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Using attachment theory in probation practice

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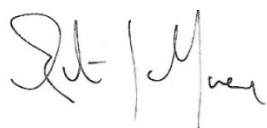
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Foreword

HM Inspectorate of Probation is committed to reviewing, developing and promoting the evidence base for high-quality probation and youth offending services. *Academic Insights* are aimed at all those with an interest in the evidence base. We commission leading academics to present their views on specific topics, assisting with informed debate and aiding understanding of what helps and what hinders probation and youth offending services.

This report was kindly produced by Dr. Maria Ansbro, exploring attachment theory and its relevance to probation practice. It is emphasised that attachment theory should not be seen as a magic bullet, and that some ideas translate into practice more readily than others. Nevertheless, it is shown how attachment theory can supplement other established theories and models in helping to understand the impact of early experiences, the psychological processes involved in empathy and self-regulation, and the supervisory relationship. Crucially, when applied in an individualised way, it offers insights and humanises, and if the practitioner can create a sense of being safe, reliable and in tune, the person on probation can be encouraged to reflect upon their behaviours and responses to specific situations.



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The views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the policy position of HM Inspectorate of Probation.

1. Introduction

Attachment theory has an obvious appeal to probation practitioners because so many of those they work with have grown up with loss and abuse, and the theory focuses on the effects of early care on later development. When examined closely, however, 'attachment theory' is actually a morass of theory and research that is continually evolving and which comes with ambiguities and contradictions. Practitioners can rarely afford to immerse themselves in these debates however, as their role demands that they multi-task, and draw on a range of theoretical ideas.

Nevertheless, as set out in this *Academic Insights* paper, there are ways that attachment theory can contribute to work with people on probation in conceptualising the supervisory relationship, and in understanding offending, risk and relationships. This does not mean, however, that all attachment-based ideas translate easily into the probation setting.

2. Applying attachment-based ideas in probation practice

2.1 A (very) brief history of attachment theory

The term 'attachment theory' was coined by John Bowlby in the 1950s to describe a growing body of work on the emotional connection of the child to his or her carers, and the developmental consequences for the child if it was not adequate. Bowlby was struck by the damaging effects he observed when children experienced separations from their carer, for example by repeated hospital admissions, or wartime evacuation. He theorised that ideally the carer represented a 'secure base' that the infant experienced as reliable and in tune with them. Having a secure base meant that the infant could afford to get on with exploration, play and friendships without worrying about what would happen if distress struck. Without such a figure who could be relied on to provide comfort, the infant had to work at getting those needs met, and was inhibited from normal developmental tasks. Bowlby drew on psychoanalysis (a field he had defected from), the burgeoning field of cognitive psychology, ethology (animal studies) and evolutionary theory in his work, and the legacy of these disciplines can still be found in modern day attachment theory. His extensive writings, particularly his Attachment, Separation and Loss trilogy (1969, 1973, 1980), are still regarded as classic texts.

Mary Ainsworth built on Bowlby's work and created the Strange Situation Procedure (Ainsworth et al., 1978), a method of identifying children who were securely attached and those who were not. Most were classified as *secure* (this is the case across the globe), and what marked them out was that they tended to have a parent who could be used to calm and sooth after the upset of separation. The children who did not do this were classified as insecure, and Ainsworth proposed that they fell into two distinct styles:

- *avoidant* children had parents who were rather detached, preferring their infants to get on with things independently. These children learned that to get their carers' attention they had to 'down-regulate' – to go it alone and sit on their emotions when upset
- *ambivalent (also known as resistant)* children had parents who were difficult to predict – one moment they were smotheringly attentive, the next they might ignore them. They were not tuned in to their children's state, and so these children learned that to get their needs met they had to 'up-regulate' – to try a range of tactics in the hope that one would hit the mark.

Mary Main (Main and Solomon, 1990) added to these three groups when she identified a small minority of children who did not easily fit into any of them. Whereas the secure, insecure-avoidant and insecure-ambivalent children all had a strategy to get what they needed from their carer, a further group seemed to lack a strategy. Identified by fleeting, anomalous behaviours (freezing, staring), Main labelled them *disorganised*, and theorised that their carer was positively frightening (or perhaps frightened, because of their own experiences). This left the child psychically torn; the very person they wanted safety from was the source of threat, a situation that Main described as 'fear without solution'.

The idea is that once established, these styles tend to provide a template of how relationships operate (the 'internal working model'), and follow the child into adolescence and adulthood. The term dismissing is used as the adult equivalent of avoidant attachment, and preoccupied or enmeshed is used as the adult version of ambivalent/resistant styles (attachment theory is unforgiving in its use of multiple terms for the same thing!).

