Critically discuss how attachment theory can help us understand human relationships

Earlier this year (February 2007), UNICEF published a report titled *"An Overview of child well-being in rich countries"*. The quality of childhood in a select group of countries[1] was assessed by a number of criteria; in many cases the UK was found to be lagging behind the other countries in Europe, especially in the following: **a**) young people's relationships with family and peers, **b**) behaviours and risk-taking of young people and, perhaps more importantly **c**) their subjective well-being[2]. Though such findings should always be taken with the proverbial 'pinch of salt', this report caused large outcry among the British press (and hence, the public) followed by extensive, collective soul-searching. As elections loom closer, issues relating to the state of society, anti-social behaviour and the importance of family in preventing it are being used as banners and weapons by high-profile politicians (Gordon Brown and David Cameron being the worst offenders), wielded in their battle for Blair's succession. In the conclusion of the report, it states that:

> "...[the public] is becoming ever more aware that many of the corrosive social problems affecting the quality of life have their genesis in childhood. Many therefore feel that *it is time to attempt to re-gain a degree of understanding, control and direction over what is happening to our children in their most vital, vulnerable years.*" [UNICEF, *Child poverty in perspective: An overview of child well-being in rich countries.* Innocenti Report Card 7, 2007, UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, Florence, p 39]

Attachment theory, particularly as postulated by John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth, sought precisely to address the statement I have highlighted in italics above – the attempt to comprehend the effects that our earliest relationships have throughout our development, draw attention to their importance, and by this understanding be able to offer direction to people involved in the care of infants.

In order to 'understand' relationships we need to break them down into some key questions:

a) *Who* we form attachments to,
b) *Why*, and
c) *How to define* what makes a good (and hence a bad) relationship?

This essay will discuss how Attachment theory addresses these questions, and whether those answers are still relevant in today's society – after all, how can we form healthy, social attachments without the secure base provided by healthy attachments with our significant others?

Bowlby had trained as a psychoanalyst[3], yet disagreed with the two main rival schools

1 Actually the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development) countries – most EU countries along with other important industrialised nations such as Australia, Japan, the US and Turkey.
2 Fig 4.0 (p 22), Fig 5.0 (p 26) and Fig 6.0 (p 34) respectively [UNICEF, Child poverty in perspective: An overview of child well-being in rich countries. Innocenti Report Card 7, 2007, UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, Florence]
3 He was trained by Melanie Klein herself.

within Psychoanalysis at the time: the classical approach, championed by Anna Freud, and Object relations as postulated by Melanie Klein. Both Freud and Klein saw mother-infant attachment as being subordinate to the libido - a means for an infant to satisfy its desires, in the form of food and as a focus for 'good breast' and 'bad breast' phantasies. Bowlby thought that both Freud and Klein missed the point: that attachment existed as an innate, biological drive *per se*, motivated by love and the presence of the mother. He found in Ethology[4] validation for his claim that attachment existed irrespective of other needs. Essentially Bowlby believed in a biological reason for attachment – the infant needs its mother for protection from *external* threats.

The answer to our first question, *who* we form significant attachments with was in Bowlby's work: the mother. He initially focused on maternal deprivation, as in the film '*A two-year-old goes to hospital: a scientific film*' [Bowlby with J Robertson, 1952] which shows the distress and protest of a child when separated from its parents upon being left in hospital. For Bowlby periods of long separation from the mother - and in its most extreme manifestation, complete loss by death or divorce - had a bearing on the attachment patterns, and hence the behaviour of the child in later life[5]. For Bowlby, loss and bereavement were powerful challenges to our attachment patterns, and the way it was handled was of vital importance for the integrity of our attachment patterns.

Bowlby's assumption of monotropism – that is to say that children will form a significant attachment with a single figure – has been a source of great criticism, both from feminists who saw his assumption of the mother as the only attachment figure as a consequence of ethnocentrism, and analysts who developed Bowlby's work; our choice of attachment figures has been found in fact to be more accurately portrayed as a hierarchy of attachments, where the mother is usually (but not always) at the top. In our early years we are tended to by a great number of people: our (too often disregarded in psychological models) father, grandparents, older siblings, and the list goes on.

The answer to *why* we seek out attachments can be found in two central ideas of the theory: seeking proximity to a preferred figure, and the 'secure base' effect. Children follow their mummies; animals do the same – think of a flock of ducklings swimming in a straight line after the mother. The degree of proximity we need changes with age, emotional and physical state, and so on.

The term 'secure base' was first used by Mary Ainsworth (1982) to describe the comfortable setting provided for an infant by their attachment figure of choice. Knowing that we have a source of comfort when things go wrong ('mummy will come to me if I hurt myself') we feel more confident in exploring our surroundings – taking great care not to stray further than we feel comfortable from our mother – the so-called 'comfort zone' becomes very real when considering the secure base. When separation from our primary caregiver occurs (either real or threatened), attachment behaviours kick in: what Bowlby saw as an innate propensity to react strongly (in some cases violently) by the means at our disposal as children: screaming, kicking and crying. Even as adults we never outgrow our need for attachment: the phrase 'when I'm ill I always feel like calling my mum' has almost become a cliché.

