

Introduction

Scottish Attachment in Action's conference this year demonstrates SAIA's commitment to informing and promoting why attachment matters throughout the lifespan life – from cradle to grave we all have a fundamental need for human connection and love.

Over the last twenty years understandings from attachment theory have been increasingly influential on the parenting and professional care of young children. It is now widely understood that infants and young children flourish when they have adults who can provide them with reliable comfort and protection and the opportunity for reciprocal joy and delight. These relationships provide a space where children can easily develop essential social and emotional skills such as self-regulation and emotional competence. These ideas have also been incorporated into central and local governmental policies. For older children whose early development has been compromised by the trauma of neglect or abuse the importance of using the therapeutic power and healing potential of new more positive attachment relationships has also become generally recognised. This focus on the importance of attachment relationships in childhood is welcome; in addition it would be Scottish Attachment In Action's view that attachment theory has much to offer in understanding and improving the human experience more widely. This paper is intended to spark thoughts, raise questions and generate interest in the potential for adopting an attachment-informed approach across many more areas of our lives.

The healing power of relationships

The cascading negative impact of adverse childhood experiences throughout life is now widely recognised but we need to avoid a fatalistic pessimism about this. The emerging evidence of the positive effects of using attachment focused parenting and attachment focused therapeutic approaches to support the recovery of traumatised children and young people offers hope for adults who still carry the emotional and social burdens of unbearable childhood pain. Counsellors, therapists, social workers, and health professionals have long understood the importance of the therapeutic relationships they develop however recognising their role as attachment figures may feel less comfortable or even inappropriate. There can be professional anxiety about creating dependence which perhaps fails to recognise that for some people their route to developing the capacity for interdependence may require a dependable experience of safety, predictability and comfort as well as reciprocity that can help repair trust and hope. The following case study illustrates the power of such healing relationships.

Much of my work involves offering long-term therapy to adults with a background of trauma who often have, a background where a secure base was not formed in infancy/childhood; or where that healthy attachment was lost or broken. Central to the therapeutic relationship is making sense of those negative experiences with adult clients and offering the secure base they have been missing.

Adults whose earliest needs have not been met usually come to counselling with a view that I will not or cannot meet their needs. They often have little expectation that I can help them begin to discover and learn how to meet their own needs.

The building of trust between us takes a long time. Consistency in our work is essential. They need to know and learn to trust that I will be there when I say I will -that if I am to provide that secure base, then they are able to leave me (the therapy space) with the knowledge that I will be there when they return.

Neil¹ (23) came to me struggling with being able to maintain romantic relationships. He found himself controlling, terrified of abandonment and loss, unable to trust, with very low self-worth and devastated by endings. His mother left the family home when he was two years old - his primary attachment figure left and did not return to him.

His relationship with Dad suffered on many levels and did not provide the safety and security needed for secure attachment. He was a lonely, sad, confused child abandoned with the experience of no one being able or willing to meet his needs.

Neil's insecurity meant he desperately sought and clutched love and connection, yet struggled to receive it when it was offered. He also pushed people away with the same intensity with which he needed that love demonstrated to him. As an adult he believed he was unworthy of love, and was confused and distrusting when I showed him kindness or acceptance.

Our therapy work was a long process over years of building up his trust in me and allowing me to be emotionally close to him. He gradually began to rely on me and to ask for my support, which was complemented with boundary setting to ensure he didn't cling to me in a way which might overwhelm me and/or inhibit his growth in his ability to rely on himself too. Learning personal boundaries is an essential part of secure healthy relationships. Had he had that secure attachment in infancy, this would have been in place as an adult. This reparative relationship with me modelled to him the importance of being able to set basic guidelines of how you wish to be treated and how to respond to the wishes of people close to him. He often tested my commitment to him, he would say things to try to hurt me or push me away (often unconsciously). He was always desperate to be my "favourite client" – continually looking for me to confirm his worth.