Many other methods have been created to classify attachment style according to developmental stage. Those with a clinical or developmental background have favoured narrative techniques such as the Adult Attachment Interview, where the way that attachments are described are held to reveal partly unconscious material about the individual's state of mind regarding attachments. Social psychologists have developed an array of self-report psychometric tests to classify attachment style in adulthood.

Establishing what qualities make somebody a secure base figure has been interrogated in different ways over the decades, and the important point is that it is more than just being warm and affectionate. Bowlby described the carer who produced a securely attached child as responsive and attuned, and stressed that they knew when to intervene, and when to leave the child to get on with it. Ainsworth (1969) added detail, and created a set of six scales based on extensive observational studies of Ugandan families (e.g. the degree of delight in the baby, acceptance of the baby). Fonagy and Target (2007) zoomed in on the interactions between carer and child, identifying the 'mirroring' and 'marking' processes at work within the parent's pre-verbal conversations with the child, and the universal habit of parents to note what they think is going on for the infant in facial expression, vocal tone and inflexion. The mirroring happens as the parent reflects back what they perceive to be the baby's mental and physical state, and the marking is the exaggerated, almost pantomime version of that state. A message is sent to the baby that there is another being who can appreciate (sufficiently) what his or her existence feels like. This is the start of that child's ability to recognise and label their own affective state, adding to their vocabulary of emotions (Bateman and Fonagy, 2006). It is also proposed as the route by which the child develops a sense of themselves as a separate entity from others, with different thoughts and feelings, which can nonetheless be perceived by another person.

According to attachment theory, these steps are necessary to be able to eventually do the same thing to others and hence to appreciate their mental states. Fonagy and Target (2005, p.334) explained: 'Understanding of minds is hard without the experience of having been understood as a person with a mind'. Hence the connection between an early secure base and the development of good reflective function is explicated (a capacity that is also referred to as mentalising). Meins (2013) uses the term 'mind-mindedness' to describe something similar – the ability of the parent to appreciate the baby as a separate being, with its own inner state, and to perceive the child's point of view.

A further aspect of the theory around attachment and mentalisation is that of affect regulation. The proposal is that the experience of another who can recognise, tolerate and soothe difficult emotions comes to be internalised, forming the basis of an individual's strategy for managing their own internal state, enabling the growth of the 'agentive self' (Fonagy, 2004). Attachment theory's psychoanalytic roots are showing here, and there are echoes of Bion's notion of containment (1962) and Winnicott's 'good-enough mothering' (1953). As an aside, it is noteworthy that these concepts come to sound very similar to Theory of Mind (Baron-Cohen, 1995), or Emotional Intelligence (Salevoy and Mayer, 1990), or even Piaget's idea of egocentrism and decentring (Piaget and Inhelder, 1967), despite their derivation from different fields of study.

Early criticisms were that mothers were usually held responsible for occupying the secure base role, and providing constant attention. However, over time it became clear that it was the quality of care provided rather than the number of hours that mattered, and that most children have multiple attachments (Schaffer and Emerson, 1964). Attachment theory has been also accused of being Eurocentric and heteronormative, but that is debatable. Ainsworth's landmark research was carried out in Uganda and attachment styles are researched across the globe. In fact, the literature tends to look enviously at cultures with extended families, with Fonagy and Target (2005) citing anthropologist Sarah Hrdy's work on the 'allo mother' (2000), where the mother is supported, and the child cared for, by a range of mother substitutes. This is far better, in their view, than the sometimes solitary western experience of parenting. Golombok's work (2015) concluded that children with same-sex parents are equally or more secure than children of heterosexual parents, although it is difficult to get a representative sample. Other debates and ambiguities will be discussed as we examine the practical applications in probation work.

2.2 Themes relevant to probation practice

Social work has readily taken to attachment theory, and its uses are perhaps more obvious here than in criminal justice. For instance, family assessments focus on the mind-mindedness of parents, and interventions (both individually and in parenting programmes) aim to improve their availability as a secure base. Work with looked after children aims for as few disruptions to care as possible. Social work has even been accused of being too invested in attachment theory, over-using it without appreciating its complexities (Forslund et al., 2022), and at worst using it to blame parenting for children's problems, with insufficient appreciation of the impact of poverty and structural disadvantage on families (Wastell and White, 2012). Attachment theory is also a common element in mental health work, particularly in applications such as mentalisation-based therapy, one of several approaches that has had some success with borderline personality disorder (Bateman and Fonagy, 2008).

