Title

A qualitative examination of attachment based concepts in probation supervision

Abstract

Attachment theory is familiar to probation workers, with its broad messages that early care can leave a lasting legacy, and that patterns of relating can be repeated throughout the lifespan. Up close however, attachment theory is complex, and research findings sometimes vague or contested. This empirical research examined the use of four key attachment-based concepts in generic probation practice over a period of six months. The concept of the probation officer as a potential secure base was a useful one, as was the idea that service users' early attachment history could help to understand relationships and offending. Other concepts (the reflective function and attachment style) were less useful.

Key words:

Introduction

The catalyst for this research was an article I published ten years ago in this journal on the possible utility of attachment theory in everyday probation practice (Ansbro, 2008). It pulled together ideas from existing research and proposed that probation officers (POs)[1] can potentially offer a reparative taste of a secure base, and that early attachment experiences can offer important insights into later development, counter-balancing over-simplistic or punitive attributions of behaviour. Attachment histories and insecure styles of attachment were recommended as a way of understanding service users who struggled to understand and control their own extreme states of mind, and to access others' mental states. Recommendations for practice were not set exercises, but an endorsement of *'time spent establishing a well-pitched dialogue, and starting to put words to offenders' thoughts and state of mind'* (Ansbro, 2008: 239). The article seemed to be read by a pleasing number of people (many academic publications sink immediately without trace). However the suspicion nagged that applications for attachment theory in a probation setting were being celebrated in a rather speculative way, and perhaps with an insufficiently

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[1] It is acknowledged that other probation staff might have the same potential. However, for the purposes of this article, 'probation officers' are referred to throughout to reflect the research participants' role.

critical eye. This research was an attempt to make amends and put those ideas to the test.

Firstly, a word on the application of any theory into practice. Historically, an extensive range of theory has been recommended for probation and social work. Indeed, the very diversity can be perplexing, leading Trevithick (2008: 1219) to comment:

> ...one of the problems with a broad range of abstract theories drawn from diverse sources is that they can be difficult to organise into a coherent framework and difficult to relate to practice...The result is a formidable knowledge mountain.

It is also possible to argue that theory as a practice tool only truly exists during training, on the pages of academic journals or in a few specialist projects, and research has repeatedly found that probation practitioners make little or no reference to theory when discussing their work (e.g. Robinson et al, 2014). The claim has also been levelled at social work (Thyer, 2001; Munro, 2002), and the riposte is usually that it is present, but is not explicitly labelled with text-book terminology - in much the same way that Curnock and Hardicker wrote about 'practice wisdom' (1979). This research chose as its starting point the assumption that theory does find its way into practice - after all the participants volunteered to give up considerable amounts of their time to discuss exactly that.

Attachment theory has always regularly featured in the practice literature, but probably does not currently feature as high up the billing order as cognitive behaviourism, motivational interviewing or desistance theory. However, latterly, it has been particularly prominent in the literature on personality disorder, and official guidance for practitioners published by the Ministry of Justice and the NHS (2015, [2011]) recommends it as the most useful theoretical framework to understand disorders of personality. Particularly noticeable is the way that the Offender Personality Disorder Pathway (NOMS and NHS England, 2015), a collaboration established in 2011 between health and criminal justice, has fed a burgeoning of literature which features attachment theory, some psychodynamic principles, and an emphasis on reflective practice to explicate the complexities of work undertaken with personality disordered service users. Fellowes (2014: 193) notes that the initiative has brought about a *'quiet revolution'* in the way psychological thinking has helped to manage this often difficult group, described by Forbes and Reilly (2011; 168) as *'frequently hostile and challenging in their responses to authority'.*

