

Changing styles: breaking the habits of a lifetime

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Attachment theory sometimes seems to have more to say about diagnosis than it does about treatment planning. This workshop will focus on how we can change our attachment style or – in TA terms – revise those parts of our script concerned with our OKness and the role others play in supporting, validating, or undermining that. Managing our OKness as we come close to and break away from other people is an intensely practical skill. Because of this, theoretical insight is rarely sufficient to bring about change. Drawing on parallels with the development of more familiar practical skills – such as music and sport – the workshop will explore activities and exercises – both in the therapy room and out in the world – that can support a change of attachment style.

1

What I am going to do (and what I'm not)

- * I'm not going to give you a detailed lecture on nuances of attachment theory.
 - * But part of me thinks that *I should* and that if I don't then I'm cheating, a fraud, etc. - and so gets anxious.
- * I am going to a quick tour of some of the theory and then relate it to some bits of TA theory
- * **and** I am going to talk about how *talk of attachment* comes into the therapy room, how it can influence and shape both us and those who come to see us seeking help

2

What I am going to do (and what I'm not)

Two exercises

1. A discussion exercise about how different theoretical / diagnostic ideas can get to influence us.
2. A therapy technique exercise – I'll give you a structure to work with that is informed by the various ideas that I am presenting here.

3

Attachment theory: a quick review

- * John Bowlby - real world observation of separation, leading to theory...
- * Mary Ainsworth - "strange situation" paradigm... testing and developing theory
- * Mary Main - Adult Attachment Interview - refining theory further testing new hypotheses
- * Peter Fonagy - mentalization / meta-cognition or mind-mindedness

4

Attachment Theory: a quick review

Childhood Patterns

Avoidant

doesn't cry on separation from parent
ignores / avoids parent on re-union
appears unemotional
focuses on toys or environment

Ambivalent

wary even prior to separation
pre-occupied with parent (angry or passive)
fails to settle on re-union (and
does not return to exploration)

Secure

explores - misses parent when separated
active re-union - settles and returns to play

Disorganised

Three classic infant patterns - Mary
Ainsworth (Strange Situation)

Later supplemented by one extra
category - Mary Main

5

Adapted from page 49 of David Howe (2011) *Attachment Across the Lifecourse*.
Palgrave

Attachment Theory: a quick review

Childhood Patterns

Avoidant

self: unloved, but self-reliant
others: rejecting / intrusive

Ambivalent

self: low value, ineffective, dependent
others: insensitive, inconsistent,
unpredictable, unreliable

Secure

self: loved, effective, autonomous, competent
others: available, co-operative, dependable

Disorganised

self: unloved, alone, frightened
others: frightening, rejecting, unavailable

6

Adapted from page 49 of David Howe (2011) *Attachment Across the Lifecourse*.
Palgrave

Attachment Theory: a quick review

Adult Patterns - Adult Attachment Interview

Dismissing

Discounts value of attachment. Normalises parenting experience. Brief.

Preoccupied-entangled

Grandiose about value of attachment. Dramatises parenting experience. Long.

Secure-Autonomous

"Reality-checked" / "grounded" value on attachment. Can talk about parenting experience w/o discounting (either way). Story telling "makes sense" (coherent)

Unresolved-disorganised

Can get quite weird, e.g. get lost in the past.

7

Based on page 33 of David J. Wallin (2007) *Attachment in Psychotherapy*. Guilford I've added a TA gloss on some of the descriptions. I've not attempted to go into detail around the unresolved / disorganised category.

Attachment Theory: a quick review

Adult Patterns - Self-report measures

Dismissing-avoidant

Value autonomy; uncomfortable with intimacy. Self-reliant. Look for meaning outwith relationships.

Anxious-preoccupied

Crave close relationships. Autonomy and independence can make them feel anxious.

Secure

Fearful-avoidant

Fear both intimacy *and* abandonment.

