

Test of time

On re-reading “Psychoanalysis and child care”, John Bowlby’s lecture delivered in 1956 on the centenary of Sigmund Freud’s birth

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Howard Steele

New School for Social Research, New York, USA

This lecture of John Bowlby’s was one of six public lectures delivered by members of the British Psychoanalytic Society during April and May of 1956. The occasion was the centenary of Freud’s birth and the lecture series was titled “Psychoanalysis and contemporary thought”, words that served as the title of a 1958 book edited by J. Sutherland and D.W. Winnicott (Hogarth Press) for which I have found two citations. This book was re-published in 1987 by Maresfield Library for which eight citations can be found. Yet, Bowlby’s monumental trilogy on *Attachment, separation and loss* culminating in *Loss* (1980) has been cited 11,961 times as of January 25, 2010. So why does this rarely cited 1956 lecture merit re-reading?

Interestingly, when Bowlby collected a number of lectures he had given over his career through the mid-1970s, in the 1979 book titled *The making and breaking of affectional bonds*, he included the 1956 lecture as chapter one. This suggests that he was proud of the way this early lecture spoke to many mysteries concerning the inevitability of mental conflict (extra-psyche and intra-psyche) stemming from ambivalent feelings of love and hate, the regulation of which is vital to mental health. The lecture elaborates, with compelling examples, on how a healthy sense of anxiety and guilt in a child is promoted by parents who model the expression, control and understanding of intense emotions including sadness, anger and love. In this sense, the 1956 lecture foreshadows the immense current theoretical and research interests in emotion regulation, the inevitability of mixed-emotions (e.g. Steele, Steele, Croft, & Fonagy, 1999), and the vital relevance of reflective functioning or mentalization, as a fundamental correlate, if not determinant, of mental health (e.g. Allen & Fonagy, 2006; Steele & Steele, 2008).

This 1956 lecture is noteworthy, as well, insofar as it includes some core foci of attachment theory (e.g. references to non-human animals’ behavior patterns, and prescriptions for what constitutes optimal parenting and child care) – ideas that were robustly elaborated by Bowlby in the years that followed. As he was not yet bound by the ethological terminology, behavioral and control systems frame of reference that would come to typify his scientific theory of attachment, in his 1956 lecture, Bowlby speaks repeatedly about a child’s “libidinal needs” and the corresponding requirement for

Corresponding author:

Howard Steele, Director of Graduate Studies, Department of Psychology, New School for Social Research,
Room 611, 80 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10011, USA.

E-mail: steeleh@newschool.edu

parents and educators to satisfy these needs (i.e. to love their children) in ways that convey trust and consistency, so that “the germ of an innate morality” (Bowlby, 1979, p. 14) in every infant may be cultivated and encouraged. Re-reading this lecture helps one make contact with the way Bowlby’s state of mind concerning parent–child relationships and mental health was informed by an abiding optimism, respect and sympathy for young children *and* their parents. This is conveyed via straightforward descriptions and compelling advice, that yield clues as to how attachment theory would evolve out of, and in tension with, classical psychoanalytic theory.

On the inevitability of the conflict between love and hate

Bowlby credits Freud with bringing into sharp relief the “crucial clinical and theoretical and conflict between love and hate [and how this conflict] comes to be regulated satisfactorily or not” (Bowlby, 1979, p. 4). Presenting evidence from children’s nursery rhymes, the canon of English literature (e.g. Oscar Wilde’s *Ballad of Reading Gaol*), observations of toddlers in the Hampstead Nurseries reported by Dorothy Burlingham and Anna Freud, and ethological observations of birds, Bowlby illustrates the intense emotions of love and hate elicited by those we love first and most. Establishing the relevance of comparative psychology to psychoanalytic inquiry, Bowlby was signaling a direction he would pursue in the years that follow. At the same time, he conveys his impassioned interest in how separation and loss experiences, especially for young children, trigger powerful emotional responses of despair and anger. Bowlby comments on how repeated experiences of loss and separation can lead a child to feel unloved, deserted and rejected. This is conveyed by the tragic-comic poems of an 11-year-old delinquent boy whose mother had died when he was 15 months old, and who had thereafter experienced a number of substitute mothers. The boy shared the following poem in therapy, presented by Bowlby who acknowledges these words may not be original, as they appear to echo from previous centuries, suggestive of their timeless relevance:

Jumbo had a baby dressed in green
 Wrapped it up in paper and sent it to the Queen,
 The Queen did not like it because it was too fat,
 She cut it up in pieces and gave it to the cat,
 The cat did not like it because it was too thin,
 She cut it up in pieces and gave it to the King,
 The King did not like it because he was too slow,
 Threw it out the window and gave it to the crow.