However, at the risk of sounding churlish, it could be argued that there is a downside to some of this literature. Fellowes, Forbes and Reilly were all writing from a probation perspective, but that is not typical - most publications are by psychologists, and they conclude for instance that probation staff know worryingly little about personality disorder (Shaw et al, 2012), but either can get a bit better at it after some training from psychologists (Shaw et al, 2017; Knauer et al, 2017; Radcliffe et al, 2018), or alternatively do not get better at it after training from psychologists (Minoudis et al, 2013), or that offenders and carers are sceptical that probation staff could ever properly use psychological formulations (Brown and Völlm, 2016). In fact, psychologists in this area seem to expend more effort evaluating probation staff than evaluating the effectiveness of their own case formulations. This all serves to compound an impression of a second-class probation workforce dependant on the experts - the psychologists. Granted, clinical psychologists have for some years qualified at doctoral level, and granted the Transforming Rehabilitation changes have done nothing to enhance POs' sense of status and skill. However, any suggestion that the training, role and perspective of POs might be different from that of psychologists is quite absent, with not a hint that awareness of social models of illness as well as medical ones, of psychosocial and ecological perspectives, and of sociological critiques of expert knowledge could add something distinct.

In contrast, this research started with the assumption that POs are knowledgeable about the job they do, and sought to put them in the driving seat. Rather than judging whether they were using the theory well enough, it asked them to judge whether the theory served them or not. A further research aim was to achieve as much specificity about attachment theory as was practical; attachment theory has evolved into a vast, vibrant, and frequently contested body of work, and so at the planning stage four attachment-based concepts were delineated for examination. Although there is a degree of inter-connectedness between these themes, they each have a prominence in their own right.

The four attachment-based themes
The first theme was that the supervisory relationship between PO and service user has the potential to develop attachment-type, secure base properties. The carer-infant relationship is theorised as the primary and most significant attachment relationship (Bowlby, 1999 [1969], 1973, 1980) but the concept is extended to other relationships throughout the lifespan (Hazan and Shaver, 1987). In adulthood attachments are conceptualised partly as real attachments to real people, and partly internalised and representational (Main et al, 1985). Professional relationships as well as personal ones are posited as potentially containing attachment qualities. The psychotherapist as secure base is a familiar notion (e.g. Bowlby, 1988; Berry and

Danquah, 2016), and Adshead (1998; 2004) has suggested that staff of high security forensic hospitals, along with the institution itself can act as secure bases for patients. It is often assumed that relationships such as the supervisory one between service user and PO can grow attachment qualities, thereby providing a reparative taste of a secure base (Renn, 2004; Ansbro, 2008, Plechowicz, 2012; Forbes and Reilly, 2011). However, how was the concept being understood in practice, and was it a useful piece of the probation toolkit?

The second attachment-based theme was the making of connections between early attachment experiences and later functioning. Bowlby (1973) drew on cognitive ideas to conceptualise the internal working model, shaped and reinforced in our minds by repeated experiences with our primary caregiver. Our internal working model, it is proposed, contains mental templates of ourselves (e.g. our worthiness of attention and love) and others (e.g. their reliability and availability) and forms our estimation of self-agency and strategies for understanding and responding to the world. On an empirical level there is extensive research on the developmental impact of early attachments. Some big messages are, for instance, that security of early attachment does seem to be the best recipe for all future outcomes, that insecure and unresolved attachment styles are over-represented in adult populations with poor mental health (Mikulincer and Shaver, 2012) and substance misuse problems (Davidson and Ireland, 2009). The strength of such relationships is striking when retrospective methodologies are used, but less so with prospective methodologies (Sroufe, 2005), an important reminder that most children who have insecure attachments will grow up quite well adjusted. There is universal agreement that attachment is only ever one factor interacting with others, and that some individuals are more resilient to negative effects, probably because of genetic factors (Caspi et al, 2002). Such research identifies fascinating trends for groups, but offers no straightforward causal relationship between early life and later development on an individual level - so this research set out to examine the use it is put to in supervision.

The third theme for exploration was that of the reflective function and the capacity to mentalize. These terms, often used interchangeably, are more recent arrivals to the attachment theory canon, and refer to the ability to understand and regulate one's own thoughts and feelings, and to access others' mental states (Fonagy, 2004). Influenced by psychoanalytic ideas and observational studies of infant-carer interactions (Stern 1985), Fonagy and Target (2005) identified what they called 'mirroring' and 'marking' processes at work within the parent's exaggerated vocalisations, and the universal habit of parents to note what they think is going on for the infant in facial expression, vocal tone and inflexion. The mirroring happens as the parent reflects back what they perceive to be the baby's mental and physical

state, and the marking is the exaggerated, almost pantomime version of that state. This sends a message to the baby that there is another being, capable of appreciating (sufficiently) what his or her existence feels like. This is the start of that child's ability to recognise and label their own affective state, adding to their vocabulary of emotions (Bateman and Fonagy, 2007). This is proposed as the route by which the child develops a sense of themselves as a separate entity from others, with different thoughts and feelings, which can nonetheless be perceived by another person.

