Section VII
Attachment Theories

Fonagy (2001) stated, “Attachment theory is almost unique among psychoanalytic theories in bridging the gap between general psychology and clinical psychodynamic theory.” (p. 5). Attachment theories are firmly embedded in a positivist perspective and are paradigmatic of developmental theories that utilize the organismic metaphor. They are rooted in the work of ethologists who studied animals’ attachment patterns. As with all evolutionary theories, the fundamental assumption is that human beings, like every other organism, have evolved and survived because of their abilities to adapt to their environments.

Attachment theory has brought to focus the significance of biological, neuropsychological, cognitive, and social factors in children’s development. In so doing, it advanced our understanding of development in major ways. Unfortunately, prominent psychoanalysts of his day accused Bowlby of having weakened the intrapsychic perspective that is central to psychoanalytic theory, a shift that led to his banishment from the psychoanalytic community and to the dismissal of his contributions for most of his life. Some critics considered attachment theory to be a theory of the pathological effects of separation, rather than a theory of normal development. Others saw the problem as residing in what they interpreted as his behavioral perspective. In spite of this opposition, a large psychoanalytic literature emerged around the topics of loss, bereavement, and death (Kubler-Ross, 1969; Palombo, 1981).

In time, psychoanalytic theorists could no longer ignore the significance of the data collected by researchers and began to integrate those finding into their theories. In particular, they sought to explore the implications for children’s development, for some of the disorders children display, and for their value to clinical practice. However, so far, these integrative efforts may best be described as attempts to graft a robust set of data onto an existing mature theoretical framework. The success of the incorporation of attachment theory into the broader psychoanalytic paradigm has varied depending on clinicians’ applications of the theory to their settings. Those who work with mother/infant dyads report major breakthroughs, as do those who work with patients who have suffered significant deprivations and abuse early in their lives. The reports from clinicians who see adults who are less disturbed indicate that the straightforward application of attachment theory takes too simplistic a view of those patients’ complex dynamics.
We consider two variants of attachment theory. In Part 1, we present the first variant, which we call traditional attachment theories. Here we summarize Bowlby’s, Ainsworth’s, and Main’s contributions. Bowlby’s evolutionary perspective took the form of finding a linkage between the psychoanalytic construct of mental representation and the concept of Internal Working Model. Ainsworth enlarged the theory by identifying three major patterns of attachment, the securely attached, the anxious/avoidant, and the anxious/resistant. Her work laid the groundwork for follow up research by developmental psychologists, who found ample confirmation of her findings. Main contributed further to the classification of patterns of attachment with the identification of a fourth category, disorganized/disoriented. She also developed an instrument that identified the intergenerational transmission of attachment patterns.

In Part 2, we discuss the second variant as elaborated by Allen Schore and Peter Fonagy, which we call neurodevelopmental attachment theories: the return to psychoanalysis. Each of those two contributors took a different path to integrate attachment theory with psychoanalysis. Schore chose the path he calls a psychoneurobiological point of view. He presents a hybrid that grafts not only attachment theory but also the findings of the neurosciences onto a coalesced version of psychoanalytic metapsychology that includes elements of drive theory, ego psychology, object relations theory, and self psychology. He makes a signal contribution in the application of this model to our understanding of the effects of child maltreatment on the type of attachment these children develop. On the other hand, Fonagy’s unique contribution was to introduce the concept of “mentalization” to bridge attachment theory, the construct of Theory of Mind, and psychoanalytic theory. He also brought a rapprochement between psychoanalytic theory and the neuroscience with his concept of Interpersonal Interpretive Mechanism.

Other psychoanalysts have contributed significantly to attachment theory; however, their contributions did not add to the expansion of a developmental theory as such but extended the concepts of mental representation and proposed psychotherapeutic approaches to the treatment of attachment disorders (Lyons-Ruth, 1998; Zeanah & Anders, 1987). Some of these psychoanalytic investigators attempted to address the relationship between the Internal Working Models construct and those of self-representations and object-representations. These efforts were directed at bridging the gap between attachment theory and psychoanalytic object relations theory.

References

Part 1

Traditional Attachment Theories