

The following is an email exchange I had with Phillip Shaver, Ph.D. at the University of California, Davis. Dr. Shaver is one of the world's foremost authorities on attachment theory. He has authored more than 300 books and articles on the subject as well as the definitive 1,000-page text on attachment theory.

Dr. Shaver:

May I share with you this layman's thoughts about Bowlby and attachment theory?

A major flaw in Bowlby's attachment theory, as I see it, is that it fails to account for the uniquely human aspect of the human animal. Bowlby tried to link human development to biology and looked to ethology (the study of animal behavior) as a model for human psychology. The problem is that chimpanzees or wolves can't write Hamlet, listen to Beethoven, enjoy baseball, or create civilization – all issues that occupy psychoanalysis, whose preoccupation with the internal world of fantasy is dismissed by Bowlby. See Mattson, M.P. "Superior pattern processing is the essence of the evolved human brain." *Front. Neurosci.* 2014; 8: 265 (2014) (while human babies may resemble chimpanzee babies in behavior, humans' capacities for reasoning, communication and abstract thought are far superior to other species and gross anatomy of the brains of each species reveals considerable expansion of three regions in humans: the prefrontal cortex, the visual cortex, and the parietal–temporal–occipital juncture).

If you look only at the intersection of the human and the animal, you end up with the central red area of a Venn diagram, but what about the rest of the circle? What about the uniquely human aspects of the human animal – issues addressed by psychoanalysis? People say attachment theory has a scientific basis that psychoanalysis lacks. What scientific models can explain Hamlet, Beethoven, baseball – or human civilization? It's a ridiculous argument. Yes, the human animal, like the monkey, can be

reducible to science. But the human mind is neither reducible in its entirety to a science nor to a mystery, but encompasses elements of both.

Do chimps and wolves, two social species, have a desire for individuality and autonomy comparable to that found in humans? There are limitations to the use of ethology to understand the importance and adaptive value of human strivings for individuality and autonomy – not to mention the adaptive value to humans of having a rich inner world of fantasy. See, e.g., *Advances in the Study of Aggression, Volume 2*, edited by Blanchard, R.J. and Blanchard, D.C. (London: Academic Press, 1986) (There is empirical and theoretical interest in the direction of understanding the functional or adaptive value of fantasy activities. Why do individuals dream, daydream, engage in imaginative play, write dramas, or go to the theater? What adaptive value do these activities –all transformations of intrapsychic fantasy, or psychic reality – have?). See also, Palombo, S.R. *Dreaming and Memory: A New Information-Processing Model* (New York: Book World Promotions, 1978) (dreams serve an information-processing function by matching present and past experience in determining what information will be filtered through for storage in permanent memory).

Also, can mental functioning be reduced to simply issues of attachment and the child's registration of objective reality, without consideration of the (adaptive and maladaptive) role of psychic reality (dreams, fantasies, wishes – that is, psychic derivatives of biology) in refashioning objective reality? (Bowlby once famously said of psychoanalysis: "I think that's all rubbish, quite frankly.") Creativity in science is rooted in unconscious fantasy. It has been found that the creative scientist shows a preference for irregularities and disorder, he temporarily takes leave of his senses, permitting expression of unconfigured forces of his irrational unconscious (an irrational unconscious whose dynamic power is denied by Bowlby). Boxenbaum, H. "Scientific creativity: a review." *Drug Metab. Rev.* 23(5-6):473-92 (1991).

Attachment theory posits that human beings have an innate biological drive to “seek proximity to a caregiver in times of alarm or danger”. We’re “hardwired” – programmed in our brains – to “attach” to someone for physical safety and security. Attachment theorists like to point out that research has proven this hypothesis beyond irrefutability and prioritizes it even over the drive for food. This hardwired attachment behavior becomes a powerful ally in the healing process in therapy; clients can use the therapist as an “attachment figure” to experience safety, protection, a “secure base” in times of alarm or perceived danger and, over time, internalize that secure base within themselves.

How do attachment theorists reconcile their view of mental health – a view that emphasizes healthy dependence on the mother as primary attachment figure and on social relations and groups in adulthood – with the functioning of creative persons who place a premium on autonomy, emotional detachment, independence of thought and behavior, and a reliance on the self as the ultimate source of identity and security?