8

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TA Script:

Core Script - self, other, world

Example - from Stewart & Joines

self unlovable - there is something wrong with me

other people (especially important women) reject me

world scary, lonesome, unpredictable

Early *decisions* that make sense of the world. And these decisions linked to a "plan" for getting through, e.g. "The best way to get my needs met is to act angry." ('racket' feeling)

9

It's out there

- * On the web, on TV, radio, magazines, newspapers, and books... talk of attachment swirls around us...
- * ... and makes it way into the therapy room:
 - * "I'm clearly an avoidant type. I tick all the boxes."
 - * "I'm worried my child won't get attached and it'll be all my fault."
 - * "My daughter will have heard the same radio programme and now she's going to know exactly how I caused her to have an insecure attachment style. I just wasn't responsive enough."

10

It's out there...

- * It's common to find what I hear as a "breezy" attitude to using the categories: "... if you look at the classic categories of attachment styles — secure; insecure anxious; insecure avoidant; and insecure disorganised — it's pretty easy to figure out which one applies to you and others in your life."

11

... and it comes into the room

- * What do we, as therapists, want to with attachment-style talk when it comes into the room?
- * When is such talk a useful "tool" that can assist the help-seeker and the practitioner?
- * When is such talk an oppressive "weapon" that can hamper the help-seeker and the practitioner?

12

Tools and Weapons

“every tool is a weapon - if you hold it right”

Ani DeFranco (and reaching me via therapist
and activist Vikki Reynolds
website: vikkireynolds.ca)

Question / illustration / provocation(?): are young people seeing the planet
fall apart and having no job / housing prospects:

- (a) depressed and anxious
- or
- (b) oppressed and annoyed

An idea to play with. “depression” and “anxiety” – useful tools – can be
“weaponised” (there’s nothing wrong with the world / society - you’re just
broken / unwell)

13

Exercise: Tool *and* Weapon

Recall - or generate from imagination - contexts where a given
concept / term that comes up in the therapy room can be used
as: (a) a tool and (b) a weapon. (Maybe try some of the terms below.)

depressed	avoidant attachment style
self-care	responsive (Winner’s triangle)
secure attachment style	kind
intimacy (TA sense)	assertive
grandiosity	self-compassion
aggressive	persecutor
scripty	insecurely attached
victim	perfectionist
discount	sad
on the spectrum	forceful

14

Thoughts

- * Attachment theory can present itself as “science” - the categories are systematically derived from observations and gain credence because they have a certain degree of “predictive power” (that holds up statistically).
- * TA theory tends to present itself as “something else” - the categories form a coherent story that helps us make sense of behaviour that is otherwise puzzling. (Maybe it’s “hermeneutics” rather than “science”.)
- * But attachment theory is often used in just the same (hermeneutic) way as script theory.
- * When a person seeking help claims “I’m insecurely attached. I’m totally avoidant” they are not reporting the results of an AAI or a Strange Situation experiment that took places many years ago.

15

Change

- * Attachment: earn sense of safety/calm by forming secure attachments as an adult that help you override your flawed internal working model.
- * I like the “earn” (found in a popular newspaper account of attachment on this occasion) as it nods towards the messy and non-decisional aspect of it.

16

Change

- * TA script: decontaminate Adult or re-decide the old script-decisions...
- * Often sounds great in theory. Much messier (in my experience) in the therapy room. TA may be committed to the decisional model. Personally, I'm committed to change possibility, but I think decisions can at best scaffold practical learning. I can't decide to play my piano piece correctly. I can only decide that I am going to practice diligently. I have to "earn" the competence to play the piece.

17

Change

- * Attachment: increase meta-cognition or "mentalizing"
- * TA script: decontaminate (cognitive); deconfuse (experiential); re-decide (mixture)

18

Interviewing Exercise

- * The approach here draws on narrative therapy ideas
- * Example – mum and the swimming pool
 - * “particular” language example:
“got-it-together me” and “little me”