

EXPLORING ATTACHMENT AND LOSS WITH RICHARD BOWLBY

Study day, hosted by Treetops Hospice Care, Derby: 04/02/16

Richard Bowlby, son of John Bowlby, founder of attachment theory, is a photographer by profession rather than a psychologist or psychotherapist but clearly has a passion for his father's work. A sprightly 74½ year-old (as he proudly told us at the start of the day), he spent the entire day on his feet from when he first stepped up to the stage to speak at 10 am until the study day was reluctantly drawn to a close at 4.30 pm, talking energetically and enthusiastically about attachment and its importance to the developing infant, answering questions, even continuing to answer individual questions, sign autographs and pose for selfies with some of the 270 delegates during the lunch break and after the final Q&A session of the day!

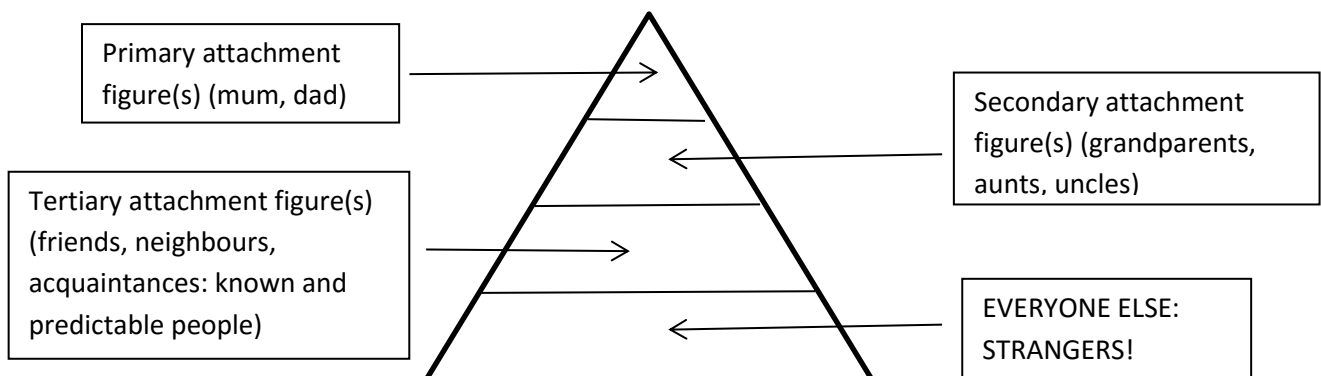
I already knew a little of attachment theory, but hearing Richard talk about his father's work and especially the anecdotes he shared, both from his own experience of family life and from those who have approached him at conferences, really brought the theory to life. He also shared some rare video footage of his father speaking about attachment theory as well as video clips of the 'strange situation' test developed by Bowlby's student, Mary Ainsworth, and other video footage both from the animal and the human world to illustrate his talk.

Some key new learning points for me from the day were around the interactive nature of attachment. The human baby is born with an instinct to stay close to his/her primary attachment figure, but who that primary attachment figure is, is determined by experience, not biology. As Richard Bowlby put it very poignantly in his presentation:

"Who comes to me when I cry?"

The baby will notice who comes most frequently; and if that individual is consistent, timely, attuned and responsive to the infant, this will lead to a secure attachment to that individual, which facilitates normal psychological development. Under the age of 6 months, a baby will respond to any kind and responsive adult; over the age of 6 months, babies develop a preference for one individual – the primary attachment figure.

In a preface to explaining the 'strange situation' test (a widely recognised test to ascertain whether an infant of around one year of age has a secure attachment or insecure/insecure-avoidant attachment style), Richard described a hierarchy of attachment figures:



This led on to an examination of the experience of being placed in day-care from the infant's perspective, including a slowed-down video clip of an infant's reaction to being handed over to a carer who was not a primary, secondary or tertiary attachment figure for him – in other words, a stranger. At a slower speed, it was possible to see the infant's facial expression change from one of engagement with his mother, to detachment and dissociation. Richard emphasised that day-care in itself is not the problem; indeed, he went so far as to suggest that from their third birthday, children in our society are *disadvantaged* unless they have attended 2-3 hours of good quality pre-school nursery education. But under 12 months of age, no benefit to the infant has been found from pre-school nursery education; only deficits. So the problem is inappropriate day-care for the child's stage of psychological development, and inappropriate introduction of day-care because of a lack of understanding of attachment issues. To help us to grasp this, Richard invited the audience to cast their minds back to their own childhoods and recall a memory of being lost as a small child: several could vividly remember this as a terrifying experience. 'Being lost' for the infant is the experience of:

- Not being able to access the primary attachment figure (not being able to see, smell, hear, touch that individual)
- Being in a strange environment
- Being in the presence of strangers.

This is a terrifying situation for the infant; it is so traumatising that infants will usually try to prevent it happening again if they can, by keeping close to their primary attachment figure in future. But as Richard pointed out, being taken to day-care and left there creates these very same conditions for many infants. We have effectively normalised this kind of terrifying separation in our society – and when infants protest, as they usually do (unless something has already gone very wrong with the attachment process), we typically do nothing to change the situation, so we normalise their protest and distress.

The particular relevance of this for my research is that some of the participants (myself included) were born at a time when it was common practice to put new-born babies in a day-nursery on the maternity ward, and only bring them to their mothers for feeding. In other words, a new-borns, we spent our first days or weeks of life not being able to access our primary attachment figures, apart from a few brief periods during each day; in a strange environment, and in the presence of strangers. What impact will this have had on our ability to develop a secure attachment style?

One criticism of attachment theory, as originally developed by John Bowlby, has been that it overlooked or underestimated the role of fathers in an infant's development, although he acknowledged that at least in his son's life, a father had an important role in encouraging exploration and excitement. Richard shared with us a more recent development which suggests that infants can in fact develop a secure attachment to 'dual primary attachment figures,' who will share the key functions of 'secure base' and 'explore and excite' in varying proportions, and not necessarily divided along traditional male/female lines. He suggested that the infant himself or herself will elicit these different functions in the dual attachment figures to a lesser or greater extent, demonstrating the complexity of human behaviour even at a very early age, and the value of an infant having two primary attachment figures, whether they are configured as 'mum and dad,' or two mums/two dads, gran and dad/mum and granddad, or any other configuration of the modern family.

And a final comment of enormous significance for my research into the experience of childhood emotional neglect: Richard stated that in a recent study, 'Only early neglect significantly predicted later aggression,' adding that 'we can't see neglect – it is the hidden epidemic.'

I am very grateful to the KPA for funding my attendance at this study day, which offered a unique opportunity to hear John Bowlby's son unpack, update and expand some key aspects of his father's work in a very engaging and accessible way. I wrote copious notes on the day, some of which will find their way into my thesis through personal reflections, others through further reading inspired by Richard's explanations of attachment theory. I have only touched on some of these aspects here, but would be happy to share more if you are interested.

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