



Pergamon

CLINICAL
PSYCHOLOGY
REVIEW

Clinical Psychology Review 23 (2003) 35–56

The relevance of attachment theory to the philosophy, organization, and practice of adult mental health care

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Received 11 July 2001; received in revised form 7 March 2002; accepted 2 May 2002

Abstract

This review is an inquiry into the relevance of attachment theory to the current philosophy, organization, and practice of adult mental health care, via an examination of the literature relating to attachment theory and, in particular, the literature relating to research into adult attachment. The review does not seek to critique attachment theory itself, but considers carefully the relevance of the theory to adulthood and to the field of adult mental health. In so doing, research into individual difficulties is examined, as is the provision and delivery of therapeutic services. In addition, the literature regarding the importance of mental health staff's own attachments and the influence of attachment theory on mental health service philosophy and organization are evaluated. Finally, potential areas for future research and development in this field are suggested.

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Keywords: Attachment; Mental health

1. Introduction

Attachment theory was developed by psychiatrist and psychoanalyst John Bowlby during the 1950s and 1960s. Bowlby began to formulate the main outlines of the theory between 1958 and 1963, and the hugely influential *Attachment and Loss Volume 1: Attachment* was published in 1969. With the attachment theory, Bowlby sought to bring together psychoana-

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lytic concepts with those of ethology, to provide an explanation of the nature of the fundamental affectional bond linking one human being to another (Holmes, 1993).

The original focus of attachment theorists was the mother–child relationship, but in recent years, there has been a massive surge of both clinical and research interest in the field of adult attachment (that is, adult–adult relationships). The field of adult mental health has proved of immense interest to researchers exploring the causes and effects of insecure attachment relationships, in terms of individual mental health problems, the role and purpose of psychotherapeutic services, and—to a much lesser extent—the organization of mental health care services. This review explores the relevance of attachment theory to adulthood and to the field of adult mental health via a critical examination of the literature ranging from individual difficulties and the provision and delivery of therapeutic services, to the importance of mental health staff’s own attachments and the influence of attachment theory on mental health care philosophy and organization.

2. Attachment theory—a resumé

Attachment behavior is conceived as any form of behavior that results in a person attaining or retaining proximity to a differentiated and preferred individual (Bowlby, 1980). Put more simply, attachment behavior involves individuals trying to get close to a person or persons they feel most comfortable with. According to Bowlby (1980), attachment behavior has its own dynamic and is distinct from both feeding and sexual behavior and of at least an equal significance in human life. Thus, during the course of healthy development, attachment behavior leads to the development of affectional bonds (or attachments) between child and parent. In addition, Bowlby also proposed that attachment relationships were present and active throughout the life cycle, so that attachment bonds would later develop between adult and adult. A behavior complementary to attachment behavior, and serving a complementary function, is caregiving. This is usually shown by a parent towards a child, but may also be shown by one adult towards another (Bowlby, 1980). Attachment behavior is activated only under certain conditions, in children particularly conditions involving strangeness, tiredness, anything frightening, or unavailability or unresponsiveness of the attachment figure. In adults, attachment behavior is more commonly activated in times of illness, stress, or old age. Attachment behavior is assuaged by the proximity and responsiveness of attachment figures, their comfort, and caregiving (Bowlby, 1979).

Weiss (1991) suggests that relationships can only be defined as attachments if they display a number of key features, including elicitation of the behavior by threat, proximity-seeking, and use of attachments as a secure base from which to explore the world. The theory also asserts that it is through internal working models (developed via early social and parental experiences) that childhood patterns of attachment are carried through into adult life, influencing the quality of later personal relationships (Feeney & Noller, 1996; Holmes, 1993). Bowlby’s (1980) theory proposes that attachment behavior functions as a kind of homeostatic mechanism for modulating anxiety: increasing anxiety increases attachment behavior; thus, the goal of attachment behavior can be seen as helping the individual to modulate their anxiety

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