**Attachment Theory and Transformative Learning:**

**Rethinking the Origins of Meaning Making**

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**Abstract**: This paper interprets Bowlby’s attachment theory as a way of understanding frames of reference, their beginnings in early infant experiences, their development throughout life and transformation over a lifespan. It emphasizes how psychology and society interact to construct and maintain meaning making. These ideas allow us discuss how to facilitate transformative learning, reinterpreted here as the transformation of attachment styles and internal working models. This lifelong learning project involves significant psychological development that influences one’s ability to forge and sustain relationships, engage in critical reflection and transformative learning.

**Key Words:** Attachment theory, attachment patterns, internal working models

Transformative learning involves changing frames of reference and there is a dearth of research tracing the origin of these frames. Attachment Theory provides an understanding of this process and leads to important insights about facilitating transformative learning.

**John Bowlby’s Attachment Theory**

Child psychiatrist John Bowlby (1907-1991) explored the nature of the child's ties to mother, the meaning of separation anxiety and the significance of grief for children outlined in his three volumes of *Attachment & Loss* (Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980). Mary Ainsworth (a Canadian at Johns Hopkins) researched the stress resulting from separation of child and mother, that she called ‘the strange situation’ (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters & Wall, 1978). Attachment builds on ethology, biology, social and developmental sciences, animal biology, genetics and evolutionary theory. Recent work by Levine and Heller (2011) at Columbia University has made attachment theory a popular source of insights and brings these ideas to the fore in theory, practice.

Bowlby saw separation from the primary carer (male or female) and social deprivation as detrimental to children’s development. Infants are biologically and through evolution ‘programmed’ to seek appropriate adult reactions so that their developmental needs are met (Bowlby, 1979). When left alone for even a short time children express distress in ways that make it normal and satisfying for adults to respond to that distress. Attachment behavior is ‘any form of behavior that results in a person attaining or retaining proximity to some other differentiated and preferred individual, who is usually conceived as stronger and/or wiser’ (Bowlby 1979, p. 129).

Bowlby observed that the child's attachment figure provides a secure base from which the infant can safely explore their environment and to which they can return if they experience stress or danger. This experience of attachment strongly influences subsequent and adult reactions to stress, relationships, one’s self-esteem, identity and meaning in life. For Bowlby, parenting involves providing appropriate responses to the child’s need for security (Bowlby, 1979).

**Secure and Insecure Attachments**

Attachment patterns can be secure or insecure. Children are securely attached(Bowlby, 1969) as a result of the carer being sensitive and responsive to the child’s need for security. Such a carer may be psychologically available to the child, emotionally expressive and flexible in dealing with babies. If significant others are generally warm, responsive, and consistently available, the child learns that others can be trusted when needed. Consequently, he or she is likely to explore the world confidently, initiate warm and sociable interactions with others and find solace knowing that the caregiver is available.

Insecure attachmentsare categorized as anxious, avoidant or disorganized and these defensive strategies are the child’s attempt to maintain contact with inconsistent or rejecting care. The anxious attachedchild is preoccupied with the carer and reluctant to explore even in their presence. The carer of an anxious attached child (Bowlby, 1969, 1973) is more likely to have given inconsistent responses, insensitive to the child’s sig­nals, have difficulties engaging in physical contact or show little sponta­neous affection. The avoidant attachedchild is usually unconcerned with either the presence or absence of the carer and does not express attachment needs in order to avoid rejection. The carer may exhibit low levels of response to the distress of the child who is encouraged to get on with life and not make too many demands on the carer who may be uncomfortable with close contact. Finally, the disorganizedattached child (Main & Solomon, 1986) is associated with consistently inadequate care, a parent who is seriously depressed or who even subjects the child to maltreatment.