Bowlby reports how the same boy responded to his therapist going on holiday with the following traditional ditty:

Oh, my little darling, I love you;
 Oh, my little darling, I don’t believe you do.
 If you really loved me, as you say you do,
 You would not go to America and leave me at the Zoo.

Bowlby remarks that as this boy’s fondness for his therapist grew, the depths of his mistrust and capacity for violent hatred were also revealed. In this observation, Bowlby shows a prescient understanding of what later research would confirm is the powerful tendency for spousal violence to be rooted in an early history of loss, trauma and disorganized attachment, complicating, if not

precluding, the resolution of ambivalence – making impulsive aggressive outbursts more likely (see West & George, 1999). Bowlby appears keenly aware of how for a small child, loss and trauma are beyond the child's capacity to understand, accept or resolve. Thus, he points out, small children in particular are given to age-appropriate (immature) defenses such as displacement (of anger), paranoia, and turning passive into active. He alerts readers to how infants and toddlers are especially alert to tones of voice and facial expressions in ways that may have long-term influences, as research has confirmed (Steele, Steele, & Croft, 2008).

A departure from classical psychoanalysis, and the ideas of punishment or shaming as a means of educating small children

Bowlby's 1956 lecture included, for the time, a seditious departure from a basic assumption of psychoanalysis in place since 1900 at least, and crystallized in the Kleinian approach; that was, to regard childhood mental health difficulties as stemming from the constitutional pressures of libidinal and aggressive forces, life and death instincts. Most pointedly, Bowlby transposes the concepts of original sin and original goodness, suggesting while,

psychoanalysis discovers much evidence [of original sin] in the human heart [I celebrate] the concept of original concern for others or original goodness which, if given favorable circumstances, will gain the upper hand. It is a cautiously optimistic view of human nature, and one that I believe to be justified. (Bowlby, 1979, p. 14)

Here again, Bowlby seems prescient insofar as much contemporary developmental and brain science confirms the relevance of this optimistic view of human nature, for example Dacher Keltner's (2009) book, *Born to be good*.

For this original concern to be cultivated, Bowlby advises *against* two parenting strategies, perhaps as common today, as in 1956. These are "forceful expression of disapproval by means of punishment; the other, more subtle and exploiting his guilt, is by impressing on the child his ingratitude and indicating the pain, physical and moral, which his behavior causes his devoted parents" (Bowlby, 1979, p. 12). These two well-enough intended efforts to control and direct children's behavior do not have their desired effect because,

both [methods] tend to create difficult personalities, the first – punishment – promoting rebels and, if very severe, delinquents; the second – shame – guilty and anxiety-ridden neurotics. [And then Bowlby continues by pointing to a chief virtue of democracy.] As in politics, so with children: in the long run tolerance of opposition pays handsome dividends. (1979, p. 12)

On the topic of punishment, Bowlby could hardly be more eloquent or clear:

That punishment is efficient as a means of control I believe to be one of the great illusions of Western civilization. For older children and adults it has its uses as an ancillary to other methods; in the early years I believe it to be out of place both because it is unnecessary and because it can create anxiety and hatred, evils far greater than it is intended to cure. (1979, p. 14)

Bowlby provides a brief synopsis of what could usefully serve as advice to parents in any parenting education program. He maintains that if a child's need for love and attention is not frustrated, then a child will be better able to cope with all the range of daily frustrations. And with respect to the

catastrophes that parents worry about, for example, fire, breakage of household objects, harm from knives and so on, Bowlby has two essential suggestions: (1) arrange the household so that breakable and dangerous objects are out of reach of small children; and (2) intervene when needed in a firm yet friendly and (wherever possible) humorous way. When taking a potentially dangerous object away from a toddler, be sure, Bowlby reminds us, to offer another (safer yet also interesting) object.

