

# Supervision and Adult Attachment

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Although supervision is now a statutory requirement in English settings (DoE, 2012), the hegemony of the ideal of motherhood as an 'obvious' template for professional relationships means that, in contrast to counselling and social work, such relationships are naturalised to such an extent in terms of the mother-child dyad that the need for supervision itself may be questioned. Ideological support for this ideal was provided in the twentieth century by the attachment theory of John Bowlby (e.g. 1979) and the notion of the mother as the 'secure base'. Within a maternal ideology, the adult-child relationship is idealised as primarily intuitive, despite increasing research (e.g. Meins, 1997) which bases differences in caregiving on *cognitive* insights into children's motivations rather than on strength of emotional connection. As an intuitive, instinctive kind of emotional labour, it is ripe for exploitation (Taggart, 2011). The power dynamic of this relationship is also ignored: caring is something which adults 'do' to passive children rather than something which is inscribed in all relationships including those between adults and between children themselves. An alternative view would be to see settings as 'fora' rather than as substitute homes, encouraging an intensity of inspiring, creative relationships in the style cultivated in Reggio Emilia (Dahlberg et al, 2008).

Yet Bowlby's insights into the emotional nature of attachment relationships cannot be dismissed so easily. Despite increasing evidence of the importance of secure attachment for brain development (Gerhardt, 2004), a recent meta-analysis of over 40 studies (i.e. involving almost 3000 children) showed that children with an average of age of two and a half were less likely to be securely attached to non-parental caregivers if the care was outside the home (Ahnert et al, 2006). It is therefore fortunate that the discourse of care persists, albeit within an entangled web of cultural assumptions. Lilian Katz (1981) famously tried to separate the roles of mother and teacher but succeeded only by removing the rationality from the former and the passion from the latter, that is by creating images of 'ditsy mothers and mechanical teachers' (Goldstein, 1997: 26) Supervision offers the 21<sup>st</sup> century practitioner a safe context in which such binaries can be challenged. In other words, received ideas about '*natural*' care can be questioned whilst the emotional vocabulary surrounding a *professional* disposition to care, based on developments in attachment theory, can be articulated and explored.

The value of Bowlby's ideas for research into adult relationships lies in his insight in the way in which early experiences establish 'internal working models' of the self and world which, whilst not inflexible, can often go on to influence the personality and life choices of the developing adult. The internal working model of the typically avoidant child positions the self as unlovable but agentic ('I can cope on my own: you can't rely on others'). That of the ambivalent child emphasises his or her ongoing dependence, neediness and lack of self-worth.

Over the last thirty years, an emerging literature has sought to apply Bowlby's insights to aspects of adult life, ranging from romantic partnerships to parenting and work. 'Attachment styles' are elicited either through an interview or self-report. The picture which emerges reveals the continuing influence of attachment effects in childhood. Adults with an avoidant pattern tend to falsify their feelings, perhaps appearing more positively cheerful than is actually the case, knowing that positive emotion and a self-reliant demeanour are more likely to be well-received. Because containment and achievement are highly valued, such adults can become perfectionist and workaholic (Mayseless, 1996). In romantic relationships, they can be reluctant to appear vulnerable and are dismissive of vulnerability or distress, such as when a partner is ill (Scharf et al, 2004. Although scoring low on

extroversion (because of the emphasis on emotional containment), avoidant adults may present themselves in a grandiose and inflated manner (Shaver and Mikulincer, 2004). When they become parents, the expectations placed upon them that they will be sensitive and responsive provoke unusual stress (Rholes et al, 2006) and the usual solution is to adopt a style that is either authoritarian or managerial since this kind of emotional defence helps to make caregiving manageable (Simpson et al, 1996; George and Solomon, 2008; De Oliveira et al, 2005)).

In the typical case, such avoidance will reduce the individual's capacity for compassion, not only as it affects personal relationships but in reducing community or voluntary participation. On one hand, therefore, it may be unlikely that individuals with this pattern may choose to work with young children. On the other, avoidant adults may gain a significant amount of personal validation from their ability to control, predict and regulate the routines of those who are especially vulnerable (i.e. young children): this is one of the features of a phenomenon known as 'pathological altruism' (Oakley et al, 2012). If practitioners with this pattern exist, they are therefore more likely to occupy managerial positions, perhaps preferring it to the messiness of 'being with the children':

*'Defensive precocious caregivers in childhood can become compulsive adult caregivers who can be highly effective and can feel rightly confident in this capacity, but only if careseekers respond to the kind of care the compulsive caregiver finds it necessary to give.'* (Heard and Lake, 2009: 177)

