested

ISBN 0–415–35527–3

To
Mary D.S. Ainsworth
who introduced the concept of
a secure base

# Contents

# Preface

In 1979, under the title of *The Making and Breaking of Affectional Bonds*, I published a small collection of lectures that I had given to a variety of audiences during the two preceding decades. In this volume I present a further selection of the lectures given since then. Each of the first five was delivered to a particular audience on a particular occasion; details of each are described in a brief preamble. The remaining three are extended versions of lectures given in extempore form to audiences made up of mental health professionals in countries of Europe and America. As in the earlier collection, I have thought it best to print each lecture in a form close to that in which it was originally published.

Since the theory of attachment provides the basis for every lecture some deletions have been necessary to avoid an excess of repetition. It is hoped that such as remains will, by presenting the same ideas in different contexts, clarify and emphasize distinctive features of the theory.

It is a little unexpected that, whereas attachment theory was formulated by a clinician for use in the diagnosis and treatment

of emotionally disturbed patients and families, its usage hitherto has been mainly to promote research in developmental psychology. Whilst I welcome the findings of this research as enormously extending our understanding of personality development and psychopathology, and thus as of the greatest clinical relevance, it has none the less been disappointing that clinicians have been so slow to test the theory's uses. There are probably many reasons for this. One is that initially the data drawn on appeared to be unduly behavioural. Another is that clinicians are very busy people who are naturally reluctant to spend time trying to master a new and strange conceptual framework until they have strong reasons for believing that to do so will improve their clinical understanding and therapeutic skills. For those who have decided the time has come to sample what this new perspective has to offer I hope the lectures gathered here may provide a convenient introduction.

# Acknowledgements

During the past ten years I have had the great benefit of frequent communication with staff and students at the Tavistock Clinic and also with a number of colleagues engaged in pioneering studies of how patterns of attachment develop during infancy and childhood. To all of them I owe a deep debt of gratitude, often for useful suggestions, sometimes for necessary corrections, and always for stimulation and encouragement. To my secretary, Dorothy Southern, I also owe a deep debt of gratitude for many years of devoted service during which she has made my interests her own.

For editorial assistance in preparing these lectures for publication and for constructing the index my thanks are due to Molly Townsend.

The first six lectures in this book have appeared in other publications and I am grateful to the publishers concerned for permission to reproduce them here. Lecture 1 was chapter 18 in *Parenthood: A Psychodynamic Perspective* edited by Rebecca S. Cohen, Bertram J. Cohler, and Sidney H. Weissman, the Guilford Press,

New York (1984); Lecture 2 was 'Attachment and loss: retrospect and prospect', *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 52: 664–78 (1982); Lecture 3 was 'Psychoanalysis as art and science', *International Review of Psychoanalysis* 6: 3–14 (1979); Lecture 4 was 'Psychoanalysis as a natural science', *International Review of Psychoanalysis* 8: 243–56 (1981); Lecture 5 was 'Violence in the family as a disorder of the attachment and caregiving systems', *The American Journal of Psychoanalysis* 44: 9–27 (1984); Lecture 6 was chapter 6 in *Cognition and Psychotherapy* edited by Michael J. Mahoney and Arthur Freeman, Plenum Publishing Corporation, New York and London (1985), expanded from 'On knowing what you are not supposed to know and feeling what you are not supposed to feel', *Canadian Journal of Psychiatry* 24: 403–8 (1979).

JOHN BOWLBY

# Preface to the Routledge Classics Edition

*A Secure Base* first appeared in 1988 when John Bowlby was in his 81st year. Although there was, amazingly, one more book to come—the Darwin biography—it is his final contribution to Attachment Theory, the discipline which he, with Mary Ainsworth's help, founded nearly half a century earlier. Thus *A Secure Base* has a valedictory feel to it—a summation of a life's work, but also a tribute and a handing over to the next generation of attachment researchers and clinicians.

In it are to be found all the familiar Bowlbian themes—theoretical, etiological, methodological, clinical, and political. He restates the conceptual foundation stones of his ideas: the primacy of the attachment behavioural response and its role in protection from predation; sensitive care-giving as a foundation for psychological health; the continuing importance of attachment throughout the life cycle. He argues powerfully for the role of real-life adversity—emotional deprivation, un-mourned bereavement, rejection, obfuscation, neglect, physical and sexual abuse—as the origin of subsequent psychopathology, as

opposed to putative endo-psychic entities such as 'death instinct'.

Methodologically he emphasizes the importance of systematic scientific observation of children and parents, as opposed to speculative reconstructions from the couch. Clinically he sees the therapist as providing a secure base for her patients, a springboard from which they can begin to develop the free flowing discourse of emotion that is characteristic of those who are securely attached.