As part of our work and my commitment to him I took his story and our relationship to my counselling supervisor. Establishing a trusting attachment relationship with young people or adults who have not had a secure base can be difficult. It can be tricky, frustrating, tiring and at times feel hopeless. It can also tug at parts of your own attachment history which can exacerbate the difficulty in offering it to another. Supervision, self-care, support for yourself is crucial.

Counselling is only one strand through which we as human beings try to form, repair, provide and receive healthy attachment relationships. Without wanting to do myself out of a job, my hope is that those working and living with young people who have not had a fair start in life are able to offer the safety and trust that can help those young people gain a secure base. The truth is, if young people are offered a secure attachment relationship there is less likelihood of them needing counselling and psychological services as adults.

Human beings don't want to be fixed, they are not broken. Instead, they want to find ways of being able to support themselves and to have an ability and willingness to seek support from others. Offering a secure base to help form a safe, connective relationship with self and others is arguably the greatest gift we can offer another.

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¹Not the client's real name

Outside the professional arena we also need to recognise the power of normal human love and relationships to reignite the possibility of belonging and reciprocity in people whose early experiences of people have been associated with mistrust or betrayal.

Attachment beyond childhood

Our needs for comfort and protection do not disappear as we reach adulthood. Most of us have special people we turn to at moments of need – friends, partners or family members. Often such relationships are mutually supportive, we are attachment figures for each other. The dominant narrative within the UK, however, privileges the individual over the group and values independence over interdependence.

This can leave people lonely and disconnected particularly at times of crisis. Attachment theory can help us recognise the importance of community and connection and the negative consequences for individuals and groups when these are lacking. **Can we create societal and professional systems and structures that support the development of this type of community and connection?**

Cultural differences, life events, mental health issues, physical or intellectual difficulties may increase the vulnerability and neediness of any of us and this might make us more dependent on the emotional or physical support of those we trust whether on a permanent or temporary basis. Can we challenge assumptions that seeking help and connection in these circumstances somehow diminishes our worth?

For many of us as we reach old age, increased physical frailty or cognitive decline will shift our relationships with our own children and a reversal of roles can take place where we find ourselves seeking comfort, care and protection from the same individuals we once cradled and soothed as infants. Once again the importance of very basic rhythms of life, consistency of relationship and soothing sensory experiences become key in insuring quality of life. There is a growing body of evidence that demonstrates that attachment-informed practice can have a similar transformational impact on the care of elderly people, whether within families or in professional settings, that it has had on our parenting and professional practice with children.

Attachment in organisations

The strongest influences on our children and young people, other than their families, come from the various educational environments they experience. From nursery to further education children are introduced to systems, structures and processes that powerfully affect their everyday lives and development. Educational organisations that recognise that learning is relational – we learn best from people we like and respect - and promote emotional health also support effective learning for all. Indeed for some children school is the safe base when home is not. As children progress through the educational system they move through environments that inevitably become increasingly less attachment-promoting. In nurseries children have their own key workers and within primary schools most of their time is still spent with a single teacher albeit in a much larger group. Once a young person moves to secondary school, however, they are likely to have a timetable that involves multiple changes of teachers, peers and places throughout their school day. In further and higher education most learning takes place either alone through self-study or in large classes. Effectively children and young people become progressively less known and recognised as individuals. Many of these structural differences are the inevitable outcome of the different curricular demands at different stages of children's education. An understanding of attachment theory has, however, allowed many schools to introduce processes, systems and structures that promote the importance of relationships and help teachers notice and recognise distress even when it is expressed through difficult behaviour. Such attachment-promoting schools provide an environment where children who have experienced adversity or trauma can be supported to recover but also where typically developing children are more likely to flourish and enjoy their learning and relationships.

What would be necessary to create an educational system where such attachment informed practice would be the norm?

