Transference and Countertransference in the Light of Attachment Theory

Family Counseling Center
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James L. Poulton, Ph.D.
Overview

- Four Phases of Attachment Theory
- Integration of Attachment Theory with Theory of Transference/Countertransference
- Use of Transference, Countertransference and Attachment Theory in Psychotherapy
- Case Example
Four Phases of Attachment Theory
Pre-Phase: Early Attempts to Explain Parent-Infant Attachment

- **Drive Theory (Anna Freud):**
  - By feeding, mother helps discharge libidinal need
  - Pleasure from satisfaction of hunger associated with mother’s presence

- **Object Relations Theory (Melanie Klein):**
  - Satisfying breast as prototype of good object
  - Absent or withholding breast as bad object
  - Attachment still based in satisfaction of need

- **Behaviorists (Dollard & Miller):**
  - Infant turns to those who offer the most consistently positive rewards
First Phase: John Bowlby (1907-1990) and the Attachment Behavioral System

- Early research on children’s response to separation from caregivers
  - Three phases: Protest, Despair, Detachment
- World Health Organization Report (1951)
  - Children seriously deprived of maternal care tend to develop ‘affectionless’ symptoms
  - These children differed from others in that:
    - Prolonged separations from caregivers
    - Deviant parenting (violence or emotional abuse)
    - Separations occurred after 6 months
  - Conclusion: Provision of mothering is as important to a child’s development as proper diet and nutrition and cannot ‘be arranged by roster’
Ethological Theory of Attachment (Bowlby)

- **Evolutionary Perspective:**
  - Genetic selection favors attachment behaviors:
    - Increase child-mother proximity
    - Provide protection and security
    - Provide other outcomes relevant to survival:
      - Nurturance
      - Learning about environment (mastery)
      - Emotional regulation
      - Capacity for social interaction
  - The goal of the attachment system is not an object (e.g., mother), but a state: the maintenance of the desired distance from mother, depending on circumstances
Attachment Behavioral System (Bowlby)

- Continuously active (in guiding child’s attention)
- Closely coordinated with other systems (exploratory, escape, feeding, etc.)
- Activated or terminated by signals from internal and external environment
- Persists throughout lifetime
- Serves multiple survival functions
- Cannot always be conscious
Second Phase: The Strange Situation (Ainsworth) and Individual Differences

- The Strange Situation
  - 20 minute procedure with 2 separations and reunions between infant and caregiver
  - The child’s behavior is coded:
    - Response to separation and reunion
    - Quality of exploratory behavior in presence and absence of caregiver
    - Ability to be soothed
    - Reunion behavior distinguishes most between secure and insecure attachment
Four Attachment Styles (Ainsworth)

- Secure (55-65%)
- Insecure Avoidant (20-25%)
- Insecure Resistant or Ambivalent (10-15%)
- Insecure Disorganized (Added by Mary Main - 15-20%)
Secure Attachment

- Free exploration in presence of caregiver
- Show distress when caregiver is absent but respond positively upon return
- Seek contact with parent when distressed, and settle down once contact is made
- Parents of secure children are sensitive to child’s signals, receptive and accepting of child’s distress, consistent
- Key to secure attachment: Active, reciprocal interaction
Insecure Avoidant

- Will explore environment without checking on parent, if present
- Upon departure of parent, show little or no distress
- At reunion, do not move toward parent or try to initiate contact
- May actively ignore parent’s efforts to attract attention by turning or looking away
- When picked up from mother, they lean out from her body and shift attention by pointing to external objects
- Physiologically, these infants still show evidence of distress (increased heart rates and cortisol)
- Associated with parents who do not provide adequate comfort when child is upset or hurt
Insecure Resistant

- Child is reluctant to explore environment even in presence of parent
- Does not respond to parent’s attempt at soothing
- Preoccupied with getting attention of caregiver
- Extreme distress upon separation
- Upon reunion, child both seeks and resists contact and comfort
- Parents of resistant children tend to be inconsistent in response to child’s distress
Insecure Disorganized (Main)