Finally, there is the figured base of Bowlby's social philosophy lying at the heart of his work: 'man and woman power devoted to the production of happy, healthy, and self-reliant children . . . does not count at all. We have created a topsy-turvy world' (p. 2).

The past 25 years has seen an explosion of interest in attachment theory, culminating in the landmark volume *Handbook of Attachment* (Cassidy & Shaver, 1999), an exhilarating summation of how Bowlby and Ainsworth's acorn, nurtured by them into a sturdy sapling, has seeded a whole forest of developments, applications, and ideas. In this brief introduction I shall pick out three of these growth points, or 'recent advances' in attachment theory, hinted at by Bowlby, but greatly expanded since *A Secure Base* was first published: the role of fathers in creating secure attachments; mentalization and 'theory of mind' as a developmental achievement; and psychotherapy as an interpersonal enterprise.

*Attachment to Fathers*. As implied in the quotation above, Bowlby was always insistent that mothers *and* fathers mattered when it came to providing a secure base. One of the crucial planks in the argument that security of attachment is an interpersonal, interactive phenomenon, and not simply a matter of the child's inborn temperament, is that one and the same child can be classified in the Strange Situation as secure with one parent and insecure with another. Nevertheless, attachment theory, both in its research and clinical guises, has tended to be a somewhat

maternocentric enterprise and it has not been easy to pin down precisely what the father's contribution to security of attachment comprises.

Recent work (Grossman, Grossman, & Zimmerman, 1999; Grossman, Grossman, & Zindler, 2005) has begun to throw light on this topic. When Bowlby was writing the essays and lectures that make up this book in the 1980s, longitudinal studies of attachment phenomena were themselves in their infancy. We now have 20-year prospective studies that look at measures of attachment security, parental sensitivity, exploration, relational competence, and their mental representations throughout childhood. These can now be correlated with attachment disposition in young adulthood as manifested in attitudes towards romantic relationships and the Adult Attachment Interview.

These studies show that paternal contributions are indeed vital to secure, stable, exploratory, balanced, verbally fluent attachment dispositions in adulthood. However, this contribution to psychological health is not predominantly mediated via security of attachment as measured in the Strange Situation. The role of fathers, rather, makes itself felt via the exploratory dimension of the attachment/exploration dichotomy and is elicited in the 'SCIP' (Sensitive and Challenging Interactive Play) measure (Grossman, Grossman, & Zindler, 2005), which observes and rates parents interacting with their children in a 10-minute play session.

In general, *combined* mother-father scores along multiple dimensions of attachment in childhood are far more predictive of security or insecurity of attachment representation in adulthood than those of either parent alone. However, the preoccupied dimension—adults who give confused, affect-laden, unstructured responses to probes—is strongly correlated with father rejection and insensitivity in mid-childhood, with the maternal contribution being relatively weak. Thus it seems that good-enough fathers help their children to develop clarity of

thought and to be able to face up to negative emotions without feeling overwhelmed.

Like mothers, fathers need to be sensitive, but this takes the form of praise, encouragement, and the capacity to sustain positive affect in their offspring. As they help their children to cope with curiosity-wariness conflicts, this protective, challenging, 'you can do it' father diverges markedly from the castrating picture of classical psychoanalytic theory, which might apply more accurately to insensitive fathers who fail intuitively to grasp the basic message of attachment: that achievement is always predicated on security.

*Mentalization and theory of mind*. Bowlby lived long enough to appreciate the enormous significance of Mary Main's contribution to Attachment Theory and in particular the possibilities represented by her development of the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI) (Hesse, 1999). He quotes her finding, confirmed by others, that mothers who showed insecurity on the AAI were more likely to have insecure children as measured in the Strange Situation. He saw insecure attachment in terms of psychological defences—necessary for emotional survival (and in the environment of evolutionary adaptiveness in which our species evolved, physical survival)—but also as a constricting factor that excludes the insecure individual from the possibility of processing adverse experience.

A crucial finding in this early work was that 'reflexive function' (Fonagy *et al.*, 2002) as measured in the AAI, appears to be a protective factor that despite adverse childhood experience such as parental separation, bereavement or even neglect and abuse, enables individuals to remain secure themselves and to provide security for their offspring. Put simply, the ability to 'talk about it' mitigates the long-term negative consequences of childhood trauma. 'Reflexive function' can be seen as tapping into internal speech, or mental representation of experience that underlies this capacity for external interactive story-telling.