For adults with ambivalent attachments, pre-occupation with relationship extends into the workplace and their interest in love, care and support makes them ideal candidates for caring professions. Yet the realm of the personal is constantly in danger of overtaking the professional. Pre-occupied adults have a high tendency to self-disclosure and towards dramatizing relationships: friends and colleagues are referred to in extreme emotional terms and may receive extravagant gifts or displays of loyalty (Bauminger et al, 2009; Feeney, 2004; Collins et al, 2004). Yet when these people develop their own interests or separate relationships (for example with workers in a different team or organisation), this can be experienced as abandonment. Relationships with children are similarly sentimental. For such adults, children represent the possibility of full emotional availability: 'babies...hold out the longed for prospect of a relationship with someone who can be loved and who will return love without the fear of abandonment' (Howe, 2011: 145). Whilst mum talking about her feelings would help children to regulate their own, she nevertheless tends to 'act out' impulsive responses in a spontaneous, inconsistent way, showering them with affection and gifts one day and wearily dismissing them the next. Such irritation is particularly likely to emerge when babies or young children begin to play and explore their immediate environment with the mother's intervention: burgeoning independence returns the adult to a sense of her own loneliness and poor self-worth. The existence of early years practitioners with unfulfilled emotional needs would suggest the involvement of the pre-occupied style of attachment in this behaviour. For example, in her research, Osgood (2012: 76) concludes that, for some of her interviewees, 'becoming part of ECEC services was constructed as a form of cathartic reconciliation for the perceived shortcomings of their own childhoods.' This observation is reinforced by research suggesting that such an ambivalent style is found significantly more often amongst adults with backgrounds typified by disadvantage and low educational achievement, the very adults who often see working in a nursery as a passage to acceptance and 'respectability' (Skeggs, 1997; Colley, 2006; Vincent and Braun, 2010).

In order to explore the application of adult attachment theory to early years practice, we sought out two contrasting case studies of practitioners. We were interested in the extent to which those with experience in this field would identify them as valid 'types' and the extent to which they would feel comfortable in relating them to their own practice. A focus group was arranged with a group of five practitioners who were training for Early Years Professional status. Since the aim of the exercise was

professional development rather than therapy, participants were not expected to disclose information about themselves, although this was volunteered in some cases. The researchers made no mention of the concept of attachment to determine the extent to which participants would spontaneously seek to apply this concept in explaining the behaviour in the case studies. However, they were primed by being asked to write a reflective account on the theme of 'professional love' (Page, 2011) prior to the focus group. As the authors deliver the training, the participants were recruited independently and assured that participation had no connection to assessment on the programme.

The case studies represented the two extremes of 'pre-occupied' and 'dismissing' relationship styles. The first case study is presented in Elfer, Goldschmeid and Selleck (2012) and concerns Kevin, a practitioner who is concerned about one of his key children who is unwell. Although the mother collects the child, he continues to telephone her to find out how the child is and the parent eventually complains that the behaviour is 'over the top'. As we have seen, the adult with an ambivalent or 'preoccupied' style of relating is uncertain about the strength of relationship bonds and enjoys being wanted or needed. His or her knowledge and vocabulary about relationships and 'emotional intelligence' (Goleman, 1996), coupled with the pleasure gained from caring, is likely to identify ECEC as an ideal occupation. Nevertheless, the 'under-regulated' care-seeking impulse tends to undermine their positional authority as parents or carers since children themselves become a source of re-assurance. When exhibited by practitioners, the impulse, as on this occasion, threatens to overwhelm professional detachment. The contrasting case study was devised for the purpose of the research and centred on Margaret, an energetic and experienced practitioner who enjoys the organisational aspects of the job. She used to manage her own setting and is a resourceful 'magpie', with good community links, whose skills come to the fore in parental liaison and arranging key events in the nursery's annual calendar. However, she also has a tendency to treat children as another element to be managed rather than as individuals to be listened to. This tendency has only become clear more recently, as the setting has adopted a key-working system and a democratic policy of 'listening to the voice of the child'. On several occasions, she comments 'I'm not their mum' and complains that she's expected to be 'some kind of therapist'. Her behaviour finally becomes 'unprofessional' when dealing with a very needy and emotional child in her key group. As we have seen, the adult with an 'avoidant' or 'dismissing' style of relating has learnt to become self-reliant from an early age, to keep people at a distance, and to develop and value her own skills of productivity and efficiency. As Howe (2011) notes, women with this pattern are placed in a quandary because of the social expectation that they will be natural parents, with warm and nurturing natures. This is resolved through applying the same skills to the parenting role, as shown through the stereotype of the 'supermum' or 'tiger mum' who can gain social approval for her achievements whilst also championing strength and self-reliance. This pattern could therefore explain the motivation for some 'super managers' in some early years settings.

The group were presented with the case studies one after the other. In both cases, participants were concerned that Kevin and Margaret were not acting 'for the right reasons'. One remarked that 'it's not for the child's benefit, it's for theirs.' However, in discussion of the former case, the 'pre-occupied' individual, more attention was given to potential remediation, perhaps because of the specific focus upon key-working.