- Lack organized pattern to their attachment behavior
- When stressed, appear disoriented and display unusual behaviors (rocking on hands, moving away from parent when frightened by stranger, falling prone to floor on reunion with parent, immobility, trancelike expressions)
- Have often experienced trauma or maltreatment or have a parent who has been traumatized
- May be related to being frightened by the parent, rather than simply the external situation
Third Phase: Internalization and Representation

- Bowlby extended his initial ethological theory to emphasize cognitive factors.
- The child’s sense of security (or insecurity) in relationship to attachment figures depends on cognitive factors, specifically expectations.
- The child seeks not just proximity, but ‘ready accessibility,’ ‘responsiveness,’ and ‘availability’ from parents, all of which depend on expectations.
- Internal Working Models
  - Encoded preverbally
  - Mental representations of attachment figure, self and environment
  - Based on past experience
  - Flexible models used to understand and predict relations with environment, make and execute plans
  - Updated (in normal conditions) as child grows
Adult Attachment Interview (Main & Goldwyn 1994)

- Structured interview focusing on early attachment experiences and their effects. Subjects are asked:
  - 5 adjectives to describe their relationship to each parent during childhood, and memories that support each adjective
  - Feelings of closeness/rejection by parents
  - Why parents behaved as they did
  - How these experiences affected the subject

- Subjects are thus given two tasks: (1) produce and reflect on memories involving early relationships and potential traumatic experiences, (2) simultaneously maintain coherent discourse

- Results are rated only as they are judged to adhere to or violate coherent discourse. Discourse is rated as coherent when the subject is able to access and evaluate memories while simultaneously remaining truthful (consistent) and collaborative

- Narrative coherence is ‘a manifestation of the adult’s capacity to reflect upon and contemplate internal affective experience: to understand his emotional life, its dynamics, its temporality, and its effect upon others.’ It requires the individual ‘to make sense of his own and others’ psychological experience.’ (Slade, 2000)
AAI Results: Four Categories of Narrative Capacity

- **Secure/autonomous**
  - Value attachment relationships
  - Coherently integrate memories into a meaningful narrative
  - Regard attachment events as formative

- **Insecure/dismissing**
  - Show avoidance by denying memories
  - Idealize or devalue early relationships
AAI Results Cont’d: Categories of Narrative Capacity

- Insecure/preoccupied
  - Confused, angry or fearful in relation to attachment figures
  - Sometimes still complain of childhood slights

- Unresolved
  - Significant disorganization in their representation of attachment relationships
  - Confusion in narratives concerning childhood trauma or recent loss
Main and colleagues compared caregivers’ styles (by AAI) with their infants’ attachment styles. They found that:

- Parent-to-child secure vs. insecure match is about 78%
- The match across four categories is 68%

Implications:

- The quality of the mother’s organization of her own attachment experiences profoundly influences the child’s representations of their attachment experiences.
- The mother’s mind is the template for the development of the child’s mind - especially in regard to attachment related experiences.
- Fonagy (2001): ‘Transgenerational consistencies in attachment classification may be understood as internalization of the caregiver’s defenses mobilized by the infant's distress.’
Fourth Phase: Mentalization, Affect Regulation and the Elaboration of the Internal World

- By the 1970s, the set goal of the attachment system was redefined - from actual security to ‘felt security’ (Sroufe & Waters, 1977).
  - This emphasized that internal cues, such as mood, felt stability of affect and fantasy, were relevant to a child’s response to separation (along with environment and external events).

- Set the stage for the reconceptualization of attachment theory in terms of affect regulation
  - ‘Affect regulation is an essential ingredient of the attachment system’ (Silverman, 1998).

