

## **Attachment Theory and Transactional Analysis**

### **Part One - Understanding Security - By Robin Hobbes**

In this article I propose to integrate the work of Developmental Psychology - and in particular Attachment Theorists - with the concept of Life Positions. This will result in a theory of security. In a later article I will show how this theory can be utilised in psychotherapy to accelerate the development of security.

#### **Attachment Theory**

Attachment Theory deals with how children make themselves secure. The theory, as initially developed by John Bowlby, suggested that there is a class of behaviours, easily observable and classifiable, that children engage in with the goal of making themselves experience security. This class of behaviours involves the seeking of physical proximity to a caretaker when the child is tired, frightened or ill.

This theory had its origins in ethology. In the early 50s Konrad Lorenz, a prominent ethologist, had noticed that in some species of birds strong bonds between mother and offspring are easily seen. The newly born baby bird will quickly notice their mother and follow her around regardless of the presence of food - he called this phenomenon Imprinting. John Bowlby, a psychoanalyst and psychiatrist drew on Lorenz's work along with studies on the ill effects of maternal deprivation (including the work of Renee Spitz) to construct a theory of attachment in a paper published in 1958.

Bowlby noticed : ' In the countryside in springtime there is no more familiar sight than mother animals with young. In the fields, cows and calves, mares and foals, ewes and lambs; in the ponds and rivers, ducks and ducklings, swans and cygnets. So familiar are these sights and so much do we take for granted that lamb and ewe will remain together and that a flotilla of ducklings will remain with mother duck that the question is rarely asked: What causes these animals to remain in each other's company? What function is fulfilled by their doing so ?' Bowlby concluded that the function was likely to be to experience security.

He put forward a hypothesis that under stress a child will seek physical proximity to a significant other with the goal of experiencing felt security. That once this physical proximity is established the child will return to exploration of the world. The behaviour Bowlby is describing here is attachment behaviour.

For example - Tom, who is 2 years old, hears an unexpectedly loud noise. He feels scared calls for his mother - hearing her voice he runs to her. On reaching her he relaxes and leaves her side to carry on playing.

Attachment behaviour is a rather narrow constellation of behaviours. It is not, as is popularly ascribed to the theory, the broad expression of interest or play with someone else. Rather attachment behaviour is purely the seeking of physical proximity to a significant caretaker when distressed with the goal of 'felt security'. Distress can be when a child is frightened, ill or tired. In the seeking of proximity and the responses that the child experiences from it's caretaker a bond is developed. Bowlby suggests that attachment behaviour is genetically predetermined with the aim of preservation of the species. This will provide safety from predators : thus the goal of the behaviour is felt security. Exploratory behaviour develops from the establishment of this bond.

According to Bowlby this class of behaviours has the same significance as feeding and sexual behaviours. It is in many ways of the same status as instinctual behaviour. Thus the activation of an attachment system in a mammal is a natural response to distress.

Bowlby suggests that children develop internal working models of attachment with which they predict future behaviour in others and organise their own response to others. In this sense we carry our early attachment system with us. These models are internal and potentially available for updating or though they tend to operate outside of conscious awareness.

I want to emphasise that Bowlby stresses that attachment behaviours is neither pathological nor necessarily regressive in adults To Bowlby attachment behaviour is a class of behaviours that remain with us from the cradle to the grave but reduce in intensity the older we get. Nevertheless adults are likely to seek proximity to a significant other when ill, tired or frightened.

### **The Development of Attachment Theory**

Bowlby completed his exposition of attachment theory in 1980 with the publication of *Loss : Sadness and Depression* the third volume of a larger work entitled *Attachment and Loss*. While presenting his theories a large number of researchers have been testing them out and a considerable body of research papers are now available supporting his findings.

### **Patterns of Attachment**

A major figure in attachment research is Mary Ainsworth who through a controlled experiment tested Bowlby's hypothesis - namely that under stress children will seek physical proximity to a significant other. She devised an experiment in which the primary caretaker of a child leaves the child in the company of a stranger for a set period of time. The attachment figure returns a number of times and the response to that figure by the child is observed and evaluated in relation to the stress that the child may have experienced during the absence of the caretaker .. for example quarrelling with another child.

Ainsworth's research showed that Bowlby's hypothesis was not accurate. While most children did seek proximity to their significant adult if they had been frightened or distressed in his/her absence there was a significant proportion who did not.

