Child Development Research: Looking At Attachment Theory From A Chronological Perspective

Child Development Research

In the following essay I hope to introduce the reader to the topic of attachment theory. I will hope to achieve this by looking at attachment theory from a chronological perspective.

Attachment theory has its origins in the seminal work of psychiatrist and psychoanalyst John Bowlby. In the 1930's Bowlby was working as a psychiatrist in a clinic where he treated a number of emotionally disturbed children. This experience made a profound impression on Bowlby and led him to think about the importance of a child's relationship with their mother in terms of their cognitive, emotional and social development. Significantly, this experience shaped Bowlby's belief around the link between early infant separations from the mother and maladjustment in the infant later on. As a result, Bowlby's theory of attachment was born.

Bowlby described attachment as: "…lasting psychological connectedness between human beings" (1969, p.194). Bowlby felt that attachment could be understood in an evolutionary context, where the caregiver offered safety and security to the infant. Bowlby was curious in understanding the separation anxiety and distress experienced by infants when they were separated from their primary caregiver. Whereas many early behavioural theories intimated that attachment was a learned behaviour. The theories suggested that attachment was the consequence of a feeding relationship between the main caregiver and the infant.

In contrast to the behavioural theories, Bowlby observed that even when the infants were fed there was no decrease in the anxiety experienced by the infant when separated from the primary caregiver. Instead, Bowlby found that attachment was distinguished through clear behavioural and motivational patterns. For example, when infants are scared or distressed they will seek close proximity to the primary caregiver so that they can experience care and comfort from them. Bowlby's belief was that attachment was adaptive and helped to increase the chance of survival for the infant. He proposed that infants were born with an innate drive to form attachments with primary caregivers. The central premise of Bowlby's attachment theory was that primary caregivers who are accessible and responsive to the infant's needs support the growing infant to develop a sense of security. The infant understands that the caregiver is reliable and thus, creates a secure base upon which the infant can explore the wider world.

Internal working model

To understand what was learned from the early relationships and why they affect successive relationships, Bowlby established the concept of the 'internal working models'. The internal working model is a set of beliefs and expectations about the self, others and the relationship between the self and others. According to Bowlby, internal working models commence formation in early infancy. For example, the infant finds that their feelings of hunger and crying result in a timely response from a loving main caregiver who makes them feel better and the infant then learns that certain behaviours illicit a positive response from their main caregiver. As

a result, the infant will feel loved and nurtured and that they are worthy of the positive responses from their main caregiver. In sharp contrast to this, where a main caregiver is cold and unavailable this will result in an internal working model where the attachment figure is seen as rejecting. Bowlby termed the model ‘working’ as the models have the potential to change and develop with the changing experiences in relationships (2009, p.42).

Ainsworth’s Strange Situation

Bowlby held the belief that the infant was: “…to be more influenced by real aspects of parenting than by internal fantasy” (2009, p.40). This hypothesis was supported by Mary Ainsworth’s research (Ainsworth et al. 1971) which highlighted that certain attributes of a mother’s parenting were far more important in establishing an infant’s attachment at the age of one year. Ainsworth created an assessment technique referred to as: ‘the Strange Situation’ to observe how attachments might differ between children.

The Strange Situation study was concerned with observing children between the ages of 12 and 18 months and their responses to a situation where they were left alone for a short time and then reunited with their mother. The infant’s reaction on their mother’s return was suggestive of the type of attachment/security they have with their mother. Based on these observations, Ainsworth concluded that there were three styles of attachment: avoidant-insecure attachment, ambivalent-insecure attachment and secure attachment.

The researchers, Main and Solomon (1986) identified a fourth attachment style referred to as: ‘disorganised-insecure attachment’. This fourth attachment style evolved from parent’s inability to respond appropriately to their child’s distress and can also relate to a parent’s inconsistent response to their child’s feelings of distress and fear.

Intergenerational Transmission

Following on from Ainsworth, the next significant research was undertaken by Main et al (1986). This study acknowledged that there was an important connection between the essence of a child’s attachment to their parent and their parent’s thoughts and feelings around attachment. This significant research was supported by the use of the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI) which explored the parents own childhood experiences with their parents, paying particular attention to life events such as: abuse, loss, separation and trauma and the accessibility comforting, intimate and supportive situations.

The creation of the Adult Attachment Interview complimented the Strange Situation test and highlighted the connection between the parent’s state of mind and the measurement of the child’s attachment offered through the results of the strange situation test. This was viewed as ground-breaking research, as it highlighted how parent’s thoughts about their own life/childhood experiences influenced their child’s maturation. It also highlighted how attachment patterns may be transferred from generation to generation.

Attachment theory has a great deal to offer in understanding a child’s needs and difficulties and how to tailor therapy in relation to these needs and difficulties. It can aid the clinician’s assessment of the child and parent attachment styles and behaviours, thus offering instruction for interventions in the above areas. However, it also needs to be highlighted that there are also

limitations of attachment theory. Attachment theory fails to recognise the huge influence of culture, ethnicity, gender and social class on the developing personality. These contributing factors can be of equal significance as the quality of the attachment.

Although, what is clear, is that attachment theory can be utilised as a sound foundation for exploring the intricate and complex dance that takes place between a child and their mother.