Work in criminal justice has also drawn on attachment theory, with its principles well received for general probation practice (Ansbro, 2008) and as an essential theoretical backdrop for work with personality disorder (HMPPS and NHS, 2020). Its place is perhaps more modest than, say, cognitive behaviourism or desistance theory, but there are key themes that can be useful in probation practice. Although somewhat overlapping, the following four key 'big ideas' recur:

- practitioner as secure base
- awareness of attachment history
- reflective function/ability to mentalise
- attachment style

The probation officer as secure base

The carer-infant relationship is the original attachment relationship, but the theory proposes that similar qualities are present in relationships through the lifespan, such as those with partners and friends (Hazan and Shaver, 1987). Secure base relationships are conceptualised in adulthood as partly representational, meaning that we can hold those figures in our minds without them actually being there (Main et al., 1985). The concept has also been applied to relationships with professional figures such as psychotherapists and carers (Bowlby, 1988) and even whole institutions such as Broadmoor (Adshead, 2004).

Applying the concept to a probation setting, the idea is that a probationer will be able to think about aspects of their life if their probation officer can create a sense of being safe, reliable, and in tune with them. Perhaps they can then use that secure base figure to get themselves over the pinch points of rage and anxiety when they come along, and even internalise that process (Renn, 2002; Forbes and Reilly, 2011). Research confirmed that practitioners found this piece of theory useful, identifying supervisory relationships where they felt they represented, to an extent, a secure base (Ansbro 2018, 2019). Although they also described work that was productive despite no apparent attachment qualities in the relationship, where it did occur it added a dimension that was distinct from other models. Rogerian theory would say a relationship is made up of genuineness, empathy and warmth, desistance would say it is the result of collaborative partnership, pro-social modelling would say it is based on modelling – but attachment added something distinctive about the emotional quality of the working relationship.

An awareness of attachment history

The assertion that early life affects later development is so obvious that it hardly needs stating, but attachment theory makes a particular contribution to understanding the mediating process.

The work on Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) provides ample evidence that early experiences have an impact on both physical and psychological development (Felitti et al., 1998; see also the earlier [Academic Insights paper 2020/05](#) by Kieran McCartan). There are many ways of explicating this, through a genetic, endocrinal, nutritional, or structural lens, as well as a range of psychological perspectives including that of attachment.

Findings from longitudinal studies confirm the connection between early attachment and all aspects of social, emotional and intellectual development, as well as mental health outcomes (e.g. Sroufe et al, 2010). For example, avoidant and disorganised attachment in early childhood is related to later conduct disorder, and disorganised attachment in childhood is strongly correlated with later psychopathology, and in particular borderline personality disorder (sometimes now referred to as emotionally unstable personality disorder). Adshead (2004) confirmed that within the (extremely violent) Broadmoor population that she worked with, secure attachments were relatively rare, whereas dismissing attachments (the adult version of avoidant attachment) were over-represented. She commented:

‘It is likely that a dismissing state of mind is linked with a developmental failure of empathy, which implies some degree of self-reflective function: it is hard to imagine the feelings of others if there is diminished capacity to think about one’s own feeling’ (Adshead, 2004, pp.152-153).

As a caveat it is important to remember that such research that identifies trends for groups holds little predictive power on an individual level – an important principle for risk assessment as well. So, many of Sroufe’s cohort who displayed disorganised attachment as a child turned out perfectly well in adulthood, and equally, in the general population a dismissing attachment style is no obstacle to a normal law-abiding life. Nevertheless, when it comes to practice, an understanding of attachment theory reminds us that the origins of destructive or dangerous behaviour can sometimes have roots that go a long way back. Moreover it theorises the transmission route, explicating for instance the origins of a fragile ability to regulate emotions and take the perspective of others, violence as the intolerable activation of the attachment system, and addiction as a perverse route to filling unmet

attachment need. It also contributes to our understanding of resilience by conceptualising security of attachment as a source of protection against ACEs.

Bowlby (1988) encouraged a deep interest in the emotional climate that the service user grew up with. He wrote brilliantly about the more subtle types of damaging interactions, such as parents' threats to abandon, to not love children, to commit suicide – all of which chime well with the ideas already set out on mentalisation, mind-mindedness, and the internal working model. Subsequent commentators echo this; for example, Ramsden and Lowton (2014: 148), wrote about the '*errors of logic*' that probation staff can commit if they do not remember the attachment difficulties of their clients, including the possibility that they are re-enacted within supervision (for example, erratic reporting, inexplicable changes from idealisation, and clinginess to rejection).