She noticed three distinct patterns of attachment behaviours on reunion. One group (by far the largest), which she called secure approached the mother with varying intensity depending on the degree to which they had been distressed in her absence. The level of distress determining the level of physical contact sought by the child. The children were seen to derive comfort from this contact and to then carry on any activity they were previously engaged in. A second group, which she called insecure avoidant, ignored the mother on her return irrespective of the stress that had occurred in her absence. The final group, insecure ambivalent, showed angry responses to the parent coupled with clinging behaviours and a resistance to being comforted. Much further research has substantiated these findings and longitudinal studies have demonstrated the persistence of these patterns over time.

Recently a fourth pattern has been identified by two separate researchers. This is described as an insecure disorganised pattern. Here the children would make avoidant, clinging and resistant behaviours. They would rapidly alternate between the three, often looking dazed confused and apathetic.

A number of longitudinal studies have now demonstrated that children with a secure attachment system have been found to be more self-reliant, more empathic, less hostile with peers and more co-operative with adults. (Role of infant-caregiver attachment - Sroufe)

### **Attachment Patterns In Adults:**

These patterns can be identified in adults. If we take the development of a therapeutic alliance as requiring the establishment of an attachment in order for the client to effectively explore experience within the psychotherapeutic relationship then :

1. Secure: In establishing an alliance this person is likely to notice any scare they may feel and give expression to this, seeking reassurance and then experiencing security. " I am feeling frightened about being here " if the psychotherapist notices and responds to this need then the client will establish an alliance quickly.
2. Insecure Avoidant : this pattern will appear withdrawn and uninvolved with the psychotherapist seeking isolation to deal with experiences of insecurity. They will not look insecure although experiencing insecurity and will find any recognition of the experience as puzzling. Their evaluation of the development of a working alliance will be if the psychotherapist is sufficiently tasked focused to encourage distraction from any experience of insecurity. This can of course be a challenge when it is in the identification and expression of insecurity that autonomy is to be found.

3. Insecure Ambivalent : this group will look insecure when they experience fear .. they will seek out reassurance from the psychotherapist and pay attention to the developing psychotherapeutic relationship in terms of whether they will be able to experience security or not. However experiencing security will be a challenge for them and they will engage in testing out behaviours and often make the psychotherapist responsible for their security. This can result in the short term in the development of an idealised therapeutic alliance in which the client ascribes their experience to be the result of the psychotherapist. “ You make me feel so safe”. Eventually the client has to come to terms with the reality that they create their own security.

4. Insecure Disorganised - this group is considerably challenged in establishing a therapeutic alliance and using the psychotherapeutic relationship as a basis for exploration. They can find involvement with a psychotherapist as highly stressful and confusing. The involvement is likely to trigger strong feelings of insecurity. The response to this experience is disorganisation. I remember one young woman I worked with who clearly demonstrated this pattern spending a number of sessions saying very little to me .. looking very scared .. and literally swallowing down her feelings. The client may look dazed and confused. Acting unsure of themselves, their experience and unsure of you and your experience.

### **Attachment Theory and Transactional Analysis**

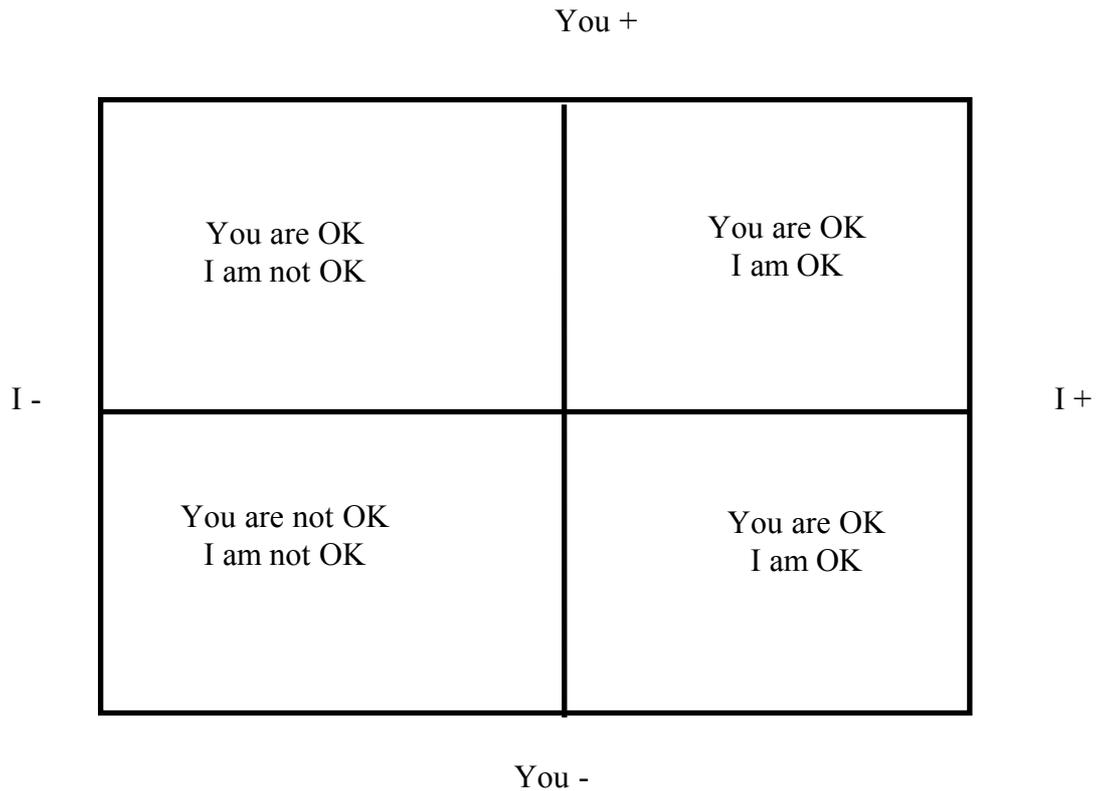
The similarities between Attachment Theory and Transactional Analysis are striking. In particular the idea of an internal working model of attachment corresponds closely to our idea of Script and patterns of attachment corresponds to our ideas on Life Positions. I'll concentrate on life positions but one very important implication here is that a substantial body of research by Developmental Psychologists has confirmed the theories of Transactional Analysis.