**Strange Situation**

Ainsworth, et al. (1978) found that when a young child is left alone in a room or when a stranger approaches, the child may experience separation anxiety. This strange situationis her analytical tool for assessing attachment patterns. A secure child is likely to be upset when the carer leaves but seeks comfort from her when she returns. Insecure avoidant children on the other hand hardly notice the presence of their carer, show few overt signs of distress when the carer leaves and mostly ignores the carer when they return. The anxious child is often inconsolable when the carer leaves, and not easily paci­fied on their return.

**Internal Working Models**

Attachment operates by each child developing through introjection an internal representation of their experience of relationships, an internal working model(IWM). Like a map it represents the child’s perception of their relationships and guides future social interactions (Bowlby, 1969, 1973). The IWMs of a secure child see the world as a safe place and themselves as responsive, caring and reliable. An insecurely attached child is more likely to be cautious toward others and see themselves as less worthy of attention and love (Holmes, 1993). IWMs can be changed, but not easily (Bowlby, 1973). Parents’ relationships with their children are influenced by their own IWMs and are transmitted across generations (Bowlby, 1969). Though attachment patterns and IWMs may persist throughout life and have a powerful impact on behavior many other factors and experiences behavior and meaning making.

**Adult Attachment**

Attachment theory provides an increasingly influential conceptual frameworks for studying relationships across the lifespan (Cassidy & Shaver, 2008) and Bowlby believed that attachment is an important component of human experience ‘from the cradle to the grave’ (1979, p. 129). When attachment figures are reliably available when needed, are sensitive to one’s attachment needs, and willing and able to respond warmly to one’s bids for proximity and support, a person of any age feels more secure, is better able to explore physical and social environments and enjoy life’s challenges and opportunities. If one’s key attachment figures have not been reliably available and supportive, this sense of security may not be attained, doubts may persist about one’s lovability and others’ motives and intentions, and other less constructive affect-regulation strategies may emerge.

Attachment-related *avoidance* is rooted in a person’s distrust of their relationship partners’ goodwill, which causes one to maintain distance from others. Attachment-related *anxiety* is based on self-doubt and worries that relationship partners may not be available when needed. People with securely attached patterns may hold more positive beliefs about self and others, use more effective affect-regulation strategies and enjoy higher levels of psychological well-being (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2013). Secure individuals generally appraise stressful events in less threatening terms, have more optimistic expectations about being able to cope effectively and report higher self-esteem (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2013). It is also likely to be associated with having a sense of meaning in life (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2013).

Attachment insecurities can interfere with meaning-making systems, the formation of a stable and positive self-identity, and the adoption of an encouraging, sustaining philosophy. Goleman’s (2006) popular work on *Social Intelligence* acknowledges the importance of a secure base for human relationships. Adults with secure attachments are better able to cope with new experiences, new ideas and accept supports offered. Insecure anxious adults tend to be preoccupied with the anxiety triggered by new experi­ences and are more likely to be disoriented and unable to avail of support from colleagues or teachers. Anxious attached adults (students) are likely to worry and tend to be unable to turn off the worry (Goleman, 2006). The role of the teacher of adults becomes one of building safe spaces in which anxiety is addressed and a secure base created (Feeney & Noller, 1996). Whether learners are secure or insecure, this impacts on their feelings, atti­tudes, behavior and how they react in a learning environment.

Secure attachment patterns facilitate optimal motivation for achieving one’s goals because it enables one to view achievements positively and focus on effective ways of reaching goals (Eliot and Reis, 2003). Anxious attachments undermine motivation because they lead to viewing tasks less positively (Eliot and Reis, 2003). This adds a new dimension to our understanding of adult motivation to learn and we begin to understand the insecurities and feelings of adults whose stress levels are effected by strange situations. Thoughts, memories, what we consider important and how we make sense of events, are influenced by these patterns.

