Attachment Theory: Meaning And Evaluation

Attachment Theory is a unique theory that many social workers use within their practices. Attachment theory looks at one's development specifically in the first few years of their lives (Berzoff, Flanagan, Hertz, 2016.) The theory examines the bond between a child and their primary caregiver. Through looking at this bond we can see how attachment styles influence an individual's behavior in childhood and later in life.

Attachment theory was first developed by John Bowlby a Psychoanalyst and was built upon by Mary Ainsworth and American psychologist (Berzoff, et al, 2016.) The concept of the theory is that during our infancy we form attachments to our primary caregiver. Depending on how that caregiver treats us (ie responds to our needs promptly and with love and kindness) depends on how "secure" our attachment is. Through research, Ainsworth & Bowlby found that Attachment theory provides a baseline to how we form attachments in childhood and later in life. "The basic attachment findings were that attachment, now defined as "proximity-seeking" by the infant toward the mother or other primary caregiver, develops rapidly, across cultures, from six to twelve months after birth." (Berzoff, et al, pg. 200 2016.)

Attachment Styles

In Attachment theory, four distinct attachment styles have been observed in infants and toddlers. Three of these styles were discovered by Ainsworth in a study called "Strange Situation". The study had a mother and their infant in a room playing with toys. An unknown friendly female would enter the room and the mother would leave for a few minutes. The researchers would observe the infants and how they responded when the mother left and then when they were reunited ((Berzoff, et al, 2016.) From this research, Ainsworth developed three attachment styles: secure attachment and insecure attachment: avoidant attachment and ambivalent attachment. A fourth attachment style was added in 1986 by Main & Solomon. This attachment style is known as a disorganized attachment which is an insecure attachment style. Below are the attachment styles discussed greater in-depth.

Secure attachment: This attachment style is the result of the primary caregiver attending to the child's needs promptly. When left with the stranger as mentioned above the child is distressed when their caregiver leaves but shows joy and seeks comfort when the caregiver returns. After they are reunited the child continues with normal behaviors (Zeanah, Berlin, & Boris, 2011)

Avoidant Attachment: This attachment style is a result of the primary caregiver not being responsive to the infant's needs. In extreme cases, the parent may punish or reject the child (Berzoff, et al, 2016.) This child has the minimal response from being separated from its caregiver and when the caregiver returns the child ignores or avoids the caregiver. (Zeanah, Berlin, & Boris, 2011.)

Ambivalent Attachment: This attachment style is when the infant becomes upset when the caregiver leaves but when the caregiver returns the child can not be consoled and often resistant to the caregiver's attempts. The infant often becomes ambivalent when they receive inconsistent caregiving and can manifest from a chaotic environment. (Berzoff, et al, 2016.)

Disorganized Attachment: Added after Ainsworth's study disorganized attachment is the most severe of the insecure styles. The child's behavior is inconsistent and often fearful. Sometimes the child will avoid the caregiver, be resistant to the caregiver, or even prefer a stranger to the caregiver. This behavior is often a result of a violent inconsistent upbringing (Zeanah, Berlin, & Boris, 2011)

Evaluation of Theory Through Social Work Code of Ethics

Attachment theory like any other theory has its limits and potential conflicts of interest. When attachment theory first started to be explored many studies were done which violated informed consent which is in the code of ethics. A secret study done by Peter Neubauer in the 1970s separated twins and triplets at birth for research purposes. "Neubauer conceived the experiment to compare the development of separated sets of twins and triplets with fellow psychiatrist Viola Bernard, to explore one of psychology's most pressing questions — that of nature versus nurture, or whether human behavior is more affected by environment or genetics. Researchers did not obtain the consent of participants or their adoptive families. They also failed to inform families that their child had been separated from a twin during the adoption process or in their later observation of the children, according to Sharon Morello, one of the subjects of the study." (Mccormack, Pg 1, 2018.) Another area where this case violates the code of ethics is the lack of access to records. The records are sealed till 2065 ." (Mccormack, 2018.) Looking at this study poses the question of how many other studies have been done in the name of research without informed consent? Another study done by Harry Harlow studied baby rhesus monkeys exploring the role that social relationships play in early development. (Thorpe, 2019.) Harlow took the infant monkeys away from their mothers and provided them with a wire mother and a cloth mother. The study showed that the baby monkeys clung to the cloth mother and only associated with the wire mother when it wanted to eat raining the question of if touch and child-caregiver relationships matter. Even though this study was done on animals it fringes on the area of informed consent. Animals can not give their consent. As humans, we tend to anthropomorphize animals but regardless due to lack of informed consent from the subjects, this raises ethical issues.

