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ATTACHMENT AS A FUNDAMENTAL LINK FOR HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT:

Considerations on attachment are presented in three parts. The first part begins with a challenging exercise necessary for personal introspection and relational empathy, in order to understand the nucleus of existence. The second section discusses the definition of the *attachment* concept, the developer of the attachment theory, the collaborators and the continuators of the theory, the internal working model, the fundamental dimensions of attachment (proximity – availability versus emotional responsiveness – accessibility – malleability of attachment – communication patterns – the "secure base" – the "Ainsworth Strange Situation"), the patterns of attachment (secure – avoidant – ambivalent – disorganized/disoriented). The final section represents an introduction to the transgenerational transmission, which will be discussed in the second part of the article and published subsequently.

Keywords: attachment, attachment theory

REZUMAT:

Considerațiile referitoare la atașament sunt prezentate într-o succesiune de trei părți; prima parte pleacă de la un exercițiu provocator, necesar introspecției personale și empatiei relaționale în înțelegerea nucleului existenței. Se continuă cu definirea termenului de *atașament*, părintele conceptului, colaboratori și continuatori, modelul intern de lucru, dimensiunile fundamentale (proximitatea – disponibilitatea *versus* responsivitatea emoțională – accesibilitatea – maleabilitatea atașamentului – tiparele de comunicare – „baza de siguranță” – „situația străină Ainsworth”), tiparele de atașament (securizant – evitant – ambivalent – dezorganizat/dezorientat). Finalul inițiază începutul celei de a doua părți, referindu-se la transmiterea transgenerațională.

Cuvinte-cheie: atașament, concepte, teoria atașamentului

Introduction

The considerations on attachment are expressed and compiled in a series of three parts, starting with the (written) challenge of an exercise that should be tried by each and every one of us in our becoming as persons, when working with people and for people, as well as in interrelating with people and with ourselves. Let us then try the following exercise...

Imagine attachment as the ready to open flower “bud”, or the drop of water that forms the lake, the sea, the ocean... We are 89 % water, so that expressing and experiencing attachment positively or negatively crystallises the water of our life. Attachment can be likened to the water ripple, an undulation that contains the expressiveness characteristic of every man as a globe of light. Attachment patterns are continuously developed and constructed in the course of our life. The word “construction” (Alan Badier, 2007) evokes the *Gestalt* theory (meaning – shape – image – structure). The figure is gradually developed, formed and crystallised against a background. Development, crystallisation and structuring are processes that help the image appear and manifest itself. It is the process by which the experience of life is manifested in the “here and now.” From its very first days in the world, the little being forms an attachment to the figure of the mother, and this connection will continue to be shaped during its entire life. Imagine, therefore, that you are holding a piece of dough (as big or as small as you wish), and slowly shape it in the form of what you are experiencing in the “here and now”, until the lump takes the shape of a PERSON. While doing this exercise in imagination and movement, observe your thoughts and feelings at the deepest and most sensitive level of the soul-mind relationship. Observe yourself at the different stages of shaping the potential form: when the dough seems to slip through your fingers, when it is moulded by your fingers; observe what happens when one hand takes shape, while the other one seems to resist you. Feel and observe what you experience during the exercise you were challenged to do for a brief period in the here and now. Bringing close, moving away, sliding, breaking apart or losing the lump of dough sends you certain messages, makes you vibrate. Similarly, attachment, separation and loss are processes shaped and implemented in every minute and every moment of our life. Each one of us crystallises and develops a certain way of being, as a result of personal dynamics, strength or fragility and in response to the dynamics of individual living environment(s). *Psychotherapy helps resignify, transform and fluidise these processes*. But before discussing the therapeutic efforts, let us revise together the theoretical aspects of the *attachment* concept.

I. Concept definition

The concept of *attachment* and the attachment theory are fundamentally connected to **John Bowlby**’s name. Formulated in 1959, the attachment theory differs substantially from all previous theories regarding the primacy of social and emotional bonds formed by the child. The tendency to seek contact with a congener is not a derivative tendency, but a primary and permanent one. In essence, the attachment theory contradicts theories of social learning, as well as psychoanalysis. From the perspective of *social learning theories*, attachment is formed with those individuals who contribute to the satisfying of social needs, while *psychoanalysis* claims that the child forms a bond with the mother in order to satisfy its feeding needs.