The importance of knowing about an individual's attachment history was endorsed in research that asked for accounts of supervision in practice. (Ansbro, 2018, 2019).

Case example

A young woman's chaos, callousness and violence towards her partner was easier to understand when placed against her own history of an addicted unreliable mother and experiences in care. This will be familiar fare for any practitioner, but it helped the probation officer in 'getting her'. She valued herself little and was vulnerable to others who might use her to commit offences. She carried a sense that she was at the mercy of a hostile world, without much order or predictability. It was entirely normal to tolerate violence in relationships.

Similarly, patterns in risk could be supported by piecing together attachment histories.

Case example

A young man being supervised for possessing a knife, but with several instances of sexual assaults on children in a residential setting, told his probation officer about his early life – a mother who was randomly over protective and rejecting, a series of experiences in care, and being sexually abused/abusive in a residential school. This helped to understand when he was most vulnerable to reoffending. The probation officer knew that his risk spiked when his attachment system was activated, notably by being blanked by his family, and worked to piece together that pattern with him.

Responses to supervision could also be put into perspective.

Case example

A young man with convictions for domestic abuse and a diagnosis of borderline personality disorder, swung from self-disclosing discussions to clamming up and absences. For his probation officer, his early history of abuse and disrupted foster care meant that a secure base figure was something to be danced around – wanted then not wanted, needed then not needed, and above all, not easily relied on (echoing Schuengel and Van Ijzendoorn, 2001; Berry and Danquah, 2016).

Attachment history does not provide any formulaic predictions, and there are heated debates in the literature about the predictive power of early attachment (Meins, 2017, Van Ijzendoorn et al, 2017). It is equally important to remember that it is just one factor

amongst many, which all interact. However, when considered with the person on probation in an individualised way it offers insights, and humanises.

The reflective function/the ability to mentalise

The theory proposes that the insecurely attached will tend to grow into adults who cannot mentalise well, and so therapists, friends – or for our purposes – probation workers can help them build this ability. It is the idea that supervision offers an opportunity for people on probation to ‘feel felt’, i.e. to be mentalised, and to be invited to articulate their own and others’ mental state, thus developing the skills of self management and empathy.

Whilst conceptually attractive, the existing research on the use of this aspect of attachment theory in a probation setting is mixed. The sample of probation officers in Ansbro’s sample (2019) found the concept of the reflective function a rather elusive one. However, whatever it was, they did not generally feel that people on probation were low on the ability to mentalise; some were less able than others, but it did not feel accurate to say they were poor mentalisers. Moreover, it struck them as rather labelling and judgemental to assume that they would be. On another level they thought that encouraging reflection was an obvious thing to do. To invite someone to articulate what they were thinking, describe aspects of their lives and speculate about what others might be feeling required little fancy theory; it was common sense, and did not need any dressing up.

Interestingly, each of these weaknesses identified by these probation officers crops up in the attachment literature. Commentators (e.g. Choi Kain and Gunderson, 2008) have described the reflective function concept as ‘woolly’, and concluded that methods for measuring it lack validity. Moreover, the evidence on reflective function levels in groups who would be expected to lack it is strikingly mixed (Adshead, 2013). Lastly, research with mental health nurses concluded that participants saw it as commonsensical, and what they were doing anyway before mentalisation based work was invented (Warrender, 2015).

Where the concept of the reflective function really contributed to probation practice is the idea that the capacity to mentalise can slip as arousal goes up. The insecurely attached, it is proposed, find it more difficult to carry on mentalising when highly aroused and the ability to ‘think about thinking’ short fuses. When describing their work, probation practitioners found this a useful way of understanding sudden violence (Ansbro 2018, 2019).

Case example

A man on supervision for violence against his partner, but with a history of organised crime, was ordinarily lucid. He was able to reflect articulately on his early life with a violent step father, his experiences in care, the times he had profited hugely from large scale robberies, and the sentences he had served when the jobs went wrong. He seemed to have impressive reflective function and was calm and insightful. But when a girlfriend went through his pockets to find evidence of an affair, it enraged him. It made sense to the probation officer that his attachment experiences meant his ability to mentalise was fragile. When aroused, suddenly there was no gap between impulse and action and the ability to mentalise slipped. Someone who had grown up used to being mentalised may have been able to hold onto their own mentalising better.