### **Patterns of Attachment and Life Positions**

According to Berne individuals adopt a Life Position - “a view of the whole world and all the people in it, who are either friends or enemies” (WDSAYAHp.85) Berne goes on to say “ the simplest positions are two-handed, You and I, and come from the convictions which have been fed to the child with his mother's milk. Writing as shorthand + for OK and - for not-O.K., the convictions read: I + or I -; You + or You -.”

Berne suggests there are four basic positions:

- I'm OK You're OK
- I'm OK You're Not OK
- I'm Not OK You're OK
- I'm Not OK You're Not OK



Berne described the I + You + position as healthy and a place of “heroes, princes, and heroines and princesses”. We now would call it the position of security. I - You + Berne calls the “depressive” position and here, like Ainsworth talking about the insecure - anxious pattern, he emphasises the angry response that underlies the placing of oneself in a I - position in relation to others perceived okness .Berne says they like to “make the other pay as much as possible for .. (their) .. OK stamp”. He describes the I+ You - position as the “paranoid” position in which “Blemish” is played as a pastime in what we would now understand to be an attempt to disown fearful feelings. Finally Berne describes the I - You - as the place of “futility” where nothing is achieved. It is easy to see how these patterns noticed by Berne in his consulting room were confirmed by Mary Ainsworth and Mary Main in observations of children. Berne goes on to say “nevertheless there can usually be detected one basic position .. on which .. (a client’s) life is staked, and from which he plays out his games and script.”

So now we can add to the OK diagram the patterns of attachment:

You +

<p><b>I am not OK</b> <b>You are OK</b></p> <p><b>Attachment Pattern :</b> <b>Insecure - Ambivalent</b></p>	<p><b>You are OK</b> <b>I am OK</b></p> <p><b>Attachment Pattern :</b> <b>Secure</b></p>
<p><b>You are not OK</b> <b>I am not OK</b></p> <p><b>Attachment Pattern :</b> <b>Insecure - Disorganised</b></p>	<p><b>You are not OK</b> <b>I am OK</b></p> <p><b>Attachment Pattern :</b> <b>Insecure - Avoidant</b></p>

You -

Life Positions can now be understood in relation to security. The adoption of a life position will tell us much about how someone will respond when their need for security is in the foreground. Furthermore the assumption in Transactional Analysis theory that there is a basic life position turns out to be accurate and is supported by research into attachment patterns.

### **Conclusion**

In attachment theory we have the description of the quest for security , of the different responses children and then adults may take towards this quest. This realisation of security .. knowing who I am .. is a developing process that evolves from the cradle to the grave. Security is effected by outer experience but understood and digested by inner experience. Direct knowledge of security is the quest in spiritual development. Sri Nisargadatta says:: “Once you realise that all comes from within, that the world in which you live has not been projected onto you but by you, your fear comes to an end. Without this realisation you identify your self with the externals, like the body, mind, society, nation, humanity, even God or the Absolute. But these are all escapes from fear, it is only when you fully accept your responsibility for the little world in which you live and watch the process of its creation, preservation and destruction, that you

may be free from your imaginary bondage.”(p298) In the second part I will look at how to promote the development of security.

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