According to attachment theory these steps are necessary to be able to eventually do the same thing to others and hence to appreciate their mental states. Fonagy and Target (2005: 334) summed up the notion thus: *'Understanding of minds is hard without the experience of having been understood as a person with a mind'*. This is proposed as the first step towards developing empathy with others, and being able to move away from 'psychic equivalence', a state of mind where one's own inner state is presumed to be the same as all others, to one where the self is individuated. Mentalization also has implications for emotional self-regulation. The proposal is that the experience of another who can recognise, tolerate and soothe comes to be internalised, forming the basis of an individual's strategies for managing their own internal state, essentially growing into an *'agentive self'* (Fonagy, 2004).

These concepts' most clinical application is to be found in Mentalization-Based Therapy (MBT), a treatment used for some forms of personality disorder, particularly borderline (Bateman and Fonagy, 2008; 2009). However, any therapeutic or professional change-inducing relationship is posited as an opportunity to flex the mentalization muscle (Choi-Kain and Gunderson, 2008), as are many ordinary human interactions (Allen, 2006). Theorised thus as psychological processes that develop optimally through early security of attachment, it might be expected that probation service clients lack a reflective function, as a disproportionate number are known to have lacked attuned, mind-minded care (Falshaw, 2005). So, whilst POs are not mental health workers nor psychotherapists, they seem to be well positioned to provide some reparative mentalization practice, by exploring events, thoughts and feelings, and by providing different perspectives - all key aspects of mentalization work (Bateman and Fonagy, 2007). This research aimed to interrogate the utility the concept had in practice.

The fourth idea was that of attachment style. Ainsworth (1967) was the first to define contrasting ways of being insecurely attached, based on extensive infant observations, and later the use of the 'Strange Situation Procedure' (Ainsworth et al, 1978). The suggestion is that attachment style is formed in infancy, is largely determined by the style of parenting experienced, and tends to endure into

adulthood. Whilst most people have a dominant style of attaching that is secure, a minority are either avoidant (known as dismissing in adulthood) or ambivalent (known as preoccupied in adulthood). The way that attachment style is classified has evolved over the years, significantly by the addition of a disorganised style (Main and Solomon, 1990), which, it is proposed has an adult equivalent of unresolved attachment style. The suggestion for practice (Holmes 2001; Berry and Danquah, 2016) is that recognising attachment style might be able to shed some light on relationships with other people, and those insights can be used to operate differently. Hence, individuals with a dismissing style might be helped to recognise their tendency to devalue relationships and work towards being less detached, and individuals with a preoccupied style might recognise their tendency to amplify emotion and work on reining that in. The question for this research was whether it was possible to discern with service users their attachment style, and if so, could that offer useful insights and direction for practice?

Methodology

Permission was gained to recruit participants from a large urban Probation Area in England, and ethical approval was granted by the Research Ethics Committee of Queens University Belfast. Qualified POs were invited to take part as their qualification made it reasonable to expect that they would have studied attachment theory. An action research methodology (Kemmis and McTaggart, 2005) was employed, as this allowed for several iterations of data gathering, and positioned the participants as collaborators rather than objects of scrutiny. Six POs volunteered to take part. Two induction meetings were arranged to establish that our understandings of attachment theory were similar, and to select three typical service users per participant who were being supervised in the community. Data was then gathered over a six-month period, through monthly semi-structured interviews during which the general progress of the case was considered, and more particularly the utility of the four key aspects of attachment theory was examined. The transcripts of the interviews were thematically analysed.

Findings

After analysis, two of the concepts were found to have real utility in practice, one received mixed reviews, and one had little use whatsoever. As with any research, names of service users have been changed, as have any identifying characteristics or events. Participating POs are referred to as PO1 through to PO6.