Research shows that even in childhood the potentially creative child exhibits unusual autonomy from his parents.

In studies many creative subjects indicated that as children they had enjoyed a marked degree of autonomy from their parents. They were entrusted with independent judgment and allowed to develop curiosity at their own pace without overt supervision or interference. Donald MacKinnon noted of these parents, “They did not hesitate to grant him rather unusual freedom in exploring his universe and in making decisions for himself – and this early as well as late. The expectation of the parent that the child would act independently but reasonably and responsibly appears to have contributed immensely to the latter’s sense of personal autonomy which was to develop to such a marked degree.”

But this autonomy has been shown to have a darker side – it coexists with a certain emotional detachment from one or both parents. According to

attachment theorists emotional detachment is a mark of insecure attachment and fear of rejection.

In one study creative subjects often reported a sense of remoteness, a distance from their elders – i.e., markers of insecure attachment dating back to infancy – which ultimately helped them avoid the overdependence – or momentous rejection – that often characterizes parent-child relationships, both of which were believed to interfere with the unencumbered unfolding of the self through the creative process.

In a study of eminent scientists Anne Roe found that many subjects had quite specific and fairly strong feelings of personal isolation when they were children (suggestive of insecure attachment). They felt different, or apart, in some way. Such statements as the following from physicists, in particular, were strong: “In college I slipped back to lonely isolation.” “I have always felt like a minority member.” “I was always lonesome, the other children didn’t like me, I didn’t have friends, I was always out of the group. Neither the girls nor the boys liked me, I didn’t know why, but it was always that way.”

In a study of architects MacKinnon found that the least creative showed the following characteristics seemingly associated with secure attachment: abasement, affiliation, and deference (socialization); their goal was to meet the standard of the group (i.e., the attachment figure). MacKinnon, D.W. “Personality and the Realization of Creative Potential.” *American Psychologist* 20: 273-81, 1965. The most creative architects scored highest on aggression, autonomy (independence), psychological complexity and richness, and ego strength (will); their goal was found to be “some inner artistic standard of excellence.” Cattell found that high ego strength (found in creative persons) was associated with being self-reliant, solitary, resourceful, individualistic, and self-sufficient: characteristics seemingly associated with insecure attachment. In creative persons are the characteristics of aggression, autonomy, psychological complexity and richness and ego strength associated with insecure attachment?

How does attachment theory reconcile the fact that although attachment is biologically-driven, the emotional detachment associated with insecure attachment – with its consequent promotion of unusual autonomy and creativity – has survival value for the group?

It is important to keep in mind, as Stephen Jay Gould (1981) has pointed out, that natural selection may produce a feature for one adaptive reason (e.g., the drive for attachment which promotes infant survival and group cooperation in adulthood). However this may have a number of potentially “non-adaptive sequelae” – such as the compromising of individual identity in the drive for group cohesion, the loss of rationality and the development of “group think”, and the scapegoating of creative outsiders who pose a threat to group cohesion. In short, there is no guarantee that all features of biology are adaptive. Another example: African populations who moved to Europe eons ago lost their skin pigmentation that allowed these European populations to more easily absorb vitamin D at higher latitudes. With that biological advantage there arose a disadvantage: the greater risk for skin cancers in these northern populations. We should emphasize that individuals who do not conform to biological imperative (e.g., persons with insecure attachment) may have qualities that prove to be biologically adaptive for the group (such as, heightened autonomy, which promotes novel problem-solving skills that have survival value for the group).

It's virtually meaningless and deceptive for attachment therapists to propose that secure attachment is an ideal to which all must aspire. The issue is what one is comfortable with. Is the individual happy to be insecurely attached with a lessened need for social bonding and relatedness but a superior ability to tolerate being alone with the concomitant ability to nurture his creativity?

Evolution is more complex than Bowlby seems to assume. Positive (good) things can come from negative (bad) things and negative (bad) things can come from positive (good) things. Secure attachment is not all good and

insecure or anxious attachment is not all bad. As the CBT practitioner likes to say: black and white thinking is a cognitive distortion.

