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Attachment Theory as an Alternative Basis of Psychoanalysis

Marco Bacciagaluppi

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Copyright © 1985, 1989 and 2012 by Dr. Marco Bacciagaluppi, Via Pellini 4, I-20125 Milano / Italien - E-mail: m.bacciagaluppi[at-symbol]marcobacciagaluppi.com.

In *The Crisis of Psychoanalysis*, Fromm (1978) claims that psychoanalysis has lost its potential for being a critical theory of society. In this article it is suggested that a renewal of psychoanalysis may be accomplished by retaining the psychoanalytic method and adopting an extended version of Bowlby's attachment theory as an alternative paradigm.

In his *Autobiographical Study Freud* (1925), spoke of metapsychology as „a speculative superstructure of psychoanalysis, any portion of which can be abandoned or changed.“ However, once the traditional framework is discarded, there is a tendency to view psychoanalysis as a purely hermeneutic discipline—a set of rules for interpreting verbal communications. This approach is taken, with different nuances, by such authors as Lacan, Schafer, Klein, Ricoeur, and Habermas (Modell, 1981).

But this approach is open to serious methodological objections. In a recent philosophical critique of psychoanalysis, Grünbaum (1984) upholds Eysenck's claim that the psychoanalytic setting may generate heuristically useful hypotheses, but that these hypotheses can be validated only by controlled extraclinical studies.

Bowlby's Attachment Theory

Grünbaum's approach is followed by Bowlby. To account for clinical observations, he turned to modern biology, in particular to ethology and the theory of evolution. In a recent article, Bowlby (1984) suggests that these principles may be used „to construct a new metapsychology“ (p. 12).

Bowlby's starting point was the observation of the reaction of small children to unwilling separation from their mother figure. This reaction goes through three phases: protest, despair, and detachment Bowlby explained these findings by postulating the primary nature of the child's tie to the mother, in contrast [312] to orthodox Freudian theory, which maintains that the child's tie is secondary to drive satisfaction. Bowlby claims that human attachment behavior is an innate form of behavior that was selected in the course of evolution on account of its survival value in prehistorical conditions. He also states that one of the fundamental forms of anxiety, and the principal source of future psycho-pathology, is separation anxiety. He further emphasizes that separation anxiety is accompanied by anger.

In addition to attachment behavior in the child, attachment theory is built up around two other fundamental forms of innate behavior: complementary caregiving behavior in



the adult, and exploratory behavior in the child. Later in development, in addition to the basic parent-child bond, peer bonds and pair bonds are established. Bowlby (1984) writes: „A person’s whole emotional life ... is determined by the state of these long-term, committed relationships“ (p. 11).

These innate behaviors are conceived as preprogrammed, but the pattern in which they become organized during development depends on the responses of the child’s caregivers. These real-life childhood experiences exert their effects on later life through the persistence at an unconscious level of the complementary pair of models of parents and self. Defenses are viewed as the deactivation of behavioral systems, due to the defensive exclusion of information from further processing (Bowlby, 1980, Chapter 4).

Thus, besides the ethological framework, there is also in Bowlby’s theory a strong emphasis on interpersonal relations, family dynamics, and cognitive mechanisms.

Affinity With the Interpersonal-Cultural Approach

It is suggested that Bowlby’s theory has a special affinity with the interpersonal-cultural approach. When Bowlby stresses the emotional problems of parents (Bowlby, 1979a, p. 135) he seems to echo what may be considered to be the key concept of interpersonal psychiatry, namely, in the words of Thompson (1957, p. 10), „the role of the emotional problems of parents in contributing to the difficulties of their children.“

There may be historical reasons for this affinity. Bowlby’s theory originates from the British school of object relations (Bowlby, 1982a, p. 37), which in turn derives from the Hungarian school of psychoanalysis (Bowlby, 1982a, p. 33). The interpersonal school, especially the William Alanson White group, was also influenced by the Hungarian school, specifically by Ferenczi, through Thompson.

There are also affinities between Bowlby’s ethological framework and the thinking of Erich Fromm (Bacciagaluppi, 1985). Fromm was also convinced of the primary nature of the baby’s tie to the mother. His whole position [313] presupposes innate components in human behavior. In *Man for Himself* (Fromm 1975) he wrote: „Man is not a blank sheet of paper on which culture can write its text; he is... structured in specific ways.“ Many of Fromm’s concepts, such as those of love, productivity, and humanistic conscience, can be reformulated in ethological terms.