As adults many of us spend a huge proportion of our lives in work settings and recognise that our emotional health and well-being can be profoundly affected by the way our working lives are structured and how well we are managed. Perhaps inevitably, authority structures and colleague relationships can mirror family experiences of rebelling against parents or being nurtured by them, as well as rivalry with siblings or enjoyment of the camaraderie and excitement shared with them. Where the importance of supportive relationships within organisations is recognised this can not only create greater productivity and less absences but also provides an emotionally healthy environment for all. An audit culture, short term or zero hour contracts, punitive targets, reputational anxieties and an increased focus on the digital sphere have all contributed to an environment in which work organisations have become less safe and containing places where relationships can be fractious rather than team-oriented. Where organisations have focused on creating a relational culture with processes and procedures that are congruent with this approach then employees are happier, staff retention improves and the primary task of the organisation is achieved. The basic responsibility of the caring industries is to provide care, support or help for people in some kind of need that is delivered through relationships with others. Yet even in these settings there can be little focus on the needs of workers for consistency, supportive relationships and emotional safety.

Is it possible to, as the norm, create organisations that are attachment informed which will have benefits for employers and employees?

Attachment to Place

We tend to think of attachment as only relevant in personal relationships yet there is a growing literature about the importance of attachment to place. Similar factors influence our attachments to places as they do to people. The places we become attached to have been those where we have consistently experienced safety or comfort – this may be a house we have lived in or a school we attended. It may equally, however, be a place in the community where we could retreat when we were sad or distressed and find soothing – a religious building, a library, a favourite outdoor space or the gym. Many of these places have the enduring quality of personal attachments – even when we have not visited them for a long time they have meaning. Many of us gain great pleasure from visiting childhood haunts many years later and are outraged if we discover they have disappeared or changed. This attachment to place underpins some of the campaigns to preserve buildings, outdoor places or institutions that are under threat because of new priorities or changing policies. Sometimes such closures can have powerful effects for individuals. Adults who grew up in children's homes, for example, whose sense of their own narrative is already compromised may find it particularly difficult if their childhood homes have disappeared without trace – some even begin to doubt their own memories and experiences. Creative use of digital archiving and social media can help preserve attachment to place even when original buildings or places have disappeared or changed beyond recognition.

Danger and distortion in attachment

Finally, we maybe need to consider the potentially lethal implications of our collective failure to provide the political, social and emotional environment where individuals, groups and communities can feel included and experience positive attachment relationships. Human beings are social animals with a powerful drive to connect to others and feel a sense of belonging. If these opportunities do not exist within our families or communities and no compensatory or healing experiences are available then the hurt and excluded will find each other and may find their sense of connection or belonging in their shared rage or pain. In many cases this will fuel positive social change and the creation of communities of interest but it may also have destructive consequences. Gangs create strong bonds and give their members an illusory sense of safety and comfort. The genius of the Violence Reduction Unit's approach to Glasgow's gangs was that it recognised this function and worked to provide alternative more prosocial ways for young gang members to feel connected and to belong. Using an attachment perspective may help us to understand both the resurgence of terrorism and the poison of racism. **Are there implications from an attachment perspective, for example, of adopting a seemingly deliberate policy to create a hostile environment for immigrants?**

Conclusion

This paper is by no means an exhaustive account of the way that a better understanding of attachment could enhance professional practice and human relationships more widely. That was never its purpose. At Scottish Attachment in Action we want to encourage exploration, debate and challenge. We hope that our members and any other individuals and organisations interested in attachment will join in this discussion. Let us push at the boundaries! What would an attachment-informed prison system look like? Or an immigration service that recognised the meaning and importance of relationship for individuals, communities and society at large? How would attachment-minded politicians frame policy and law? It is our contention that any service, profession, community or business that involves connection with people would benefit from underpinning their work with an attachment –informed approach. What do you think?

Written by Catherine Cooke and Judy Furnivall, SAIA Trustees, December 2019