

Tri-County BIP Providers Network Meeting  
Tuesday, July 15, 2008

Attendees: Chris Huffine (Allies in Change Counseling Center), Laura Milner (Allies), Jacquie Pancoast (ChangePoint), Brandi Gale, Ophelia Arango (ARMS), Regina Rosann (ARMS), Johnnie Burt (ARMS), Andrea Poole (Manley Interventions), Paul Lee (Men's Resource Center), Phil Broyles, Sara Windsheimer (Choices), Chris Wilson (Allies), Joan Scott (Allies), Margaret Braun (PSU), Jennifer Warren (Men's Resource Center/Women's Counseling Center), Birgit Preu, Brad Peterson (New Christian Counseling), Elsie Garland (Mult. County Juvenile Justice)

Minutes by Margaret Braun

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TODAY'S TOPIC: SPEAKER ON ATTACHMENT—BETH LANGHURST FROM OHSU

Beth started out wanting to get a PhD in clinical psychology, which she did not feel was right when she realized the program was focused on electroshock therapy. Then she got interested in attachment and completed a PhD in developmental psychology. She has done consulting for early childhood programs, but then went back to Pacific University and received a second PhD in clinical psychology.

There are quite a number of studies on the relationship between DV and attachment. The research is still in the early stages and is only descriptive of the relationship and has not yet come to the explanatory level.

The Circle of Security is a program developed by a group in Spokane, WA. They have put together a nice summary of attachment. Even though they explain basic attachment between a parent and child, they are really working with the parents. It is a great program. The people who train on this program are master clinicians and have worked with adults in many different kinds of settings.

The Circle of Security is a great representation of what attachment is. It demonstrates how the child needs attachment in terms of security but also a safe place from which to explore the world.

Some theories on attachment have been harmful to the field. One is that the parent and the child have a critical period of attachment and if they do not connect during this period they will never connect. Another is rage reduction and holding therapy. The basic idea is that the bond comes from rage reduction. This has led to the practice of holding and provoking the child (or the adult) to rage, and theoretically when you are holding them and they are in that rage, the rage is reduced and you form a bond.

There are really no good diagnoses of attachment disorders (e.g., reactive attachment disorder), but rather personality disorders are more related to attachment. But attachment is not pathology. Everyone experiences attachment because it is a basic component of being a human being- some people are just not securely attached.

What is attachment? It is a biological imperative for survival. Ethologists used animal models to study attachment. We would not survive if we didn't have a caregiver who is responsive to our needs. When you are dealing with the emotions surrounding an unavailable caregiver, you are dealing with survival emotions that are very primitive. A person who has a history of not trusting that their biological needs will be met experiences shame that essentially tells them that they don't deserve to live. Men (and women) who end up perpetrating violence toward others are motivated by shame. Shame that is touching the deep level of "do I deserve to live?"

Attachment used to be defined very easily, but now with new developments in neurobiology, etc., attachment is really an umbrella term for a lot of different functions. The primary attachment with the mother is critical because it is the foundation for development as a human being. It forms the core elements of what it takes to survive in the world. Neurobiological mechanisms involved with attachment do not come with you at birth, but are rather formed in the first years of mother-child interactions.

In the first years of mother-child interaction, that is really the only thing that matters. The interactions involve touch, vision, etc. and it all works together to form the brain of the infant. Huge emotions are communicated during the early years of the mother-child relationship.

Part of the function of that early interaction is that the baby starts to recognize that the mother is a reflection of their own feelings. Therefore they can refer to mom to understand how to react in certain situations. Kids who are securely attached will refer to mom's face when they are in a new situation to see if it is "okay," but they will also look to mom's face during exploratory play to share joy. That shared joy is a crucial part of human connection.

An example of problematic attachment was when a baby in her research was not reactive to his mother's sad face. Most babies become uncomfortable when their mother's faces are straight or sad. What they figured out is that the mother smiles with a fearful tendency, so a straight face from the mother was not much different than a smile from the mother. This baby would rock when he was stressed out because he couldn't look to her face for comfort or reassurance. This baby was also more likely to look to a stranger for comfort than to his mother- this mother turned out to be in an abusive relationship with her partner.

This points to the importance of the early relationship with the mother. It makes all the difference in how you learn to see yourself and your behavior.

More related to DV, another study found that mothers experiencing DV were not at all accurate in their responses to their children's needs. These mothers were kind of on their own agenda and they projected ideas and thoughts that were inconsistent with what was going on with the infant. The idea came about that connecting behavior with consequences is important in these early years. If the consequences for behavior are inconsistent, the child does not have a gut sense of taking responsibility for their actions.

Because so much of what goes on in those early years is so important, when the child is feeling threatened by the parent it really disrupts the process of developing out of the egocentric stage of child development. When the parent threatens the child, the child does not try to move out of that egocentrism. Part of developing out of egocentrism is understanding that people have thoughts that are different than yours and that you don't control the world. The consequences for not developing out of egocentrism include not being able to understand others' feelings and beliefs. They stay locked in a world where they can't distinguish their own representations from those of others' and from reality.