The PO as a secure base

POs recounted numerous practice situations where they felt their supervisory relationships developed attachment qualities, and where they assumed some of the qualities of a secure base figure. For instance, a lifer, now released after serving over 20 years for murdering his wife had known his PO for several years whilst in custody. Struggling to cope in a hostel and manage his drug addiction that had persisted throughout his sentence, he reported to his PO sometimes more than weekly and particularly when altercations at the hostel left him on 'the edge' (speculated to be either a drug binge or a suicide attempt, or perhaps seeking out family members he was not allowed to see). An elderly sex offender was generally taciturn and gave off few explicit signs of 'being attached', and yet the PO had a clear sense that their relationship had an importance to him, and after some time on weekly then fortnightly contact, he was resisting reducing contact further, introducing subject matter to spin out contact. A young care leaver, convicted of domestic abuse and diagnosed with a borderline personality disorder, conveyed some alarm anticipating the end of his order, and his PO commented:

> He said how very sad it was, he wanted to continue, how it was helpful to have someone behind him, as he put it the buck didn't stop with him, there was someone behind him...he bought me a very sweet card, said, I will have to go out and commit another offence, but I might not get you...(PO1)

Thus service users were seeking contact, conveying a sense that it was used to regulate emotional extremes, and indicating that the loss of contact would cause some distress.

Of course whether or not there really were attachment qualities cannot ultimately be tested, and that goes to the heart of the matter; we were discussing a theoretical concept that the literature acknowledges as elusive, and for which there is no acid test. Nevertheless the attachment literature is clear that some relationships have attachment qualities, and some do not - Rutter et al (2009) have bemoaned the unhelpful tendency to view virtually all relationships, regardless of duration or depth, through the prism of attachment.

So how do we tell the difference? Proposals from key figures (Hazan and Shaver, 1987; Weiss, 1991; Cassidy, 1999) posit that the essential properties of attachment relationships in adulthood all converge around the need for the relationship to be persistent rather than temporary, to be with a specific figure, to have an emotional significance, and to have an anxiety relieving quality. Furthermore, the attached individual needs to seek contact with, and feel some distress at the loss of the secure base figure. Although these contributions add some clarity, the concept of a relationship with attachment qualities remains somewhat subjective, and can elude

empirical research. For instance, how long does a relationship need to 'persist' to grow attachment qualities? How much distress has to be shown at an ending? Schenguel and van Ijzendoorn (2001: 241) have conceded that the *lack of an operationalized criteria to call a relationship an attachment relationship* is a major difficulty for both researchers and clinicians. Moreover, attempts to develop psychometric measures to discern the existence and efficacy of attachment relationships between service users and staff have not produced consistent findings. (Harder et al, 2013)

So the observations of the POs seemed to be as meaningful as any when discerning attachment qualities in their supervisory relationships. The important matter for the purposes of this research was that the concept was a useful one for the practitioners, and it advanced their practice. There were indeed accounts of purposeful work accomplished when the POs perceived no such attachment qualities, however when present it provided a useful additional theoretical prism through which to view the supervisory relationship. Other research consistently finds that POs value the supervisory relationship, and often imbue it with the rather humanistic characteristics of 'trust' and 'respect' (Mawby and Worrall, 2011; Phillips, 2013, Robinson et al, 2014). The desistance literature has conceptualised the supervisory relationship as an alliance with both parties engaged in the co-production of desistance (Weaver, 2013). An attachment framework adds to those definitions the idea that the supervisory relationship can have an emotional element and provide a sort of psychological safety.

Attachment history

There was a similar consensus that attachment history was important to know about, where service users were willing to share it. Nevertheless participants stressed that discussion of early life did not occupy much time, as there was far too much other business to be getting on with, and poking about for the sake of it was not acceptable:

> If it's just hearing about somebody's childhood for the sake of it then it's really quite unpleasant - voyeuristic (PO2)

POs' accounts confirmed that their supervisees had often grown up in violent families, without consistent care or protection. Some life stories visited extremes of abuse, abandonment and deceit that were breath-taking (being told a mother who had left home was dead to find out later she was not, unwittingly assisting in a mother's suicide, leaving borstal to find an entire family had emigrated) but accounts of neglect and parental drug habits were more routine. There was agreement that an attachment perspective helped to humanise those who offences might militate

against empathy, and tempered an impulse to be punitive or rule-bound. Just as it was important to know that the probation caseload was often materially and socially disadvantaged, so it was important to know that the caseload frequently had not been well cared for, and lacked an equivalent sort of emotional capital. Beyond those points of consensus, applications of attachment histories were individual to the case. They were variously seen as helpful in understanding later isolation, oddness, mistrust, vulnerability and peaks in risk.