Strange situations bring to the fore attach­ment patterns and this is also experienced in learning situations. Teachers have been described as initiating wonder (Aristotle), cre­ating perplexity (Dewey) or making the familiar strange (Greene, 1995). Transformative learning (and much of adult education) provide ‘strange situations’ that bring to the fore attachment patterns. It can happen when adults join a course for the first time or later when new ideas are explored. These ideas of Bowlby prompt us to see that new ideas, new perspectives, new learning can have a disorienting impact, even if the student has navigated their way into the classroom. Learners react to strange situations in ways consistent with their IWMs – echoes of Greene’s *Teacher as Stranger* (1995).

**Transformative Learning**

Transformative learning involves becoming aware of the ways in which unquestioned assumptions, that act as taken-for-granted beliefs, attitudes and values, constrain and distort how we make sense of the world. It involves the search for, testing and adoption of new more adequate assumptions as guides to action. The unquestioned assumptions, that act as frames of reference, have two dimensions. One involves habits of expectation that serve as filters or codes that shape, constrain or distort meaning making. The other involves points of view (meaning schemes) or individual beliefs, judgments or attitudes (Mezirow, 2007). Attachment patterns and IWMs are examples of psychological filters or codes that continue to influence ways of feeling and acting in adulthood. Attachment patterns and internal working models, originating in childhood, are frames of reference as understood by Mezirow.

Transformation theory understands learning as a reorganization of experience in which we relate experience to previous experiences and use this to make decisions about how to act. By perceiving experience as having a recognizable pattern we can learn. The process of growing up is at least partly the process of developing organizations of meanings. The activity of adult learning involves the process of changing these organizations of meaning. But transformative learning theory adds a critical dimension by emphasizing how these organizations of meaning are transformed by critical reflection on taken for granted assumptions.

One’s attachment patterns and IWMs are psychological dimensions of meaning schemes and it is these meaning schemes or frames of reference that in this example of transformative learning get transformed. The IWMs are exactly what Mezirow means by psychological filters or codes ‘that shape and delimit and often distort our experience’ (Mezirow, 2007, p. 11). We can associate the process of transforma­tion with the development of new IWMs and attachment patterns. It is consistent with attachment theory and transformation theory to see the creation of perplexity as a prompt for trans­formative learning. In addition, we come to understand how a changed IWM may be an improvement on a previous one if it is ‘more inclusive, differentiating, more open to alternative perspectives and more integrative of experience’ (Mezirow, 2007, p. 11). Research indicates that it is at least a possibility that development and growth and transformations are best supported by more secure attachment patterns.

In transformative learning attachment patterns and IWMs may be transformed. According to Mezirow, the process of transforming a frame of reference commences with a disorienting dilemma and concludes with a reintegration into community with a new set of assumptions. This is suggestive of a process of altering or transform­ing one’s attachment patterns and IWMs. The strange situation is reminiscent of Mezirow’s disorienting dilemma. n. As Dewey pointed out thinking begins with a nagging sense that something is problematic, something is unsettled (Noddings, 2007). Each has in common an expe­rience that what was taken for granted or assumed does not hold anymore. In the case of the adult engaged in transformative learning it might be the apprehension felt by the arrival at new learning situations or exploration of new ideas. The strange situation has the added importance for transformation theory that it allows us identify the experience of disorientation as a sense that things do not fit any more, previously taken for granted meanings do not hold. The profound sense of loss implied in that experience may bring to the fore one’s own attachment patterns. If a learner is secure, they are more likely to react with less anxiety and a decreased possibility of avoiding issues and situations.

Attachment patterns influence ways of relating to others and I am suggesting here that a significant kind of adult learning involves the developmental task of moving toward more secure attachments. Human development is being redefined here as the transformation of attachment patterns and IWMs. Bowlby (1973, 1988) envisaged attachment as a lifelong project!

This study of Bowlby’s attachment theory allows us understand more thor­oughly how society and culture, in constructing child-rearing practices, have a profound impact not only on children but on the entire learning life of the individual. Attachment theory provides us with a lifelong learning project that brings together deep psychological patterns as well as the reproduction of soci­ety. These ideas allow us take on board, in a way reminiscent of Erich Fromm, how the individual and society are inextricably connected. It contributes a positive response to the debate as to whether Mezirow has an adequate social dimension. Marris (1991, pp. 79-80) understands this;

The experience of attachment is the first crucial link between sociological and psychological understanding: the experience of attachment, which so profoundly influences the growth of personality, is itself the product of a culture, and a determinant of how that culture will be reproduced in the next generation – not only the culture of attachment itself but all our ideas of order, authority and control.