Evaluation of Theory through Empirical Research

Looking at attachment styles through the lens of research is an ideal way to quantify if attachment styles influence individuals into adulthood. We will look at how attachment styles may affect us later in life. The research that this paper examines is attachment theory in correlation to trauma. The research this paper supports is that if infants experience trauma that they are more likely to show insecure attachment styles.

A study done in Mugla Sitki Kocman University, in Turkey in 2016 explored the connection of childhood trauma on attachment styles (Erozkan, 2016.) Through collecting data from 911 students the findings strongly supported the theory that trauma in childhood affects attachment styles. "Results indicated that there were significant positive relationships between physical abuse, emotional abuse, physical neglect, emotional neglect, and sexual abuse subdimensions of childhood trauma and insecure types of attachment (fearful, preoccupied, and dismissing attachment styles). These results indicated that participants displaying relatively high levels of physical abuse, emotional abuse, physical neglect, emotional neglect, and sexual abuse subdimensions of childhood trauma tended to report insecure types of attachment (fearful,

preoccupied, and dismissing attachment styles). (Erozkan, pg 1075 2016.)

A similar study done with Danish 328 Danish students showed that " Secure attachment was significantly associated with low levels or lifetime and current number of PTSD symptoms, negative affectivity, somatization, and emotional and avoidant coping, and a more favorable attribution of benevolence in the world" (Elklit & O'Connor, pg 2008)

Attachment styles can affect one's life in a variety of ways from our achievement to our parenting styles. This was confirmed by a 2003 study that hypothesized that individuals with a secure attachment style were more able to achieve and goal-oriented. The study found "Securely attached participants were higher in need for achievement, lower in fear of failure, and adopted more approach (relative to avoidance) personal achievement goals than did insecure participants, both avoidant and anxious/ambivalent. Secure participants adopted more mastery-approach goals than avoidant participants and adopted fewer performance-avoidance goals than anxious/ambivalent participants.(Elliot & Reis pg. 321, 2003) Looking directly at trauma and how it might affect parenting a 2017 study proposed that adults with insecure childhood experiences had the "potential to affect the parent/child relationship, both in terms of attachment style parental reflective functioning." (Cristobal, Fuenzalida & Santelices,pg 1. 2017.) The study findings were complex but it did indeed show that "adults with insecure early attachment show higher inabilities to recognize the mental states of their children (higher prementalization). On the other hand, secure attachment did not show this effect." (Cristobal, Fuenzalida & Santelices,pg 1. 2017.) It also showed that interestedly enough attachment styles and attachment patterns are passed on intergenerationally.

Evaluation of Theory through the Lens of Trauma

Looking at these articles we see that Attachment theory and trauma are interconnected. The higher the adverse child experiences the more likely a child is to develop an insecure attachment style that may affect them later in life. What this paper doesn't touch upon is that even though if in early childhood we create an insecure attachment it is possible to change your attachment style in adulthood.

Conclusion

Examining these case studies, we see that our attachment styles shape how we interact in our lives. It can affect how we view the world, how goal-oriented we are to how we parent our own children. This theory provides great insight into how trauma specifically childhood trauma can affect our lives. Having this knowledge gives us great power to look at our trauma and heal our attachment styles. Many studies are being done that are showing that we can shift our attachment styles. A study in the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology showed that through intimacy-building exercises individuals with avoidant attachment styles rated their relationships as higher quality(Stanton, Campbell & Pink, 2017) In understanding our attachment styles we can better look at how they may be affecting our lives.