- It quickly became clear that adequate affect regulation requires that the child possess an understanding of mental states - in others and in the self
  - ‘The early relationship environment is crucial not because it shapes the quality of subsequent relationships … but because it serves to equip the individual with a mental processing system that will subsequently generate mental representations, including relationship representations. The creation of this representational system is arguably the most important evolutionary function of attachment to a caregiver.’ (Fonagy, 2001)

- Attachment research then turned to explore the mechanisms by which the child develops the mental representations necessary to adequately regulate affect
Mentalization

- The process by which we realize that having a mind mediates our experience of the world.
- Intrinsically linked to the development of the self-organization and affect regulation.
- Provides foundation for responding not only to another’s behavior, but to the beliefs, feelings, attitudes, desires, etc. that underlie it.
- Makes both the self’s and other’s behavior meaningful and predictable.
Reflective Function

- ‘Refers to the operationalization of the psychological processes underlying the capacity to mentalize’ (Fonagy, et al)
- Involves both a self-reflective and an interpersonal component
- Provides a well-developed capacity to distinguish inner from outer reality, pretend from ‘real’ modes of functioning, and intrapersonal mental and emotional processes from interpersonal communications
Key Elements for Development of Mentalization

- Attunement: Modulation of parental response to match the infant’s
- Reciprocity
  - Mutual looking between mother and baby (Daniel Stern)
  - Parent offers complementary caregiving behavior that matches child’s attachment behavior
- Holding environment: ‘the entire psychophysiological system of protection, support, caring and containing’ (Holmes)
Representational Mapping

- Coordination of representations of self and other between mother and infant

- Mirroring:
  - ‘When the mother reflects, or mirrors, the child’s anxiety, this perception organizes the child’s experience, and he now ‘knows’ what he is feeling.’ (Fonagy et al, 2002)
  - ‘The mother’s representation of the infant’s affect is represented by the child and is mapped onto the representation of its self-state’ (Fonagy et al, 2002)
Mirroring

- Will fail if too close or too remote
- If too accurate, the mother’s reaction can become a source of fear and loses its symbolic potential (failure of markedness)
- If absent, not readily forthcoming, or contaminated with mother’s own preoccupation, the process of self-development is profoundly compromised (failure of contingency)
Internalizing Representations

- The infant internalizes the mother’s mirroring response
- Develops a secondary representation of his emotional state, with mother’s empathic face as the signifier and his own emotional arousal as the signified
- The pretend mode of reflective function: building representations during play
Failures of Adequate Mirroring

- Defensive exclusion (Holmes)
- Splitting, dissociation, encapsulation
- Obstructed updating
- Rigid and habitual patterns of interaction
- Compromises in affect regulation and ‘mentalized affectivity’ (Fonagy, et al.)
- Multiple and incompatible representations of self and other (Solomon & George)
- Avoidance of negative appraisals of self and other
Integration of Attachment Theory with Theory of Transference/Countertransference
Psychoanalytic Communalties

- Bion: container/contained model of projective identification
- Winnicott: mirroring and holding environment
- Klein: projective and introjective identification
- Mitchell: intersubjectivity
- Scharffs: geography of transference/countertransference
Transference, Countertransference and Attachment Theory in Psychotherapy
A therapist applying attachment theory sees his role as:

- Providing the conditions in which the patient can explore his representational models of himself and his attachment figures
- Helping the patient reappraise and restructure the models in the light of new understanding
Bowlby

- Five therapeutic roles
  - Provide a secure base
  - Help the patient consider ways in which he engages with significant relationships
  - Encourage exploration of the therapist-patient relationship
  - Consider how perceptions are a product of childhood relationships
  - Recognize that past images may no longer be appropriate
Analysis of Transference/Countertransference

- Both T and CT as keys to patient’s defensive exclusions
- Mirroring and playfulness (development of pretend mode)
- Importance of contingency and marking
- Creation of a new and more complete narrative
- Working through fear in the transference
Case Example