For instance, Pete had been a carer leaver and now in his early 20s was on an order for domestic violence. As a toddler, he had been removed from a mentally ill mother and violent father (his baby sister was born with broken bones from injuries in utero). Placement with long-term foster carers worked until the age of 14 when they could no longer cope with him. A crash driving a stolen car (a crash that killed his passenger) saw him in youth custody, and then transferred to a mental health setting. This worked well for him, and by his early twenties he had a partner and a baby. However, when his partner called time, he experienced his old attachment history being replayed, and his violence escalated. For his PO those early experiences helped to understand not only his domestic violence, but his habit of reporting and spilling out his thoughts, then disappearing for a while (echoing e.g. Ramsden and Lowton, 2014; Schuengel and Van Ijzendoorn, 2001; Berry and Danquah, 2016):

> '...he didn't have anything in the way of stability...he thinks people are not reliable. Can't trust your girlfriend, your mother chucks you out, your foster mother gets rid of you after 10 years...it helps me to understand what happened and it helps me to understand why he is like he is about people helping him'. (PO1)

For his PO, Pete had repeated experiences of those he was attached to cutting away and no longer wanting him, and he seemed to bring that schema to his relationship with his ex-partner and his PO. In supervision they worked towards identifying that his volatility peaked at such points, and that he must accept the ending of the relationship.

PO6's work with Kim led her to the conclusion that her early experiences were vital to know about, but she found some details of Kim's growing up almost too much to hear. Kim's mother, now dead, had a heavy substance habit, and Kim had found herself variously fending for herself and her brother, trying to look after her mother, being taken into care and asking to be taken into care. What made her experiences particularly vivid were the details she dropped in. Kim described to PO6 being mystified the first time she was taken into care and feeling unsure why her social worker was coming to see her during the school day. She recounted the day her

mother was due in the Family Court with a chance of getting her brother out of care, but she went out the night before and did not return home. Her efforts to care for herself and her brother in her mother's absence were particularly poignant. She remembered as a small child the day she tried to cook fish fingers for herself and her brother and served them up still frozen (*'it's hilarious, isn't it!'* said Kim, *'no'*, thought PO6). Kim knew her father, but resented him because of his refusal to take her in when she went into care as a girl. His priorities were with the new partner and children he lived with.

PO6 certainly made a connection between Kim's early attachment experiences and her later development, and PO6 was in no doubt that knowing about the way Kim grew up was important in 'getting her'. She valued herself little and was vulnerable to others who might use her to commit offences. She carried a sense that she was at the mercy of a hostile world, without much order or predictability. It was entirely normal to tolerate violence in relationships. Her current relationship with her father was a particularly striking and contradictory mixture of care and abuse. He was seriously ill, and when he went missing PO6 and her father's social worker found him at Kim's flat, having been put to bed with a supply of the alcohol that was killing him. At the same time the social worker was concerned that Kim was stealing her father's benefits. Put together it did not offer any easy solutions, but it ensured that PO6 tried to hold off breaching her for her many missed appointments. It encouraged a kind of supervisory stoicism.

The reflective function and mentalization
The third suggestion was that service users might lack reflective function and the ability to mentalize, and so probation supervision could be an opportunity to grow this capacity. Views were mixed.