In 1983, a symposium on attachment was organized within the interpersonal-cultural area, in which extensions of Bowlby’s theory were suggested (Bemporad, 1984). Another meeting on separation was organized in 1985. The time seems to be ripe to attempt an integration of the interpersonal-cultural approach with Bowlby’s theory. A similar suggestion to use attachment theory as a new paradigm for psychoanalysis has recently been put forward by the Swedish psychologist Videgird (1983).

Why a New Metapsychology?

However, there may be some reluctance within the interpersonal-cultural school to adopt a new metapsychology. This reluctance is quite understandable, considering the effort it cost to get rid of the old one. For example, Greenberg and Mitchell (1983) state that „because of these efforts to place psychoanalytic data within an extrapsychanalytic framework ..., Bowlby’s theory cannot stand as a distinctly and purely psychoanalytic model.“ But, in my view, this is precisely the merit of his theory. If psychoanalysis is only a form of hermeneutics it lends itself to the attacks of the philosophers of science such as Popper (1962) and Grünbaum (1984), already quoted above. Actually, as



Modell (1981) states, psychoanalysis is a unique discipline in integrating two basic forms of knowledge (for a detailed discussion of the two psychoanalytic theories, see Dazzi, 1985). Psychoanalysis integrates the methodology of the *Naturwissenschaften* (natural sciences) with that of the *Geisteswissenschaften* (human sciences)—*verstehen* (to understand by empathy) with *erklären* (to explain causally).

English-speaking authors have rediscovered these distinctions, often without awareness of their precedents in European Continental philosophy. This differentiation is present, for example, in Sullivan's description of the therapist as a participant observer. In „Psychoanalysis as Art and Science“ Bowlby (1979c) has also drawn attention to the two different aspects of psychoanalysis.

Modell also uses the term of „I-Thou“ and „I-It“ relationships. The I-Thou position rests on the most primitive perception of all: the capacity of the mother and child to know each other's affective states, which antedates the acquisition of language.

Thus, in psychoanalysis there is a hermeneutic component at the deepest possible level. On the other hand, in the analytic setting there is an oscillation between the I-Thou and I-It relationships. The analyst is also in the I-It position [314] when he/she uses models to organize the clinical data, that is, when he/she uses metapsychology.

Remote Causes of Psychopathology: The Ethological Viewpoint

The ethological viewpoint, as set forth by Bowlby (1969) in Chapter 4 of *Attachment*, has important implications that deserve to be emphasized and developed.

In an evolutionary sense (the selection of genotypes) man was adapted to a pre-historical environment—what Bowlby (1969, p. 47) calls the „environment of evolutionary adaptedness.“ This adaptation was characterized by nomadic hunting and gathering in small groups.

Man's prehistory lasted two to three million years. The environment of evolutionary adaptedness started undergoing drastic change only about ten thousand years ago, with the domestication of plants and animals.

The ten thousand years that have elapsed since the agricultural revolution is too short a time to have significantly affected our genetic endowment. We may therefore presume that innate behavior at the beginning of ontogeny has remained basically unchanged and is still adapted to the original environment.

We are faced with a discrepancy between biological and cultural evolution. Since the advent of agriculture, cultural evolution has proceeded at an exponential rate, far outstripping that of biological evolution. This discrepancy is a potential source of conflict: Our innate behavioral tendencies now develop in an unnatural environment.

It can be objected that man is characterized by his adaptability at a phenotypic level. Bowlby (1969), however, points out that there are limits to man's variability (p. 139). Psychopathology may be expected if the environment at birth differs beyond certain limits from the prehistorical one.

At the level of character and family structure, the most important consequence of the agricultural revolution was the peasant adaptation. In this cultural development, the economic conditions of agriculture led to behavior in many ways opposed to the earlier prehistorical adaptation; as Fromm (1978) wrote in an early paper, economic conditions necessarily prevail over man's instinctual endowment. One peasant characteristic is the production of a large number of children, in order that at least some will survive, help with the work, and care for the parents in sickness and old age. This type of family



and character structure may still be exerting an influence, since most of us are only a few generations removed from peasant ancestry (Farb, 1980).

This ethological viewpoint stresses a *discontinuity* in our evolution, represented by the domestication of plants and animals. This discontinuity seems [315] to be reflected in the concept of the fall of man, which is present in many cultural traditions. It is suggested that the consequences of the agricultural revolution, in particular the family and character structure of the peasant adaptation, may represent the most remote causal conditions for the pathological situations that we encounter in our clinical practice.

Proximate Causes of Psychopathology: Real-Life Events on a Continuum

If we now turn to proximate causes, events causally relevant for psycho-pathology in an ethological framework are those that thwart innate behavioral tendencies. A typical experimental example is provided by Harlow's studies. The separation of infant rhesus monkeys from their mothers and their rearing in isolation leads to species-specific abnormal behavior (McGuire and Fairbanks, 1977, p. 13). In man, of course, such experimental studies are barred by ethical considerations. Bowlby built up his theory by observing the effects on children of real-life events such as separation and loss. In a recent article, Bowlby (1984) has turned his attention to another class of real-life events, namely to violence in the family.