Research paper critique

In the following critique I will be considering the 2005 study by John Grienenberger et al, entitled: ‘Maternal reflective functioning, mother-infant affective communication, and Infant attachment.’ This study explored the link between mental representations and maternal behaviour within the context of intergenerational transmission of attachment.

Hypothesis

Grienenberger et al hypothesised that a mother’s maternal reflective functioning would predict the quality of the mother-infant affective communication This hypothesis was to be supported with the use of the strange situation and the AMBIANCE measure. All of the measures used were seen as forecasting the quality of the infant attachment.

Sample of the study

The study consisted of 45 first time mothers and their babies who were observed from the third trimester of pregnancy right through to the infant’s second year of life. The mothers observed were all middle or upper-middle class, 90% had graduated from college, over 50% had completed some type of graduate study and 92% were in gainful employment when recruited to the study. The sample was also made up of 94% caucasian women.

The sample used for the study leaves the reader with a number of questions and curiosities. The sample is a fairly limited one that appertains to just first time mothers. It is not clear what is meant by ‘first time mothers’, could this include mothers who may have experienced a miscarriage previously? As this could potentially have an impact on the results of the study.

It is also not clear from the study sample what gender the children are who are being observed. As a result, there is the potential for gender anomalies in the sample presented. The research also appears to be predominantly limited to a white western perspective, as the sample is highly populated by caucasian women. This leads the reader to be curious as to whether this sample is a fair representation of the local demographic.

The research sample has the potential to be misleading as it does not appear to be diverse enough to represent the population and does not appear to be large enough to represent the population.

The research also fails to make clear the relationship status of the mothers being studied and whether the mothers are in a heterosexual relationship or homosexual relationship.

The criteria employed to measure class could be viewed as overly simplistic and heavily gender

biased, since the primary focus is on the mother's employment status and level of academic attainment. Nowhere in the sample is there mention of the father's employment status and level of academic attainment.

Methodology

The study was part of a longitudinal project that explored a variety of features of the early mother-infant attachment relationship. This specific study examined the correlation between a measure of maternal reflective functioning and the quality of the mother-infant affective communication. The affective communication was measured by the Atypical Maternal Behaviour Instrument for Assessment and Classification (AMBIANCE), which traced disrupted maternal behaviour throughout the course of the strange situation.

The study also utilised the Parent Development Interview (PDI; Aber et al.,1985) which is a partially structured interview that consists of 45 questions for the clinician to explore with the parent. The parent development interview was used in this study to measure maternal reflective functioning.

The advantage of using the parent development interview is that it has the potential to offer a standardised response, where all of the mothers are faced with the same questions and the interviewer is present so that they can clarify any questions to avoid misinterpretation. However, there is also a disadvantage to using the parent development interview as the interviewer can potentially affect the answers through the tone and intonation in their own voice and through non-verbal cues, such as body language. The consequence of this is that mothers could potentially change their answers to the questions because of social or cultural bias, as they may worry about being judged by the interviewer.

Results

The results of the study are highly suggestive of a close link between maternal reflective functioning and maternal behaviour. Mothers with the ability to be highly reflective show little disruption in affective communication whilst participating in the strange situation. Where there is significant reflective functioning there is the suggestion that it helps to support affect regulation at highly distressing times for the infant. The findings also suggest a significant link between disrupted affective communication and infant attachment. The results of this study reinforce a central premise of attachment theory, that being that the infant is dependent on its mother to respond to it in ways that contain the infant's internal experience.

As discussed earlier in this critique, it would be interesting to note whether such variables as: culture, gender or socioeconomic status would have an influence on the mother's reflective functioning. It would also be of immense benefit to explore the role of paternal reflective functioning on an infant's development, so that its influence can be measured and understood within the psychotherapy field.

References

1. Aber, J.,Slade, A., Berger, B., Bresgi, I., & Kaplan, M (1985). The Parent Development Interview. Unpublished protocol, The City University of New York

2. Ainsworth, M.D.S (1967) Infancy in Uganda: infant care and the growth of love. John Hopkins Press
3. Ainsworth et al (1971) Individual differences in strange situation behaviour of one-year olds in H.R. Schaffer (ed) The Origins of Human Social Relationships, London: Academic Press
4. Bowlby, J (1969) Attachment and Loss (OKS Print) New York: Basic Books
5. Hopkins, J. and Phillips, G (2009) in. The Handbook of child and adolescent psychotherapy. Psychoanalytic approaches. Lanyado, M and Horne, A., London: Routledge, pgs: 38-50
6. Grienenberger, J., Kelly. K.,& Slade, A., (2005) Maternal reflective functioning, mother-infant affective communication, and infant attachment: Exploring the link between mental states and observed caregiving behaviour in the intergenerational transmission of attachment. Attachment and Human Development, 7 (3): 299-311
7. Main, M. & Solomon, J (1986a) Discovery of an insecure disorganised-disoriented attachment pattern. In Affective Development in Infancy (Eds. T.B. Brazleton and M. W. Yogman). New York: Ablex
8. Main, M., Kaplan, N. & Cassidy, J. (1986b) Security in infancy, childhood and adulthood: a move to the level or representation. In growing Points of Attachment Theory and Research (Eds. J, Bretherton and E. Waters) Monograph 50 of the Society for Research in Child Development, pp. 66-104)
9. Slade, A. (2005) Parental reflective functioning: An introduction. Attachment and Human Development, 7 (3): 269-281