One aspect of the concept was found to be genuinely useful. That was the notion that early self-soothing and affect regulation is learned through early attachment, and without that the individual might be particularly prone to (violent) slips of mentalization. Fonagy et al (2004) posit that we are all prone to losing our capacity to mentalize when aroused (i.e. extremely angry or upset) but it is our early attuned care and secure attachment that allows that threshold to be set high. Without that early secure base experience, the threshold is precariously low and fragile. Carl's PO found this fitted his pattern of domestic violence well. His childhood was characterised by periods in care, alternating with periods at home, where he concentrated on watching out for his own safety and that of his mother. He was now being supervised for violent assaults on his partner. PO3 applied the idea that as a child he had not experienced having his distress 'read' and allayed for him. Thus he

had perhaps not been able to internalise the process, and so was not sufficiently in tune with his own thoughts and feelings to calm himself:

> It's the idea that babies start to be able to keep themselves together through their parenting, and if they don't learn the mechanisms to calm themselves down it can be because there was no one there making them feel secure. (PO3)

This was a model that fitted Carl's variability, moving from lucid and reflective one moment to volatile and unthinking the next, illustrating the idea that mentalization is not a constant, but a facility that can slip as arousal climbs (Schore, 2000; Fonagy et al, 2004).

However, the idea that the probation service clientele would be characterised by a generally low capacity to mentalize was met with resistance, and there were several reasons. Firstly, the process of gauging a service user's overall ability to mentalize was difficult. For example, John was seeing both PO2 and the office mental health worker, and the latter had undertaken some training in MBT. PO2 and the mental health worker compared their thoughts on John's ability to mentalize and arrived at different conclusions. The mental health worker felt that John was fairly good at mentalizing, citing his ability to describe with some affect a recent bereavement. However, PO2 took the opposing view, citing his fixedness when invited to think about the motives and intentions of others (e.g. his grandfather had kept his terminal cancer a secret, and this made John angry). The difference in opinion between PO2 and the mental health worker was difficult to reconcile. The mental health worker seemed to place more importance on John accessing his own mind, particularly his emotional state, whereas PO2 seemed to be prioritising accessing other peoples' minds, and his cognitive processes. A further definitional problem was the idea that reflective function was connected to early attachment experiences, and there was a reluctance to make such connections when there were other explanations available (e.g. learning disability, Asperger's Syndrome, complicated personal circumstances that made lucid reflection a genuine challenge). There was also sometimes an uncomfortable fit with POs' professional values: *'...it suggests that if you are abused it will make you unthinking...'* (PO2)

In fact they were not alone in trying to 'nail' mentalization. Choi-Kain and Gunderson, (2008) have argued that mentalization can be an exceptionally broad concept, and elusive to identify and gauge. The Reflective Function Scale (Fonagy et al 1998) is viewed as the most thorough way of measuring reflective function, but requires training to code Adult Attachment Interview transcripts in a particular way, leading Katznelson (2014) to conclude that its complexity and expense make it quite

unsuitable for any setting outside specialist research. Psychometric tests for reflective function have been attempted - although evidence that these effectively capture it is scant (Newbury-Helps, 2011). POs are unlikely to have the resources or inclination to use either.

Moreover, expectations that certain populations (e.g. those with personality disorder or prone to violence) will lack reflective function have not been consistently supported (Tolfree, 2012; Adshead, 2013). The conundrum of reflective function and whether certain groups lack it is somewhat redolent of the 'cognitive deficits' debate in the probation world. One assumption of the 'What Works?' agenda was that service users lacked empathy for the victims of their offences, and that increasing it needed to be an element of rehabilitative work (Ross et al, 1988; Porporino et al, 1991). Although exercises to enhance empathy (particularly towards the victims of offences) remain standard parts of group-work programmes for offenders, there is scant evidence to support the notion that offenders lack empathy, or that working to expand it reduces recidivism (Jolliffe and Farrington, 2004), a sticking point that has been referred to as 'correctional quackery' (Mann and Barnett, 2012).

Finally, POs frequently observed that using labels such as reflective function or mentalization seemed to unnecessarily elevate something ordinary into a theoretically-driven process. In principle the suggestion that supervision could be an opportunity to encourage mentalization was agreed with, but it seemed that engaging offenders in conversations where they were encouraged to identify and put into words what they were thinking and feeling, and to speculate about what others might be thinking and feeling scarcely merited a theoretical framework.

Warrender (2015) provides a rather similar finding from an allied profession in an evaluation of some mental health nurses who had received a two-day MBT-S course (essentially the first principles of MBT). They were generally positive about the messages for their work with borderline personality disorder patients, but there were repeated comments to the effect that rather than delivering anything novel it was essentially a reminder of the need for empathy when working with a group who can quickly exhaust patience. Comments such as *'a lot of it is kind of natural anyway'* and '*before we had any mentalization we probably did the same sort of techniques'* (Warrender, 2015: 628) mirror the thoughts of this project's participants.