*'Perhaps he doesn't understand what his role is as the key carer....'*

*'The key carer is a secondary carer, as a back-up support...'*

The assumption was that Kevin's intrusive intervention most likely came about as a result of an intellectual misapprehension, that he had not been sufficiently well-informed about the position of

key-worker. One of the participants addressed the possibility that he might have acted out of a psychological, emotional need which overrode this professional knowledge:

*'He wasn't thinking with his head, but with his heart, and as professionals we have to think with our heads as well'*

Margaret inspired a greater degree of criticism from the group. Described dismissively by one member as 'one of those people who want to feel needed', her apparent lack of child-centredness seemed to signify a degree of selfishness:

*'I think she's doing a lot to get the praise for it, to get the pat on the back, to boost her own confidence but not necessarily for the children'*

*'It does seem as though there's nothing about her as a person – the fact that she's busy all the time....but at what point does she actually stop and think about...'Am I doing this for the right reasons?'*

All of the group members commented at different times about the value of professional development in encouraging a form of reflection which challenge the attitudes shown in the case studies. One participant, for example, described the deeper self-awareness demonstrated by qualified members of staff at her setting, as opposed to unqualified. Another participant suggested a difference between staff who have trained recently and those who trained many years ago;

*'(sensitivity to boundaries in professional care) varied with the age of the practitioners... We have some in their mid to late 50's. ..one whom the children see as a kind of granny figure. She's lovely but she's very tactile. She does like to cuddle them and everything and they go to her quite willingly but then we have others who think that she's too tactile.'*

A theme which the group touched upon here, and returned to when talking about 'training', centred on this tension between care as a supposedly 'natural' disposition and a professional service. Several participants talked about inexperienced practitioners who lacked 'that connection' with young children but agreed that the capacity for caregiving can be developed:

*'...you can learn though because if you get a good role model, you can learn from that, perhaps not so empathetic but it is possible. I had one member of staff who has just blossomed in her relationships through watching other members of staff. ..'*

Only two out of the five participants identified that the behaviour of participants in the case studies was probably influenced by the legacy of their own childhood attachment patterns. This occurred mostly in relation to preoccupied rather than avoidant behaviour, suggesting that this is more commonly experienced. For example, in discussing the case of Kevin, one practitioner commented:

*'I had a practitioner who kept talking about 'our' children... I had to talk to her and say 'they're not our children. Yes, we can love them, but they've got to go home.' She had issues with her son about attachment when he was born – post-natal depression – that's come out since then. But you can now see why she is the way she is. I think she was trying to build up the kind of relationship with her key children that she had missed out on with her own child, especially the baby. Even if she slightly squawked, she'd be picking her up..'*

This experience was corroborated by a colleague who admitted that 'We have practitioners who get, well not obsessed, but very involved with one child'. This participant made significant contributions

throughout the focus group: this may have been prompted by the supervision training she had recently attended and which she referred to several times:

*'It's all very well having professional development meetings but these are about goals for the centre 'What are we going to do?' 'How are we going to work towards that? Whereas a supervision meeting is more about you as a person, how you are with the children ... and it did really make me think about how we are...I could really pinpoint those people who have had positive experiences and those who maybe not have but have that ability to reflect and those who ...just couldn't go there, whether it was too painful or they just haven't got the natural ability.'*

In comments such as these, she suggests that professional reflection, in order to be valuable, needs to include in its domain those values and dispositions which would normally be seen as the constituent elements of character or personality:

*'If you know yourself and you can think about your own personal experience and are comfortable with that...when I think about people who struggle, I think they've had not the most positive experiences in their own personal lives in terms of attachment. Even if they haven't had a positive experience but they've been able to really unpick that and reflect on it'*

Recognising that early childhood experience can have the effect of putting 'the guard up', she returned at various times to the point that 'good practice' in key-working can often be assumed rather than openly discussed in relation to practitioners experience of relationships: 'There has to be more to it than just telling someone what their role is as a key person'.

The case studies were recognisable to the focus group, indicating that attachment effects may be involved in similar scenarios in practice. If typical, the views of the focus group, as a sample of the most well-qualified practitioners in the field, would also seem to demonstrate that the conceptualisation of caring is in transition and that the ideology of the mother may be in decline. For example, none of them considered that the case study of Kevin was unrealistic because of the subject's gender. The most common recommendation was that such practitioners should be given opportunities to 'reflect' upon their behaviour. However, there was little suggestion about the theoretical or intellectual framework they should use in order to gain a cognitive grasp on it. Theories of adult attachment, if disseminated more widely, could be useful in this regard, particularly in the context of supervision. They also have the potential to re-position Bowlby at the centre of early years pedagogy without the prospect of a return to gender-based caring.

[See also <http://drgeofftaggart.blogspot.co.uk/>]

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