This emphasis on real-life events is another reason for the congeniality of Bowlby's theory to the interpersonal-cultural approach. According to Levenson (1981), „It is on this point that the infra-psychoic and interpersonal analysts differ most sharply.“

However, in this connection Greenberg and Mitchell (1983) have another objection to make to Bowlby (p. 186). They claim that he places undue stress on the actual physical absence of the mother and underestimates the importance of her emotional absence. Maybe this criticism is due to the fact that most of the empirical work reported by Bowlby concerns physical absence, due either to separation or loss, because these clear-cut events lend themselves more readily to quantitative study (Bowlby 1979c, p. 5).

Actually, Bowlby (1973) explicitly states the equivalence of physical absence and emotional unavailability. He asserts that threats of abandonment and of suicide on the mother's part are just as pathogenic as actual separation.

In a more recent article, Bowlby (1979b) calls attention to more subtle forms of communication. For instance, parents may determine the exclusion of important data from processing. Children are thus compelled to refuse the testimony of their own senses.

Subtler forms of communication lend themselves less readily to empirical verification or falsification, but on principle they are experimentally testable. Proximate causes of psychopathology may thus be viewed as a continuum of real-life events, ranging from subtle forms of communication at one end to clear-cut events at the other. [316]

Proximate Causes of Psychopathology: Classes of Events

Causally relevant events could be classified according to the nature of the thwarted innate behavioral tendencies. Bowlby started by observing the effects of the frustration of attachment needs, which remained the main emphasis of his work. However, autonomy needs can also be frustrated by inappropriate parental responses. Within the interpersonal-cultural school, Dince (1966) had already pointed out some years ago that



in pathological conditions there is a *twofold frustration of basic needs* of the child, and hence, we may add, a dual source of anger.

Another form of behavior that has to be taken into consideration is sexual behavior. Bowlby (1982b) did not attempt the development of this theory. Freud's basic hypothesis in this connection is quite compatible with an ethological framework. He assumed that in the course of evolution an overlap between sexual maturation and dependency took place. It is suggested (Bacciagaluppi, 1984) that in prehistorical conditions the appropriate parental response was also selected, consisting in the setting of limits and in the indication of peer alternatives. The Oedipus complex, as a pathological structure, only arises when cultural conditions prevent the appropriate parental response from operating.

The Core of Psychopathology: The Inverted Parent-Child Relationship

At the core of psychopathology we find the situation described by Bowlby as the inverted parent-child relationship. Parents who have suffered from a twofold frustration of basic needs cannot, in turn, satisfy these needs in their children. They cannot satisfy their children's initial attachment needs, and they will later tend to prevent them from achieving autonomy. On the contrary, they may more or less covertly seek to satisfy their own needs by eliciting parental behavior in the children. The resulting structure may be described as an interplay between the parent's and the child's dual unsatisfied needs.

These pathological situations generally also include inappropriate parental responses at an oedipal level. The redirection of sexual strivings of children onto alternative peer relationships is particularly threatening for needy parents. This development may be discouraged by covert or overt seductiveness on the part of a parent. The Oedipus complex is often the culmination of an inverted parent-child relationship.

A Synthesis: Multiple Binding Mechanisms

The remote causes of psychopathology (the peasant adaptation, following the domestication of plants and animals) and the proximate causes (inappropriate [317] parental responses leading to the frustration of basic needs in children) seem to be connected by the binding of children to the family of origin.

The implicit function of keeping the children bound is expressed by the term *multiple binding mechanisms* (*Bindungskräfte*), which is used by Stierlin (1978) in his system of family therapy. It is noteworthy that Ferenczi, in his last article (1980), had already anticipated this concept (pp. 165-166).

An example of the operation of multiple binding mechanisms is provided by the study of incestuous families by Gelinas (1983). She observed that incest victims are typically *parentified children*, which is the term employed by Boszormenyi-Nagy and Spark (1984) to describe the child's role in an inverted relationship. The very fact of having a parental role leads the victim to protect the incestuous parent and to deny the occurrence of incest. The child is thus bound not only by the parent's seduction but also by the child's inappropriate parental role.

Conclusions

It is suggested that Bowlby's attachment theory may provide a new meta-psychology



for psychoanalysis, based on evolutionary biology. At the same time, this theory reveals a discontinuity in our evolution, whereby present society may not satisfy basic human needs. A new critical theory of society may thus emerge from modern biology.-

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