In developing the theory, **Bowlby** was inspired by two conceptual directions: the first was offered by the works of **René Spitz** and the second was represented by the **ethological perspective (H. F. Harlow)**. **R. Spitz** considers, on the one hand, that maternal deprivation in the early years of life fundamentally disrupts the development and growth of children, even though the environment provides for the physical needs, and, on the other hand, that satisfying feeding needs is not sufficient for forming object relations. If separation from the mother happens after the age of 6 months, when a certain relationship mother – child has been formed, although no identification with a stable image is yet possible, the child’s anxious inhibition and disinterest in the outside world (*anaclitic depression*) can disappear if the child is reunited with his mother. In the case of a fundamental emotional deprivation in the early years, the resulting disorders can be as severe as mental disorganisation and even death. Studies on *hospitalism* have offered a completely new meaning to the

studies on child institutionalisation conditions. In addition, **ethological** studies have noted in animals the presence of innate behavioural systems that make possible the immediate forming of relations with a congener by means of physical contact, crying, nipple suckling (the works of **H. F. Harlow**).

Continuing the considerations on attachment, we can add some important aspects supported by the **empirical research**.

1. The newborn is equipped with well-prepared means of attracting the congener's attention, for which reason the adult does not have to develop a repertory of reactions to these signals or effective means of stimulation; the reactions should be intuitive, innate. *Attachment bonds* should be understood as *the working of a system, not that of an individual*.

2. If attachment towards a congener (usually the mother) is fundamental, attachment bonds can also be formed with many other figures from the child's external environment: father, siblings, nanny, etc.

3. Starting from the children's reaction to a standardized situation, in which the presence/ absence of the mother and a stranger is systematically controlled (*strange situation*), **Ainsworth** distinguished several types of attachment: *secure* attachment, *ambivalent* attachment and *avoidant* attachment (in which the mother represents a more or less effective secure base). These types of attachment are formed with a given attachment figure, but they can change depending on the living conditions.

4. Relationships of attachment are *relationships of security and autonomy*, (not dependence) and are important for the entire life.

5. Attachment bonds begin to be formed with *the construction of an internal working model* of dyadic relations, which will serve as a prototype for subsequent relationships. Authors like **Lamb** and **Sroufe** favour more general concepts like *the feeling of control* and *the feeling of efficiency*, which support both the cognitive dynamic and the emotional experiences.

6. The behaviour the mother displays towards the baby relies on the representations of the mother's own experiences of attachment during childhood. These representations, enhanced through a cognitive effort of modifying internal patterns, deeply influence the quality of attachment formed by the baby and lead to a certain transgenerational stability. From this point of view, the study of events able to modify these representations is the object of research on this topic.

II. Attachment theory – theory developers, collaborators and continuators. Key concepts

As mentioned above, the father of the *attachment theory* was **John Bowlby**. His theoretical contributions were empirically tested and subsequently elaborated by **Mary Ainsworth**. The intellectual collaboration between the two proved to be extremely fruitful, as Bowlby's ideas successfully meshed and intertwined with those of Mary Ainsworth's. About the collaboration, J. Bowlby's son wrote: “... it was a dynamic duo. You can't say precisely who developed the theory, just like, in a flight of stairs, you can't say that one stair belongs to the flight and the next don't. Their relationship was a very long conversation. Without Ainsworth, my father would have been nothing but a shadow... (although) without my father, Ainsworth would have been nobody” (cf. David J. Wallin, 2010, p. 27). The collaboration between Bowlby and Ainsworth represented not only the foundation of the attachment theory, but also the starting point for numerous other empirical researches concerning attachment.

Thus, **Mary Main** shifted the research focus from childhood attachment to *adult attachment* and from *nonverbal behaviour* to *mental representation*. Inspired by her work, **Peter Fonagy** and his colleagues determined that *intersubjective attachment bonds* represent a key context for the development of the vital human capacities of insight and empathy.

J. Bowlby. *The attachment system constitutes a genetic component of human programming*, just like feeding and reproduction. The primary nature of attachment dictates the child's absolute need to have physical closeness with the caregiver, not only to ensure emotional development, but also as a precondition for survival. The genetic dimension of attachment was enlarged with the concept that attachment is significant during our entire life (“**Intimate attachment to other human**

beings is the pivot of a person's life, not only in infancy or childhood, but also in adolescence and early maturity, and then during adult life and in old age" [cf. David Wallin, 2010]).