Attachment style
The last of the ideas was that of attachment style, and this had the least utility of all. During the induction meetings we had discussed the original three-part classification system (secure, avoidant and ambivalent), and it had also emerged that some accredited programmes (e.g. Building Better Relationships) used an attachment

styles questionnaire based on Bartholomew and Horowitz's model (1991) of attachment style. This is a four-part grid with permutations of positive or negative views of the self and other which are held to map across to secure, preoccupied and two different variants of avoidant attachment. However, participants who introduced the concept, either by using this paper based exercise, or by introducing it into supervision in a more free-style way repeatedly reported that service users did not conform to a dominant style, and were simply more varied in their way of relating to others than any classification system allowed for. Moreover, when examined up close, the concept of attachment style became increasingly confusing. PO1 perhaps hinted at this when she said '... *whatever that attachment style is - I've gone over them so many times but I can never remember them'*. In short, there were no cases where the concept of attachment style captured anything meaningful, and the examples of Bob and Kim were typical.

PO5 was using the attachment styles exercise based on Bartholomew and Horowitz's (1991) typology in her work with Bob. Bob and PO5 were working through the materials of the Building Better Relationships programme on an individual basis. He was actually convicted of burglary, but Bob and his PO agreed that violence within his relationships were part of his constellation of problems. Bob approached the attachment styles exercise with gusto, and although at various points he saw aspects of all the styles in himself, he could settle on none. PO5 could only conclude that Bob was ultimately a mixture of various styles. PO5 saw real value in making connections between Bob's early attachment history and his subsequent development. His step-father's extreme violence during his childhood and recruitment into organised football violence had, they agreed, left him constantly anticipating that others would be unreliable, and unable to use others as supports. It made sense to PO5 to see Bob's style of attaching as an adult through the dimensions that ran from secure at one end of the spectrum, to insecure at the other end. However, figuring out a specific attachment style as an adult did not add to their work, and she concluded that it was neither possible nor productive to assign a particular style to him. Neither were his style of narrating and reflecting theoretically congruent. In PO5's view Bob had ample supplies of the 'autobiographical competence' emblematic of a secure state of mind (Holmes, 2014), whereas in their discussions about his attachment style he had placed himself in various insecure styles.

When attachment style was considered in a more 'free-style' way, there was equally little practical use for the concept. The importance that PO6 gave to Kim's attachment history has already been examined, but when she discussed attachment style in relation to Kim, she concluded that there was no one style that effectively described her, commenting '*she's a bit of everything...she ticks every box but no box...*' (PO6). The possibility of lining up discourse with attachment style was also

discussed, for instance, connecting the confusion and high level of emotion to a preoccupied style, or the disconnect between event and emotion to an unresolved adult attachment style. However, this line of thinking struck PO6 as tenuous and she was keen to speculate along less theoretical lines, for instance that laughing at bleak memories perhaps indicated how tragically normal such experiences were for Kim, distorting her whole emotional range. Viewing it as a probe into attachment style did not work for her.

Despite the small sample, the lack of utility for the concept of attachment style was striking, and this is certainly not congruent with the abundant literature on the subject. Attachment style is regularly encountered on pop psychology websites (e.g. 'psychologytoday'[2]) where on-line quizzes offer to reveal a relationship style that is either dismissing, preoccupied or secure. Literature for social work and allied professions frequently suggests attachment style as a useful tool (e.g. Holmes, 2001; Howe, 2011), and in pure attachment research there are connections made between attachment style and just about every aspect of the human condition, from alopecia (Schmidt, 2003) to xenophobia (Russmann et al, 2010). Thus, the impression is of a classification system that is clear and simple.