Roots of children's mental health difficulties in parents' own unresolved childhood experiences

In place of constitutional factors (excessive libidinal or aggressive energies) unsettling a child's adaptation, Bowlby places parents' unresolved ambivalence from their own childhood experiences. This is the culminating penultimate six-page section of his lecture introduced with the subtitle "emotional problems of parents". Here Bowlby sketches what could be considered a blueprint for "ghosts in the nursery" (Fraiberg, Edelson, & Shapiro, 1975), and the development of the Adult Attachment Interview as reported in "a move to the level of representation" (Main, Kaplan, & Cassidy, 1985), findings from which have been recently summarized in a report "on the first 10,000 Adult Attachment Interviews" (Bakermans-Kranenburg & van IJzendoorn, 2009). Bowlby remarks:

it seems plain that the feelings evoked in us when we become parents have a very great deal in common with the feelings that were evoked in us as children by our parents and sibling ... [and he qualifies on p. 18:] ... I believe that the trouble does not lie in the simple recurrence of old feelings – perhaps a measure of such feelings is present in every parent – but in the parent's inability to tolerate and regulate these feelings. (1979, p. 17)

Bowlby reaches the peak of his concern for, and empathy with, new parents when he advocates for the kinds of efforts that would later become organized as the field of infant mental health (1979, p. 20): "The advantage of treating young children is now well-known; we are now advocating that parents, too, should be helped soon after they are 'born'!" Pointing out how salient are new parents' feelings and wishes to get things right, Bowlby comments (p. 20): "Relatively little help, if skilled and given at the right time, may thus go a long way". In this comment, Bowlby anticipates the "less is more" finding that would be documented 48 years later in a meta-analytic review of 88 interventions involving over 7500 mothers, where the aim was to enhance maternal sensitivity or infant–mother attachment security (Bakermans-Kranenburg, van IJzendoorn, & Juffer, 2003).

On environmental sources of mental health

In concluding his lecture, Bowlby returns to his claim that deficiencies in the environment are the central source of mental ill-health and unhappiness. He acknowledges that he takes this position as a counterpoint to the psychoanalytic view, adopted on the basis of Freud's (1900) turn away from the environment (convinced as he was that his seduction hypothesis had been disproved), "that little could be done by environmental change to mitigate the force of infantile conflict" (Bowlby, 1979, p. 21). Yet, in paying special attention to the environment, Bowlby does not diminish the importance of inner conflict and psychic structures, viewing them in terms of internal motivational and cognitive processes necessary to permit regulation, control and understanding of ambivalence. Within a few years, of course, he would be less vague about motivational forces and come to view them in ethological terms as control systems organized within the central nervous system, and expressed in species-specific behavior, aimed at achieving and maintaining attachment relationships.

This would put him directly on a collision course with classically minded analysts who still adhered to drive theory, and by the early 1960s he was more-or-less alienated from the British Psychoanalytic Society, turning to Mary Ainsworth and the troop of American developmental psychologists she trained, for professional support. Yet Bowlby remained a psychoanalyst to the end of his life, and always regarded attachment theory as one of a number of object relations theories.

In the early 1990s, the British Psychoanalytic Society convened a well-attended event in honor of the contributions of John Bowlby, which included praise as well as suggestions that Bowlby's character was easily given to dissent, and that *he* distanced himself from the society. Notably, this reconciliation of sorts took place *after* Bowlby's death. This history is reminiscent of the story related by Franz Kafka in his unfinished book *The castle*. As is well known, in *The castle* a protagonist, known only as K., works relentlessly but without success at gaining access to the mysterious authorities of a castle who govern the village where he wants to work as a land surveyor. Kafka died before finishing the work, but suggested (to his biographer Max Brod) that the book would end with K dying in the village and, reaching him after his death would be notification that his legal claim to live in the village was not valid, yet, taking certain auxiliary circumstances into account, he was permitted to live and work there. When I received guidance and supervision from John Bowlby in his office at the Tavistock Clinic in the late 1980s, there was a sense of him being there by special permission without perks (beyond that afforded to eminent emeritus professors), amidst a hub of therapeutic work being pursued from multiple variations on the Kleinian theme. Yet citations to Bowlby's work in the scientific literature are unrivalled by any other psychoanalyst, including Melanie Klein and Sigmund Freud. And, if anyone doubts the validity of his clinical insights, re-reading Bowlby's 1956 lecture is likely to assuage those concerns.

Thus, historians of science, as well as researchers and practitioners may find much of interest in re-reading Bowlby's 1956 lecture on "Psychoanalysis and child care". The effort will be rewarded by an immense range of practical insights into parent-child relationships, mental health and the need to acknowledge, if not fully resolve, the inevitability of mixed feelings in relation to those people and causes for whom we have the greatest affection. Bowlby's message in the 1956 lecture can be reduced to the following: an affirmation of the complexity and value of love. The betterment of self and society may depend on hearing and following it.

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Author biography

Howard Steele PhD, is Professor of Psychology and Director of Graduate Studies in Psychology, New School for Social Research, New York, USA. Howard Steele is also founding editor and editor in chief of *Attachment and Human Development*, and co-editor (with Miriam Steele) of the 2008 volume, *Clinical applications of the Adult Attachment Interview*.