Three types of behaviour can be identified:

(1) *searching for, monitoring and attempting to maintain proximity to a protective attachment figure* (the mother or other close persons in the family hierarchy); **"... according to Bowlby, the fact that children preferentially seek the mother's company derives from the reality that attachment is formed based on availability. Reading the studies conducted in Sweden, Mary Main noted that even when the mother does not stay at home and the father is the primary *de facto* parent, the mother is still the highly preferred parent. Main suggests that this "surprising discovery" can be explained by the child's prenatal experience (such as the intrauterine exposure of the foetus to the mother's voice and the baby's explicit preference for the mother), which more or less guarantees that the mother will become the primary attachment figure even before the child's birth"** (Mary Main, 1999, in David Wallin, 2010, p. 28);

(2) *using the attachment figure as a "secure base"* (Ainsworth); when the attachment figure provides security, support and protection, the child wishes to explore; if there is no attachment figure, no exploration takes place;

(3) *seeking refuge in the attachment figure as if in a "safe haven" at times of uncertainty, danger and alarm*; tensions, threats, dangers of any kind, separation proper or the imminence of separation from the mother causes the child to look for proximity, an essential component of attachment behaviour;

(4) *internal working models* are based on the theories advanced by **Kenneth Craik** and **Jean Piaget**.

Kenneth Craik was an innovator in what would later become artificial intelligence – "the internal working model." **"If the mind possesses a 'small scale model' of external reality and its own possible actions, the body is capable of trying various alternatives, decide which alternative is best, react to future situations before they occur, use knowledge from past events to handle present and future situations and, to react as complete, as safe and as competent as possible to emergencies it is faced with"** (Craik, 1934, in David J. Wallin, 2010). The cognitive psychologist **Jean Piaget** was the first to use the term "cognitive schemas" to describe the child's interaction with objects and the impact these experiments have on the child's development, as well as the child's interaction with the world. **"In the working model of the world that every person builds, the attachment figure is a key component: who the figure is, where it can be found and how it is expected to react. Similarly, in the working model of the self that every person creates, the notion of how acceptable or unacceptable the person is found by the figure of attachment constitutes a key element. The structure of these complementary models forms the basis of the person's predictions about how accessible or responsive its figures of attachment may be."** (Bowlby, 1973, in David J. Wallin, 2010) Thus, internal working models of attachment make possible the recognition of patterns in the interaction with the caregiver, patterns which were formed and developed in the past and on the basis of which the child can "know" how the caregiver will react. This **internal working model** influences expectations and behaviour and shapes interactions, but can also be shaped in turn. This is where the subsequent conceptual distinction between *secure attachment*, *avoidant attachment*, *ambivalent attachment* and *disorganised/disoriented attachment* results from (Mary Ainsworth).

In **Bowlby's** understanding, the fundamental dimensions of attachment are:

- **proximity;**
- **emotional availability – responsiveness (between the child and the caretaker)**, by creating an internal dimension based on the child's experience;
- **accessibility.**

Mary Ainsworth. An exceptional collaboration between J. Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth who described consecutive stages in the attachment theory. A specialist in developmental psychology at the

University of Toronto, Mary Ainsworth contributed to the theory of attachment with concepts concerning:

- **maleability of attachment** – in the sense that qualitative differences in the attachment behaviour of individuals depend on the behaviours of different caregivers;
- **patterns of communication** between the caregiver and the child represent the key to future security or insecurity;
- **the “secure base”** – a concept that refers to the influence of the child’s expectations regarding the caregiver, which expectations eventually crystallise into mental maps or representations called by Bowlby “internal working models”;
- **the “Ainsworth strange situation”** – conducted in Baltimore in 1964 and focusing on the study of behaviour in early childhood.

The studies conducted in Uganda and Baltimore provided arguments for distinguishing three distinct types of attachment, each type being associated with a corresponding, different pattern of mother – child interaction.

Secure attachment. Irrespective of how much the separation from the mother affected them, securely attached children were immediately comforted after being reunited with the mother and resumed their play or previous activity. In these cases, *the maleability of attachment* proves flexible and resilient, as a result of interaction with a sensitive mother, who responds to her baby’s signals and communicates with him. These mothers know how to hold the child and for how long, and are able to adapt their rhythm to the child’s rhythm, without trying to impose a certain rhythm. During the securing dyads, the child clearly expresses the need for being comforted after separation from the mother, he is easily comforted and manifests the capacity to immediately resume its activity. This communication is collaborative and contingent: the mother’s responses fit to the child’s needs, which results in congruent communication.