4 The scientific study of behaviour in animals – [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ethology]. Bowlby was particularly interested in the work of two ethologists: Lorenz (1952) observed attachment irrespective of feeding in geese and their young; Harlow (1958) found in rhesus monkeys feeding without attachment. [J Holmes, *John Bowlby & Attachment Theory*, 1993, p 64].

5 In his study 'Forty-four juvenile thieves: their characters and home life' Bowlby found that only two out of fourteen 'affectionless psychopaths' had **not** had prolonged periods of separation from their mother in childhood! [J Holmes, *John Bowlby & Attachment Theory*, 1993, p 39]

Finally, this brings us to what Bowlby, and later Ainsworth, said defines a good working model of relationships, or 'attachment pattern'. Bowlby distinguished between secure attachment and anxious attachment – it was implicit in his use of the word 'anxious' that later psychological troubles (i.e. anxiety) could be traced back to our earliest attachments. Secure attachment is 'healthy' attachment – such individuals cope well with loss and separation, and have a secure enough base from which to explore. Ainsworth developed the 'Strange situation' test[6], which yielded further subdivisions of anxious, or insecure attachment: *avoidant* children, who as the term implies avoid intimacy and closeness, and consider themselves unworthy of it; *ambivalent* children, who are highly dependent on an unreliable (and potentially abusive) attachment figure; and *disorganised* children - a group which was identified later - who exhibit erratic and confused behaviour, and have been identified as a group which can develop serious personality disorders in later life – perhaps equivalent to Bowlby's 'affectionless psychopaths' (see footnote 6).

Having considered the way Attachment addresses our key questions, we can turn our attention to the central question: are these appropriate answers for the questions that society is asking itself at present? The strength of the theory has been vindicated by many studies, which have found that it has great power as a predictive model of how we will repeat our patterns of attachment, and eventually pass these on to our children[7]. Furthermore, the work of later analysts has shifted the focus of attachment on quality, rather than quantity; in other words, continuous contact with a single figure is not a requisite for secure attachment.[8] Other qualitative measures such as *attunement* between mother (or caregiver) and child, and *attentiveness* have been highlighted.

As mentioned in the introduction, the importance of family for a healthy society has been elevated to a high profile. In many articles on the subject[9] there is much mention of the family as an institution; politicians seem to agree that the lack of proper family structures, and breakdown of families is what is leading to an antisocial society. Single-parent families are seen as symptomatic of a society where 'breakdown of the family has brought about a degradation in social fabric'[10], and hence they are easy to blame for social ills. There is much talk of supporting traditional families; however, there is precious little talk of helping those families that go through breakdown to continue to provide *qualitative* care for their children and hence a 'secure base' – the focus seems to be more on *quantity* (i.e. 2), of parents, rather than the actual *quality* of parent-child relationships.

The state of present-day society (at least in its portrayal by the mainstream media) appears in stark contrast with Bowlby's (naïve?) expectation that

> "[it should]... in two or three generations, be possible to enable all boys and girls to grow up to become men and women who, given health and security, are capable of providing a stable and happy life for their children" (Bowlby 1952)

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6 Conducted during a structured session where mother and child are separated and re-united, and the child's behaviour in both cases is observed.

7 Many studies have found a high correlation (as much as 80%) between attachment patterns in children and the experiences of parents' own attachments, as determined by the Adult Attachment Interview. [J Holmes, *John Bowlby & Attachment Theory*, 1993, p 114]

8 [Jeremy Holmes, *Attachment Theory: A secure base for policy?,* from *The Politics of Attachment: Towards a secure society,* p31]

9 [http://www.politics.co.uk/issueoftheday/domestic-policy/children/child-poverty/ids-poverty-report-does-not-look-past-$460680$460657.htm]

10 The proportion of single mothers is one of the factors considered in UNICEF's report *An overview of child well-being in rich countries*.

Much work is needed in order to remove the stigma attached to 'bad parenting'; a mature, informed debate is required, rather than demonising 'moms from hell' raising hell-raisers. The information about how one's own experiences may affect parenting must be made readily available. A redefinition of the prevailing notion of the 'perfect father' and 'perfect mother' is needed – who can realistically pursue a career, be socially responsible and provide for their child's every need while at the same time being loving, caring and a good example? Perhaps a more appropriate concept of 'good enough'[11] parenting is needed, rather than an unreachable, idealised standard.

In light of so much focus being placed on family, community and global attachments, one can't help but hope that, much as in Bowlby's post-war era, the biological drive to attach for survival is re-awakening when faced with the misery which is present in so many parts of our world.

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11 As supported by Winnicott (1958), perhaps in response to Bowlby's own idealised perspective on family life. [Jeremy Holmes, *Attachment Theory: A secure base for policy?,* from *The Politics of Attachment: Towards a secure society,* p 31]