Beth is working on a case of man who is abusive to his wife, and it has shown her that this level of stress can cause people to not be in touch with reality. This is a function of early attachment issues and not being able to move past egocentrism and see yourself and other people, to feel securely related to other people.

One of the things that Men's Resource Center (as well as most other providers) teaches is for men to be aware of their belief systems. One client is very egocentric and now it makes sense that he can't understand the concept of "beliefs." He thinks of his beliefs as *facts*. He doesn't understand that other people have other beliefs.

Beth highly recommends the book *Attachment Theory, Child Maltreatment, and Family Support: A Practice and Assessment Model* by Howe, Brandon, Hinings, and Schofield. A classic is Bowlby's *A Secure Base*.

The two main concepts of poor attachment, Beth and other theorists/authors believe, are the problems that arise when children don't develop out of egocentrism and when they do not develop that gut level sense of responsibility for their actions.

Bowlby argues that parent's have a lot of influence over what a child believes. There was a case where a child saw his parent hang himself in a closet, but the other family members thought this was too horrific and told him that his parent died in a car accident. But what your family and parents tell you is very compelling when you are a child and they tend to have a lot of difficulty when you tell them something different from their own experience. So, when one parent tells the child that "mommy doesn't love you" but the child experiences that mommy loves him/her, this can be very difficult. This is consistent with literature in DV that suggests parents can sometimes use children to perpetrate DV.

One of the core human traits is that we are storytellers. We create a narrative to explain our experience. The work of Pat Ogden is a new method of therapy, sensorimotor therapy, which helps deal with those early, primitive, body-based emotions. She talks about alternating between experience and reflection. Children will detach and disassociate with their feelings and their internal body states in order to protect themselves with the anxiety of being maltreated and neglected. This makes them put aside their experience and not being open to their experience.

One of the early pieces on adult attachment involved the use of interviews of adults on their past

attachment. People who were incoherent and were not able to describe their experiences were asked to give 5 adjectives to describe their mother and 5 to describe their father, and then describe an experience that goes along with one of the adjectives. They will describe something that is inconsistent with the adjective. For example, a teenager describes her father as “always there for her” but then describes nothing but experiences when her father was not there for her. These people cannot see the inconsistency.

There are basically 4 types of attachment. There are huge amounts of research showing that people generally fall into these 4 categories. The four categories: Secure-autonomous, avoidant-dismissing, ambivalent-preoccupied-entangled, and disorganized-unresolved.

Children with insecure attachments experience stress through raised cortisol levels. Avoidant kids do not show stress even though their cortisol levels are just as high, instead they have learned to deal with the stress through engaging in other things, looking away, etc. Avoidant kids have learned that they can't seek mom or show stress because mom will not comfort me- mom will only interact with me if I show that I am competent and not dependent on them.

When the parent is inconsistently available, that is classed as ambivalent. Ambivalent kids, whose parents are inconsistently available, are more likely to be easily triggered and go to a state of high arousal quickly and when only moderately provoked. They also have a hard time calming down afterward. This could have implications for abusive men who go immediately to high arousal when moderately provoked.

Disorganized-unresolved attachment style developed out of new research with kids who were abused or were in an abusive household. This is when the source of security (parents) is also a source of fear (fearful of being harmed themselves or reflecting on mom's fear of dad). This child never develops an organized strategy to deal with life and attachment.

The affect regulation issue is a primary issue in attachment, which is why these body-based therapies are really effective. The brain pathways for controlling emotion develop in the context of the parent-child relationship. When the child's needs for attachment are not met, their systems for regulation are not developed.

The concept of identification with the aggressor is that you grow up learning the role of the aggressor when you are exposed to those kinds of social roles. When adults or children feel vulnerable, one of the ways to overcome that feeling of vulnerability is to become the aggressor. Sometimes in a relationship, the partner who is feeling vulnerable might increase their aggression to deal with their own vulnerability.

Shame is one thing that triggers that intense vulnerability. There is then a need to increase aggression to regain a sense of power.

There is some literature on attachment and coercive violence. If a child, seen mostly in boys, sees that their parent is vulnerable and a constant victim of coercion from the other parent, the

child learns that “I can get my needs met through coercion,” and they learn to also be coercive with the more helpless parent.

*The Explosive Child* is another book she uses when dealing with parents of explosive kids, but many adults have said they use it also to deal with their spouses! It explains the collaborative problem solving strategy, where parents are trained on understanding where the child is coming from and working on the child’s capacity to problem-solve. Three basic steps: make a statement of empathy which conveys you understand the person feels hurt; then you make a statement of your need; then you have both needs on the table to work on solving the problem.

Parent-child interaction therapy might be a good thing for DV clients who have children. You teach the parent to have non-reactive play therapy with the child and gives you the opportunity to work on sensitivity and attunement with the child and work on positive discipline therapy.

Another good book that gets at egotism and entitlement is *Trapped in the Mirror: Adult Children of Narcissists in their Struggle for Self* by Elan Golomb.

These findings on attachment are consistent across cultures. Some cultures have different levels of children at different attachment styles based on what is valued in certain cultures. For example, to be avoidant and passive might be pathological in our culture but is totally acceptable in other cultures.