Sensitivity – acceptance – cooperation – emotional availability.

Sensitiveness and responsiveness

Psychologically, **s.a.** is characterised by: high self-esteem, emotional and affective balance, resilient self, concentration during games and activities, social competency, congruent positive social relations.

Avoidant attachment. Children with an avoidant attachment style are engaged in permanent exploration, but remain obviously uninfluenced by the mother’s coming or going, their distress is masked and they appear to be calm. In fact, during separation from the mother, the pulse of these children is as raised as that of distressed children with secure attachment, while the cortisone level before and after exposure is significantly higher than that of securely attached children. The apparent indifference of avoidantly attached children indicates defensive accommodation, since the child has reached the conclusion that opening up to comfort or care would be useless and has consequently given these up. The mothers of avoidantly attached children refused closeness or cringed when the children were sad. **Inhibition of emotional expression – aversion to physical contact – rejection** developed by children with avoidant attachment. Avoidantly attached children suppress any kind of communication that might require a connection; they express no need for proximity and seem insensitive to any opening up from the mother. Emotional unavailability is a characteristic of the mothers who are disturbed by physical contact and tend to retreat in the face of their children’s sadness. Inhibiting the communication of attachment needs represents a means of adaptation – to avoid rejection, to prevent the mother alienating the child as a result of the child’s anger or revolt. (the mother’s rejection and the child’s anger at this reaction).

Psychologically, **a.a.** reveals: emotional and affective balance marked by retreat, oppositionalism, medium or low esteem and self-esteem, precarious resilience, incongruent and difficult social relations, with a tendency towards victimization of those with whom the individual comes into contact. There is a subsequent psychopathological risk of obsessional, narcissistic, schizoid disorders.

Ambivalent attachment. Children with an ambivalent attachment style are of two types: angry and passive. Both categories are extremely preoccupied with the mother's presence so that separation is not possible, the mother having to return almost immediately to the child, who shows overwhelming distress. Even in the mother's presence, when the parent returned to the room, the children was looking for a mother who was not there. The mothers of ambivalently attached children are occasionally and irregularly present. They do not reject the children like the mothers of avoidantly attached children, but show **insensitive responsiveness**. The communication of attachment needs in the case of children with ambivalent attachment continues at a very high level even in the mother's presence. The unpredictability of these children is the result of the mother's own mental states that lead to incongruent communication with the child. Thus, exercising pressure on the mother is a way of determining her to pay attention to the child (unpredictable availability, maximisation or minimisation in these children).

Psychologically: adherence and immaturity, infantile relationships with psychobehavioural regression, tendency towards victimization; psychopathological predisposition to developing a histrionic personality disorder.

Disorganised attachment. Almost 20 years after her master, one of Mary Ainsworth's talented students, Mary Main identified another type of attachment with a manifestation that did not fit any of the classical, traditional categories. The observed children showed curious, inexplicable and contradictory behaviour in the presence of their parent. ***Disorganised attachment remained unidentified for such a long time because it is only manifested over a very brief time period, between 10 and 30 seconds, and only certain aspects of behaviour are indicated during the strange situation.*** This is why every observed child was alternatively classified in one of the previously outlined categories – secure, avoidant, ambivalent.

Mary Main considers that disorganised attachment occurs when the attachment figure is simultaneously experiences as a "safe haven" and a source of danger, so that the child is caught between contradictory impulses of closeness or retreat, and avoidance (a "biologic paradox" of disorganisation or disorientation). Mary Main proposes that disorganised/disoriented attachment should be understood as a result of the child's interaction with parents who are *scary*, *scared* or *detached*. Disorganised attachment is seen as a "*strategy breakdown*" on the part of the child who experiences "fear with no solution" (David J. Wallin, 2010).

Subsequent psychopathological vulnerability leads to the development of a borderline personality.

Attachment patterns are manifested in time, since the relationship with the attachment figures leads to psychobehavioural continuation and strengthening of the patterns, as well as their internalisation as mental structures. Consequently, the initial genetical and biological internalization can be psychically registered as mental representations that shape lifelong behaviour and subjective experiences, irrespective of the presence or absence of attachment figures, or as the so-called "survival programs."