Gary Freedman
Washington, DC

Reply from Dr. Shaver. Significantly, Dr. Shaver emphasizes that “no one in the attachment field ever claimed that attachment is everything” and that insecure attachment is as valid an attachment style as secure attachment. Whether any attachment style is “good” or “bad” depends on the individual's circumstances – whether the attachment style is adaptive to his environment and ego-syntonic. Dr. Shaver would say to an avoidant individual, “If you are an insecurely attached individual who likes to spend time alone listening to Beethoven on his iPod while watching people walk down the street on Connecticut Avenue, there's nothing wrong with that.”

From: Phillip R. Shaver
To: Gary Freedman
Sent: Sun, Nov 19, 2017 2:49 pm
Subject: Re: SPN Profile Message: problems with Bowlby

Hi. I don't have time to respond in detail, but you are ignoring the fundamental concept in the theory: “a secure base FOR EXPLORATION.” That was the idea that motivated Ainsworth's development of the strange situation assessment procedure. So basically you are running wild in a direction that ignores a centerpiece of the theory.

Secondly, Tsachi Ein-Dor and some of the rest of us have published several papers showing that people who score fairly high in attachment anxiety or avoidance make important contributions to the groups they belong to. The anxious individuals are sensitive to threats and are quick to mention their worries to others (they are also better at detecting bluffing during poker games). The avoidant individuals are quick to see how to

save themselves in a threatening situation, and while avoiding harm to themselves often inadvertently save other people by countering a threat or seeing a way to escape, inadvertently showing others how to escape. In one of our studies we found that avoidant young pre-professional singles tennis players have better records than less avoidant players, perhaps because they can hold up better while traveling and competing alone. Aside from all these details, I would say that no one in the attachment field ever claimed that attachment is everything.

Bowlby was primarily focused on infancy, and human infants are more like monkey infants than adult novelists are like adult monkeys. Bowlby was also a clinician, so he was looking at possible early experiences that presaged later mental health problems, later delinquency, etc. In the adult realm, he focused mostly on loss and grief, which is a core process that may be more similar in monkeys and humans than is, say, painting or comedy writing. So, to make the 1000-page 3rd edition of the Handbook of Attachment, plus thousands of research articles not covered there, short, I think you're running wild in a direction not much addressed by attachment researchers but not at all incompatible with the theory.

But maybe I would have a more refined opinion if I had time to look into it. I am a 73-year-old retiree and member of my County Grand Jury, so I don't have much time at the moment to defend Bowlby, who is long dead but clearly made major contributions to science and society. He doesn't need much defending, especially with respect to what he didn't write about.

Sent from my iPhone

Reply from Gary Freedman:

On Nov 19, 2017, at 11:27 AM, Gary Freedman <garfreed@netscape.net> wrote:

Thank you so much for your thoughtful and useful reply. I have been led astray about attachment theory by my very socially-oriented relational therapist who seems unable to see anything positive about my avoidant, independent-minded traits. Thanks again for the information. I'll have to read more!!

Gary Freedman
Washington, DC

Reply from Dr. Shaver:

-----Original Message-----

From: Phillip R. Shaver <prshaver@ucdavis.edu>

To: Gary Freedman <garfreed@netscape.net>

Sent: Sun, Nov 19, 2017 2:49 pm

Subject: Re: SPN Profile Message: problems with Bowlby

Sounds good. One's view of these matters depends on one's values, which are in turn somewhat related to one's attachment history. Therapists are generally interested in how a person's history, including family history, has led to a person's current problems. If an anxious or avoidant person has made a series of happy life choices that fit with his or her attachment orientation, he or she will not show up for therapy, so therapists need not worry about those successful adaptations. (I've always thought that an avoidant person might be a good spy, for example, because he could go somewhere alone, maintain a fake identity, and take advantage of people without feeling too bad about it. But he might also become a double agent without guilt, as has often happened with actual secret agents.) Therapists are generally trained to notice when symptoms are or are not "ego-syntonic."

For example, Donald Trump obviously qualifies as having a narcissistic personality disorder, but there's no indication that this bothers him, makes him unhappy, or keeps him from succeeding in life. As with

avoidance, however, narcissism may not be good for one's close relationship partners, as we see with The Donald's three wives and many cheated and abandoned business partners. A less extreme example is Steve Jobs. I'm typing on one of his wonderful products, but he was often hell to live and work with.

Sent from my iPhone