Fonagy and his co-workers (Fonagy, Gergely, Jurist, & Target, 2002; Bateman & Fonagy, 2004) have extended these early findings with their new concept of 'mentalization'. Drawing on the philosophical tradition of 'theory of mind' they suggest that there are crucial developmental processes which enable infants to begin to appreciate the fact that they themselves, and those around them, have 'minds'—i.e. the ability to represent the world and to have projects, beliefs, and desires. Mentalization enables us to differentiate between 'reality' and our perspective or appreciation of reality, and also to grasp the fact that different people view the world in differing ways. Thus mentalization, which could be seen as an extension of Bowlby's notion of internal working models, is anti-narcissistic and, so Fonagy *et al.* argue, a vital component of the ability to interact socially, including the ability to survive the vicissitudes of mis-attunement, alliance ruptures, and the minor failures that are a normal part of 'good-enough parenting', or even 'not-good-enough' parenting.

This set of ideas leads to a rather different take on the evolutionary significance of attachment, which Bowlby, drawing on an ethological perspective, always insisted was that of protection from predation. Fonagy *et al.* (2002) suggest that the emotional and physical proximity which attachment ensures also equips infants with the capacity to understand themselves and those around them. Secure attachment enables us to 'read' people—including ourselves. Recent work in developmental psychopathology has begun to look at the developmental processes which lead to successful mentalization—'mirroring' between mother and child, 'marking' clear boundaries between 'pretence' and reality—and the ways in which these can break down. These studies suggest that insecure attachment, especially disorganised attachment (Holmes, 2004), is a likely predisposing factor for the subsequent development of personality difficulties in adult life (Bateman & Fonagy, 2004), especially Borderline Personality Disorder (described in this volume by Bowlby in

traditional psychoanalytic terms as cases of 'false self', schizoid personality or pathological narcissism).

*Interpersonal aspects of psychotherapy*. Bowlby regularly emphasized the parallels between secure parenting and good psychotherapy (see Chapter 8). Just as he rehabilitated the role of real trauma, as opposed to phantasy, as the pathogenic factor in psychological difficulties, so he called for 'greater emphasis [to be] placed on the contribution of the therapist's role as a companion for his patient in the latter's exploration of himself and his experiences, and less on the therapist interpreting things to the patient' (p. 151).

Bowlby himself clearly was able to provide a secure base for his patients, co-workers, and students, inspiring a huge amount of affection and admiration amongst them. His writings, and life-story, are imbued with his capacity to balance the 'maternal' qualities of sensitivity and responsiveness with 'paternal' challenge and support (note that I am here utterly repudiating my earlier inaccurate and impertinent description of him as 'dismissing', Holmes, 1993). He may perhaps not have appreciated, however, just how hard won these qualities are for some therapists. Recent work has begun to tease out the separate contributions of therapist and patient to the therapeutic dyad and to suggest that the quality of the therapy, and probably ultimately its outcome, is a function not of each alone, but of the interaction or 'fit' that exists between them. Dozier *et al.* (1999) looked at the attachment classification of therapists and their clients, and found that insecure therapists tend to reinforce the insecure attachment patterns of their clients, in avoidant clients resulting in yet more hypoactivation of attachment behaviours, and in their preoccupied counterparts greater clinging and affective dysregulation. Secure therapists by contrast tend to redress the balance between avoidance and preoccupation and to push their clients towards more secure patterns of relating.

With the introduction of the Patient-Therapist Adult Attachment Interview (PT-AAI) Diamond and her co-workers (Diamond *et al.*, 2003) have taken this line of investigation one step further. Here the Adult Attachment Interview procedure is applied to the therapeutic relationship itself—both therapist and patient are asked to provide adjectives to describe one another, together with supporting anecdotes, and are asked speculate about why they think their patient/therapist behaves in a particular way. The interview is then transcribed and rated in a similar way to the AAI, generating attachment categories and also measures of Reflexive Function in relation to the therapeutic process. A number of interesting findings are beginning to emerge.

First, as might be hoped and expected, Reflexive Function improves in the course of therapy. Second, good outcomes seem to be associated with therapists who are neither too far behind nor too far ahead of their clients in the PT-AAI scores. A degree of distance between therapist and client is needed, but it must not be too far—for effectiveness therapy should not be too cosy, nor too astringent. Third, the therapist's capacity for Reflexive Function varies from patient to patient. Each therapist-patient pair appears to generate its own particular attachment atmosphere and capacity for mentalization, or the lack of it.

All this implies a much more complex and dynamic relational culture between caregiver and care-receiver (whether parent and child, or therapist and patient) than perhaps Bowlby's suggestions in the last chapter in this volume suggest. Tracking the vicissitudes of this relationship is a huge challenge for developmentalists, psychotherapy researchers, and clinicians wishing to practice and teach their craft. Bowlby was an eclecticist par excellence. He had a remarkable capacity to bring together differing disciplines—psychoanalysis, cognitive science, child development, ethology, cybernetics—and to weld them into a coherent story.

