

## Book Review

### Reassessing attachment theory in child welfare

White S., Gibson M., Wastell D., & Walsh P. (2020). **Reassessing attachment theory in child welfare**. Bristol: Policy Press. ISBN 978-1-443-3692-1 paperback. pp 163. GBP 17.59 plus post.

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What a book!

This book reassesses the scientific foundation of attachment theory as initially developed by John Bowlby. It also examines subsequent work by key exponents of attachment theory and the construction of a fourth-category ‘disorganised attachment’ to go alongside the three initial categorisations of secure, insecure and anxious-avoidant forms of attachment.

To quote:

Attachment theory is arguably now so magnificently malleable there is no possible permutation of behaviours or traits that it cannot plausibly explain (Preface. p. viii).

or

For child welfare professionals (*social workers/child protection workers* [italics added]), attachment theory provides a degree of comfort, succour against the glare of lives in the living, a handy vocabulary, a diagnostic gaze, learned-sounding re-descriptions of messy relationships and often a foil for moral judgements. Arguably, it is at its most hegemonic, and in many ways problematic, in child and family social work and child protection, and it is in these domains that we will concentrate (Preface. p. viii).

With this eloquent and grand rhetorical flourish, the book is launched.

The question then becomes: Can the authors provide data and research evidence to support the position they are taking in relation to the misapplication and misuse of attachment theory in child and family social work and child protection? A view that is confirmed, through my observations as a Guardian ad Litem in the NSW Children’s Court, of child protection workers, lawyers and magistrates who are all too readily relying on a less than correct version of attachment theory.

This small, well-written and easy to read book is made up of six chapters.

- Love is a wondrous state: Origins and early debate.

This chapter reviews the origin of attachment theory and its component parts, including the seminal empirical research on animals and humans.

- Social work and the attachment story: A felicitous bond?

Next, we have an examination of the symbiotic relationship between child welfare professional practice – social work, in particular – and the ascent of attachment theory.

- Shaping practice: Prescribing assessment.

This chapter develops these themes to review the use of attachment theory in practice guidance and child welfare policy, focusing on social work in England.

- Practising attachment theory in child welfare.

This chapter shows how attachment theory is used, or not, in professional practice and decision-making.

- Exhibiting disorganised attachment: Not even wrong?

Disorganised attachment is used as an ‘exhibit’ to show how research agendas get shaped and distorted by normative and habitual assumptions that drive the belief systems of the research community.

- Breaking the back of love: Attachment goes neuro molecular.

In this final chapter, the focus is on how attachment theory investigations are increasingly looking for fundamental biological mechanisms to explain behaviour and consequences.

At the end of this chapter (chapter 6), you get the following statement: ‘if the only handy tool you have is the hammer of attachment theory, there arises a tendency to treat everything as through it were a nail (an attachment disorder), at the cost of identifying problems elsewhere ‘in’ the child’s disposition, or indeed the social circumstances of the family’ (p. 120) (Pinto, 2019; White, Gibson, & Wastell, 2019). Never a truer word!

In an earlier publication, *Blinded by Science: The social implications of epigenetics and neuroscience*, by two of these authors, Wastell and White (2017), that was reviewed in *Children Australia*, there was some rehearsal of the arguments used in the current book. But, repeating these arguments again is a valuable reinforcement of several important messages.

In every chapter of the current book, the authors’ scientific rigour is impressive. As a result, this is the most solidly, scientifically based book relating to child and family social work and child protection that I have ever had the pleasure to read. Hopefully, it heralds a new phase in thinking about theory for use in these domains.

The authors of this book also thoroughly discuss Mary Ainsworth’s (no relation to the reviewer) Strange Situation Procedure (SSP). It is noted that only mothers and children seem to have been subjected to the procedure that allows clinicians to identify secure, insecure and anxious-avoidant forms of attachment or so it

is claimed. If this is the case, such practice feels very dated. It is as if the feminist movement has never happened and that it is legitimate for a mother to be blamed for their child's attachment standing. And what about fathers? Or more particularly a father as a single parent? Or gay and lesbian couples who now act as foster or adoptive parents? Where is the SSP research on these populations? There is also no differentiation, by degree of severity, of any of the possible categorisations of a child's attachment status, nor acknowledgement that attachment status may change over time.

These issues could have been usefully discussed, but regardless of the omission, this book is a 'must read' for professionals undertaking child and family assessments.

## References

- Pinto C. (2019).** Looked after and adopted children: Applying the latest science to complex biopsychosocial formulations. *Adoption and Fostering*, 43(3), 294–309.
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- White S., Gibson M., & Wastell, D. (2019).** Child protection and disorganised attachment: A critical commentary. *Child and Youth Services Review*, 105, 1–8.

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