Generally speaking, at the core of a critical adult learning theory we imagine and theorize about how the culture and societies in which we live and with which we interact, influence the ways in which people relate to each other. In today’s political climate this is reminiscent of Hannah Arendt’s assertion: ‘Thought itself…arises out of the actuality of incidents, and incidents of lived experience must remain its guideposts by which thinking soars…’ (Bernstein, 2018, p. 9). Adult learning in general (not just TL) may be enhanced or distorted by secure or insecure attachment pattern and internal working models.

**Mind-mindedness**

Recent research has developed the important concept of mind-mindednessto describe the ability of a parent to understand and respond to an infant’s feelings and thoughts (Meins, Ferynhough, Wainwright, Gupta, Fradley & Tuckey, 2002). Carers’ ‘proclivity to com­ment appropriately on their infants’ mental states and processes’ is related in the research to secure attachments (Meins, et al., 2001, p. 637). Mind-mindedness is an indicator of a relationship that is more likely to produce secure attachments and helps reframe Bowlby’s concept of ‘maternal sensitivity’ that involves the carer being ‘willing to change her [sic] focus of attention in response to cues from the infant’ (Meins et al., 2001, p. 638).

Paying attention to the learner as having a mind and feelings is not new to adult education and is also already a precondition for Communicative Action (Habermas) that is so influential in transformative learning. Insights from attachment theory give a solid and additional grounding for attending to students in this way. Mind-mindedness is developmental. Maxine Greene described teaching as ‘becoming a friend of someone else's mind’ (Rothman, 2007). Mind-mindedness is a useful way of supporting adults in the process of learning and supporting the move toward secure attachment patterns.

**Critique**

Neither the work of Bowlby nor Ainsworth was readily accepted by developmental psychologists and one of the main criticisms concerns the idea that infant experiences seem to determine adult behaviour. Research confirms that there is considerable scope for later change in attachment patterns but also points to the strong link between children and adults attachment across the lifespan. The word ‘determine’ is not optimal but early experiences do make a unique contribution to adulthood – this is also a perrenial insight of psychoanalysis.

Attachment theory is based to some extent on observations of animal behavior and this leads many, including feminists, to object to Bowlby using biology and ethology to justify what is essentially a cultural product of our own ‘patriarchal but father-absent’ society (Holmes, 1993, p. 47). They claim that this division of labor fits modern society, leaving men free and women fettered.

The age old question about whether nature or nurture has the priority appears to be raised by Bowlby in ways that prioritize nature. Bowlby’s theory actually reconstructs this relationship not as nature versus nurture but as both nature and nurture in a dialectical relationship. It is how nature and nurture (biology and culture) interact this is key.

**Conclusion**

Those moments in which parents recognize the child’s need for security and reacts appropriately is a moment of recognition – the parent recognizes the internal experience and mind of the child. This is the same moment identified by Axel Honneth as a foundational event in the struggle for recognition. These moments and experiences are preconditions for developing satisfying interpersonal relationships, an identity, the ability to engage in critical reflection and be a become a participant in democracy. If, as Dewey said, democracy is a form of associated living then the security of our attachments are foundational, critical and essential. Critical reflection in transformative learning assumes recognition as foundational. The family is the first institution of recognition (Marcelo, 2013, p. 211) and on this rests the works of Freire and Mezirow and Habermas and Honneth. Of course these are contested ideas and concepts and are not immune to further development. But the transformation of IWMs and attachment patterns remains an important interpretation of transformative learning and an answer to these questions: what gets transformed in transformative learning? How are these frames of reference formed in the first instance?

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