This eclecticism makes attachment theory hugely attractive to

some, but also off-putting to clinicians in search of truths deriving from but one 'God' alone. For our discipline to advance further, another effort of synthesis will be needed, bringing together ideas from neurobiology, neuroimaging, linguistics, ecology, and the mathematics of complex systems such as chaos theory. Forging such creative links is a task for the future—one which Bowlby would surely have happily endorsed and be sad to have missed.

JEREMY HOLMES

## REFERENCES


Bateman, A. & Fonagy, P. (2004) *Psychotherapy for Borderline Personality Disorder*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Cassidy, J. & Shaver, P. (1999) *Handbook of Attachment*. London: Guilford.

Diamond, D., Stovall-McClough, C., Clarkin, J., & Levy, K. (2003) Patient-therapist attachment in the treatment of Borderline Personality Disorder. *Bulletin of the Menninger Clinic* **76**, 227–259.

Dozier, M., Chase Stowall, K., & Albus, K. (1999) Attachment and psychopathology in adulthood. In *Handbook of Attachment* (Eds J. Cassidy & P. Shaver). London: Guilford.

Fonagy, P., Gergely, G., Jurist, E., & Target, M. (2002) *Affect regulation, mentalization, and the development of the self*. New York: Other Press.

Grossman, K., Grossman, K., & Zimmerman, P. (1999) A Wider view of attachment and exploration: stability and change during the years of immaturity. In *Handbook of Attachment* (Eds J. Cassidy & P. Shaver). London: Guilford.

Grossman, K., Grossman, K., & Kindler, H. (2005) Early care and the roots of attachment and partnership representation in the Bielefeld and Regensburg longitudinal studies. In *Attachment from infancy to adulthood: the major longitudinal studies*. New York: Guilford.

Hesse, E. (1999) The Adult Attachment Interview: Historical and Current Developments. In *Handbook of Attachment* (Eds J. Cassidy & P. Shaver). London: Guilford.

Holmes, J. (1993) *John Bowlby and Attachment Theory*. London: Routlege.

Holmes, J. (2004) Disorganised attachment and Borderline Personality Disorder: a clinical perspective. *Attachment and Human Development* **6**, 181–190.

# 1

# CARING FOR CHILDREN

*During the early months of 1980 I was giving lectures in the United States. Amongst invitations reaching me was one from the psychiatric staff of the Michael Reese Hospital in Chicago to address a conference on parenting.*

## AN INDISPENSABLE SOCIAL ROLE

At some time of their lives, I believe, most human beings desire to have children and desire also that their children should grow up to be healthy, happy, and self-reliant. For those who succeed the rewards are great; but for those who have children but fail to rear them to be healthy, happy, and self-reliant the penalties in anxiety, frustration, friction, and perhaps shame or guilt, may be severe. Engaging in parenthood therefore is playing for high stakes. Furthermore, because successful parenting is a principal key to the mental health of the next generation, we need to know all we can both about its nature and about the manifold social and psychological conditions that influence its development for better or worse. The theme is a huge one and all

I can do in this contribution is to sketch the approach that I myself adopt in thinking about these issues. That approach is an ethological one.

Before I go into detail, however, I want to make a few more general remarks. To be a successful parent means a lot of very hard work. Looking after a baby or toddler is a twenty-four-hour-a-day job seven days a week, and often a very worrying one at that. And even if the load lightens a little as children get older, if they are to flourish they still require a lot of time and attention. For many people today these are unpalatable truths. Giving time and attention to children means sacrificing other interests and other activities. Yet I believe the evidence for what I am saying is unimpeachable. Study after study, including those pioneered in Chicago by Grinker (1962) and continued by Offer (1969), attest that healthy, happy, and self-reliant adolescents and young adults are the products of stable homes in which both parents give a great deal of time and attention to the children.

I want also to emphasize that, despite voices to the contrary, looking after babies and young children is no job for a single person. If the job is to be well done and the child's principal caregiver is not to be too exhausted, the caregiver herself (or himself) needs a great deal of assistance. From whom that help comes will vary: very often it is the other parent; in many societies, including more often than is realized our own, it comes from a grandmother. Others to be drawn in to help are adolescent girls and young women. In most societies throughout the world these facts have been, and still are, taken for granted and the society organized accordingly. Paradoxically it has taken the world's richest societies to ignore these basic facts. Man and woman power devoted to the production of material goods counts a plus in all our economic indices. Man and woman power devoted to the production of happy, healthy, and self-reliant children in their own homes does not count at all. We have created a topsy-turvy world.