Attachment style

The idea that we have a dominant attachment style has been much written about, even filtering down into pop psychology (an attachment styles quiz is standard fare on websites such as PsychologyToday). In the field of mental health and psychotherapy, one application of the concept is that individuals with a dismissing style might be helped to recognise their tendency to devalue relationships and work towards being less detached, and individuals with a preoccupied style might recognise their tendency to amplify emotion and work on reining that in (Holmes, 2001). In social work, one application is the use of attachment style classification to assess the risk and resilience of prospective adoptive parents (Bifulco et al., 2008).

In probation practice, the concept has been put to work in several ways. The Building Better Relationships programme for domestic abusers includes an attachment styles exercise based on a four-part system created by Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991). Group members are invited to consider which style fits them, and reflect on the impact of that style on their relationships. Paul Renn (2002) has written about his use of attachment theory in probation practice, making links between childhood trauma, insecure-avoidant attachment and emotional detachment with offending characterised by violence and substance misuse. He also notes that people on probation who fit this pattern have frequently experienced attachments that once severed or disrupted are never made good, and he sees probation supervision as an opportunity to model an alternative outcome. Thus disagreements and misunderstandings happen, but are not catastrophic. The secure base qualities allow negotiation and recovery, a process referred to in the attachment literature as 'rupture-repair' (Fonagy and Adshead, 2012). Clark Baim specialises in psychodrama and has worked closely with probation practitioners. He writes compellingly about the application of Pat Crittenden's 12-part attachment classification, explaining how individuals develop contrasting strategies to get their attachment needs met. He recommends that practitioners examine how apparently destructive behaviours have meaning when viewed through an attachment lens (Baim, 2020).

When probation officers were consulted on the utility of the concept there were, however, mixed reviews (Ansbro, 2018, 2019). The main sticking point was that despite attempting classification using either informal discussion or an exercise based on Bartholomew and Horowitz's model, people on probation just did not neatly fit one clear attachment style. It sometimes provided a handy conversation starter but no more than that.

This was somewhat surprising, given the popularity of the idea. However, voices within the attachment world have for some time questioned the way that attachment style has been picked up and applied in ways it was not intended. Even in the 1960s, Bowlby and Ainsworth's correspondence showed they had concerns, with Ainsworth declaring it part of the attachment 'bandwagon' (Duschinsky, 2021). More recently Meins (2017) has declared it an aspect of attachment theory that is 'over-rated', arguing that insecure styles should not be pathologised, as they are just different strategies, developed to suit circumstances, and used by 40 per cent of the population. The weaknesses mount up further though; there is debate about the stability of attachment style from childhood into adulthood (Goldberg, 2000), the extent to which insecure styles are determined by parental care is unclear (Meins, 2013), and in reality we quite often display different styles of attachment in different relationships (De Wolff and Van Ijzendoorn, 1997). There are also multiple models of attachment style, ranging from a binary dimension between security and insecurity, to a 12-part dynamic model (Crittenden, 2000). What starts off simple has become tricky.

Clearly views differ on the utility of attachment style in practice. Its advocates recommend it as a powerful tool for understanding and improving relationships, whereas others suggest its importance is over-stated, and caution that it is easily misapplied.

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, attachment theory can offer a practical lens for understanding the impact of early experiences, the psychological processes involved in empathy and self-regulation, and the supervisory relationship. Equally, it is important not to overestimate the utility of attachment theory or pretend that it offers any predictive powers at an individual level. At best a theory helps to think, and sometimes it has no role at all. Even attachment 'greats' (Bowlby, 1973, Rutter et al, 2009) have cautioned about putting too much weight on attachment – it is not a magic bullet, nor a diagnosis.

It is worth considering a historical 'take' on the role attachment theory has in probation practice. Fashions come and go in probation; at the risk of simplification, in the mid-20th century a casework approach dominated, which by the 1970s had become a more structural, political way of understanding crime. Then there was an interlude when we thought that nothing worked, and so probation *was* the punishment rather than instead of the punishment. By the 1990s a psychological approach had returned, suggesting that we could do something about offending after all. This time it was a cognitive-behavioural approach, which, in retrospect was applied in a rather confrontative, punishing way, with any suggestion that the offender might have had some awful times, or been abused themselves being inadmissible. That was going soft, and it did not fit with that era of the 'punitive turn'.

Fast forward to the present, and we are allowed to use terms like 'service user' or 'people on probation', we use desistance theory, strengths-based approaches, we like the 'good lives' idea that people are less risky if they are supported to create a liveable life, and – getting to the point here – we are allowed to consider the effect that early attachments have on the way that we develop. So if we were to ask 'where have we got to now?', it could be argued that despite all of the difficulties that cuts and unification have thrown at the service, theoretically we have arrived at a healthy eclecticism, and there is the ability to work in a humanising and respectful way.

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