

John Bowlby

By Simon Baron-Cohen, Cambridge University, and author of The Essential Difference (Penguin/Basic Books)

John Bowlby (1907-1990) is, for me, one of the great figures of psychology. He started as a student of psychology in Trinity College, Cambridge, before studying psychiatry at the Maudsley Hospital, London, and ending up as a psychoanalyst, ethologist, and Deputy Director of the Tavistock Clinic, London, from 1950. He is widely credited with having developed 'attachment theory'. When I first heard of his theory, I had a 'so what?' reaction. But over the decades I have come to appreciate its deep importance.

Attachment theory says that offspring of primates (and perhaps other species) have an evolved, biological drive to "attach" to an adult member of the same species, either literally (by for example holding onto the adult for grim life, seen in baby monkeys) or to behave in such a way as to 'close the gap' between infant and caregiver (by for example crying, causing the infant to be picked up, or by crawling after their caregiver, to stay close).

Bowlby argued that this biological drive to stay close or attach to a caregiver is independent of other drives: it is not secondary to thirst or hunger, for example. Harry Harlow's famous experiment proved Bowlby was right: if a baby monkey is reared in isolation, with a food dispenser at one end of the cage and a soft cloth (a "surrogate mother") at the other end, the infant spends most of its time clinging to the soft cloth, taking occasional breaks to cross the cage for food or liquid.

Bowlby pointed out that the attachment drive serves a biological survival function, since young dependent offspring end up in close proximity to an adult who can protect them from being lunch for some predator or being left behind when the herd moves on.

More interestingly, Bowlby argued that, over and above its biological survival function, a 'secure' attachment has a profound psychological function: a 'secure' attachment in infancy predicts the individual's ability to go on to make deep, long-term intimate relationships across the lifespan. The presumed mechanism is that secure attachment promotes the development of healthy self-esteem, through the experience of being valued and loved by a parent-figure, and promotes the development of trust in intimate relationships.

What makes Bowlby's insights remarkable for me is that he was a psychoanalyst with his feet rooted in biology: his theory is as much psychodynamic as it is evolutionary. His idea is big because it established a human (indeed a primate) universal, implying a unique evolved circuit in the brain, independent of culture; and in the same breath his idea explained the origins of delinquency in adolescence, and 'borderline personality disorder' in adults. These teenage and adult outcomes do not just come out of the blue: most people with these outcomes experienced 'insecure' attachments in childhood, as a result of neglect (at best), or abuse (at worst).

Decades of subsequent experimentation and follow-up studies have demonstrated the truth of Bowlby's ideas. Securely attached children are also the most popular children, do best academically at school, are more self-confident, and do better in relationships. Insecurely attached children grow up into adults who have more relationship difficulties and who are at greater risk for personality disorders and depression.

I met John Bowlby in 1984, when he was close to 80. He had come to UCL to give a research seminar. I was 26, and studying for a PhD in Psychology. That evening I was privileged to be able to join him in a small group for dinner at a local restaurant in Euston. Whilst I understood his theory at an intellectual level then, it is only decades later that I stand in awe of his contribution. What other psychological theory can predict, from the first 12 months of life, if a person is going to grow up into an adult capable of being a caring parent or partner? The implications are massive, since if an insecurely attached infant end up being a less caring parent, they in turn are at risk of producing an insecurely attached infant, a repeating cycle of neglect across the generations.