Mary Main, as the continuator of the concepts connected to the attachment theory, after her transfer to the University of California in Berkley in the '70s, implemented a study presenting **two types of strange situations** that the child experiences: one with the mother and one with the father.

To this situation it is added the concept of **mental representations of the child** (inner world): memories, emotions, beliefs with subsequent shaping influence on the present and future attachment behaviour. An individual's working model of attachment is manifested in characteristic patterns of expression, discourse, imagination, behaviour. **The parent's working models shapes the child's working models.** The parents' internal working models indicate the mental state towards attachment, so that the fitting of parents in a certain category of mental state towards attachment can predict the category of attachment in which the child fits even before birth and during the strange situation. Thus, the parents of securely attached children are characterised by a "secure/autonomous" mental state towards their attachment. The parents of the children with avoidant attachment manifest "rejection", minimize exploration of their attachment, claiming not to have any memories about this. The parents of ambivalently attached children manifest "preoccupation" and their past

attachments are experienced as disturbing in the present. As for the parents of the children with disorganised attachment, they manifest “a lack of solutions/disorganisation”, when they intermittently speak about attachment.

The way in which the parent talks about their personal experiences of attachment is connected with the attachment behaviour of the child in the strange situation. The security of the parent’s mental state towards attachment is much less dependent on the past if the personal effort in the present represents an effort to give meaning to the past events by means of a detached, relaxed living and an understanding of the lifestyle.

Mary Main was particularly impressed with what she found as a result of her studies regarding: **(1) patterns of non-verbal behaviour in small children, (2) representations of attachment in 6 year-old children and (3) the form and content of parents’ discourse during the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI).**

“... a set of conscious and/or unconscious *rules* for organising the information relevant to attachment... The organisation of secure attachment versus different types of non-secure attachment can be best understood in terms that refer to certain types of internal working models... that controls not only *feelings and behaviours, but also attention, memory and cognition*... Individual differences in... internal working models are connected *not only with individual differences in patterns of non-verbal behaviour, but also with patterns of language and mind structures*” (Mary Main, 1985, in David J. Wallin, 2010).

The communication behaviours of children with avoidant attachment and children with ambivalent attachment reflect adaptive strategies for the optimization of attachment to parents who are, on the one hand, predictably non-responsive and, on the other hand, unpredictably responsive (Mary Main, 1981, in David J. Wallin, 2010).

Transgenerational transmission

As we could notice, attachment patterns are transmitted from generation to generation. Based on what the first study showed with the help of the Adult Attachment Interview, Mary Main concluded that parents who fitted in disfunctional categories of attachment – avoidant, ambivalent, disorganised – are caught in their own experiences of loss or trauma from early childhood. Since they were never consciously processed, these experiences are stored at certain levels of the psyche and can be activated in psychoemotional and psycho-relational life contexts, or in the interaction with their own children. The inheritance of unresolved trauma and/or loss stored at a certain mental level can become a way of existence, of survival, that confers meaning and signification. If this meaning represents a way of living, it can be difficult to access and change. Children preserve the parents’ “mental state”, and this is the reason why transgenerationally transmitted patterns are generationally continued.

The concept of transgenerational transmission will be subsequently enlarged by Peter Fonagy. In 1991, Mary Main introduces two concepts meant to complete her studies and research regarding the links of the attachment chain. These are the concepts of **metacognition, metacognitive knowledge and metacognitive monitoring**. The two concepts were based on the “multiple models” advanced by Bowlby, who in turn interpreted Freud’s hypothesis about the dynamic unconscious (Main, 1991, in David J. Wallin, 2010). The (incompatible and conflicting) multiple models lead to a narrowing of attention in order to handle the situation of “knowing” what one shouldn’t know and feeling what one shouldn’t feel (Bowlby, 1988). This narrowing limits the individual’s capacity to reflect on his or her own experiences. *Metacognition* refers to the mind’s capacity to reflect on its own thinking processes. *Metacognitive knowledge* makes possible an understanding of the fact that our present experience is profoundly influenced by subjacent mental states, what we have come to believe, feel or wish. *Cognitive monitoring* allows us to observe what is happening inside ourselves, as well as outside our experience. From Mary Main’s point of view, the presence of metacognition is associated with security and its lack, with insecurity. However, she couldn’t explicitly show whether metacognition favours secure attachment, or secure attachment favours metacognition. In

addition, Main was not prepared to defend the crucial role that the parents' metacognition plays in deciding the security or insecurity of their children's attachment.

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