Attachment Theory Of John Bowlby And Harry Harlow

Attachment Theory of John Bowlby and Harry Harlow “Attachment is a special emotional relationship that involves an exchange of comfort, care, and pleasure.” There are a few theories out there, dealing with attachment in human beings. But two in particular stand out. One theory is called the theory of attachment as an innate process; a theory made by John Bowlby. Another theory, made by Harry Harlow, is called the theory of attachment as “contact comfort”.

John Bowlby, considered the father of the attachment theory, did extensive research in this area. He came up with this concept of this attachment after testing the relation between children in hospitals and their mothers. Bowlby explained this attachment of child to caregiver as a “lasting psychological connectedness between human beings.” He also said that early childhood experiences of attachment greatly influence the development and behavior later in life. Bowlby’s (1951) main part of the theory was that the mother-child attachment has an evolutionary basis, an innate process that helped the child’s survival by increasing mother-child proximity or closeness, especially when the child is fearful, or stressful, such as in the case of child meeting stranger. Bowlby explained the theory of attachment in four characteristics. The first is proximity maintenance, which is the desire to be near the people we are attached to; the caregiver. The next characteristic is returning to the attachment figure for comfort and safety (safe haven) in the face of fear or threat. Another characteristic is that the child takes the attachment figure, or the caregiver, as a secure base from which the child can explore the surrounding environment. The fourth and final characteristic is called separation distress, where anxiety occurs in the absence of the attachment figure. These four characteristics were part of his theory of attachment as an innate process. This attachment he believed was “The propensity to make strong emotional bonds to particular individuals [is] a basic component of human nature.”

Then came Harry Harlow, with his theory of attachment as “contact comfort.” Harlow was most famous for his wire-mother experiment (Harlow, 1958). Through this experiment he “revealed the importance of a mother’s love for healthy childhood development.” Taking just born rhesus monkeys away from their mother’s to a lab surrogate mothers, the monkeys were observed to see which surrogate they would pick, the wire monkey with a feeding bottle (providing nutrition) or the soft terry cloth mother (physical contact). In the end the monkeys chose the terry cloth mother as their secure mother even though extending them selves to reach for the milk bottle of wire mother. “These data make it obvious that contact comfort is a variable of overwhelming importance in the development of affectional response, whereas lactation is a variable of negligible importance” (Harlow 1958). This disproved existing theories of love
which focused on the idea that “the earliest attachment between a mother and child was merely a means for the child to obtain food, relieve thirst, and avoid pain” (Van Wagner, 2009).

Both Harlow and Bowlby have theories of their own about attachment, and consequently they support each other. Both reject the traditional view that affection and mother-infant attachment is based merely on food and the infant’s hunger drive (van der Horst & van der Veer, 2008). Harlow’s conclusion of the rhesus monkeys and their attachment to the terry cloth mother (representing as their monkey mother counterparts) rather than nourishment (wire mother) support this rejection. Both theories also conclude that early types of attachment affect relationship and life later on. “Attachment can be defined as the strong bond that develops first between parent and child, and later in peer and romantic relationships,” said the great Bowlby (1969). A later experiment of Harlow supports this development. Harlow created a strange situation setting where the monkeys used the surrogate mother as their secure base (caregiver). But when the mother left for a period of time, they no longer had a secure base and so “would often freeze up, crouch, rock, scream, and cry” The reason for this violent act could be explained because of a non-responsive mother. “Harlow’s experiments offered irrefutable proof that love is vital for normal childhood development. Additional experiments by Harlow revealed the long-term devastation caused by deprivation, leading to profound psychological and emotional distress and even death” (van der Horst & van der Veer, 2008). The relationships between mother and infant and their later affects can be supported by Mary Ainsworth’s Strange Situation. Ainsworth had four steps following Bowlby’s four characteristics of attachment. The infant would be in a room would be in a room with their caregiver/attachment-figure and would be let to explore, then a stranger would walk in, then the caregiver would leave for a period of time, and finally the attachment-figure would return. At each of the four stages, Ainsworth observed the infants actions and reactions and concluded the following. There were four types of attachment. A normal secure attachment would be able to separate from caregivers without too much distress; will seek comfort of parent when frightened; will show positive emotions with return of caregivers; and prefer caregivers over strangers. Ambivalent attachment consists of an infant who is distressed, clinging, and over-dependent. Avoidant attachment has infants who show no preference between strangers or caregivers, and doesn’t really care for contact or attention either. And finally the fourth and last attachment called the disorganized attachment consists of a child who is confused because their caregiver is a symbol of fear and comfort. All these different insecure attachments have great negative impact later on in the infants’ lives including forming insecure relationships, taking a parental role over the caregivers, not
being able to share thoughts and feelings, etc.

Overall, it can be said that although the theory of Harlow and the theory of Bowlby focuses on two different aspects of attachment, in the end the theories support each other. While Harlow focuses on attachment as “contact comfort” while Bowlby focuses his theory on attachment as an innate process. In the end both theories agree with each other, supporting the fact that animals and humans are born with a pre-disposition to form an attachment that deals with more than relieving the child of hunger.

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