However, when it is considered more fully its multiple models and measures crowd in. The human mind likes organised patterns - the tendency that Waters and Beauchaine refer to as our *'inordinate fondness for types'* (2003: 417) - but in reality theoretical constructs are usually ontologically messy. There is debate about stability of attachment style from childhood into adulthood (Goldberg, 2000), and the extent to which style is determined by parental care (Meins, 2013). Social psychologists (focusing on adult attachments as literal attachments to other people) classify attachment style using self-report tools (e.g. Hazan and Shaver, 1987) whereas developmental psychologists (focusing on internalised representations of attachments) use the Adult Attachment Interview and analyse linguistic cues in lengthy interviews (Kaplan and Main, 1985). Then there are contrasting ways of conceptualising attachment style, ranging from a binary dimension between security and insecurity, a three part A B C model (Ainsworth et al, 1978) or a four part A B C D model (Main and Solomon, 1990) - in which case how disorganised attachment translates into in adulthood becomes a complicated matter (Rutter et al, 2009). Alternatively, there are four part models, either based on axes of anxiety or avoidance (Fraley and Shaver, 2000), or a variation based on representations of self and other (the model already mentioned by Bartholomew and Horowitz, 1991) and then there is a 12 part dynamic model which does not recognise disorganisation (Crittenden, 2000). Research by Pietromonaco and Barrett (2000) has concluded that

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[2] See: https://www.psychologytoday.com/gb/tests/relationships/relationship-attachment-style-test (accessed 6th November 2018).

models emanating from the developmental perspective do not map precisely onto the models from the social perspective, and are probably measuring something subtly different. Add to that the debate as to whether attachment style needs to be viewed as a fixed number of categories, or dimensionally, in which case there are endless permutations, (Fraley and Spieker, 2003), and what starts off simply has become conceptually tricky.

Given all of this, perhaps it is no wonder that attachment style was not utilisable in generic practice. This research provided the opportunity to talk about the concept in some detail over time, but still the idea did not grow into a useful piece of 'kit' for practice. It is worth remembering that Mary Ainsworth herself, in one of her last interviews expressed disappointment at the extent of the focus on attachment style, at the expense of research on the types of parenting likely to nurture secure attachments (Ainsworth and Marvin, 1994).

Such debates might be endlessly fascinating for specialists in the area, but, arguably, impede the concept's easy translation into practice. The luxury of one sole theoretical focus allows contradictions to co-exist without losing sight of the main point. Holmes, for example, writes extensively about attachment style in psychotherapy, but acknowledges it is a concept that cannot be taken too rigidly, and which works only up to a point:

> Although attachment theory's three main categories of insecure attachment...have research validity, we should be cautious about assuming that attachment categories map easily onto clinical phenomena. Many of the patients seen in clinical practice show both avoidant and ambivalent patterns at different times and in different circumstances. (Holmes 2001: 28)

In applying the concept there seemed to be a '*trade off between complexity and utility*' (Rich, 2006: 120); the numerous debates and ambiguities might make it a fascinating area of study for the specialists, but a potential minefield for non-specialists.

Conclusion

The methodology of this research foregrounded Probation Officers' views, and followed real cases over time. Their experiences indicated that certain aspects of attachment theory, specifically those around the PO representing something of a secure base, and the use of attachment history to achieve a depth of understanding, enhanced their practice and had real utility. The idea of reflective

function/mentalization as a concept intrinsically related to early attachments received mixed reviews. Although the idea of violence as a slipping of mentalization held some currency, the idea that certain service users might generally lack the facility did not fit their experiences, and was an uncomfortable fit with the POs' values. Moreover it seemed a nebulous concept, and there was a suspicion that it was theory that lacked any uniqueness and at worst resembled common sense. The fourth theme of attachment style did not offer much at all to practice over and above being a conversation generator (not be sniffed at in some cases). It could be argued that the less useful parts of the theory were only found wanting because the POs did not have sufficient expertise to make them useful, yet their understanding of these concepts seemed at least as developed as it is reasonable to expect in busy POs multi-tasking their way through the generic role.

If we were to look to neighbouring professions we would find that in social work (where attachment theory is arguably the 'go-to' theory for work with children) questions are similarly posed - not with the theory or research in itself, but with the way that complex findings are sometimes packaged for practice. Wastell and White (2012) questioned the way that attachment theory individualised and pathologised poor parenting whilst disregarding the structural and political. Granqvist et al (2016) criticised the way that signs of disorganised attachment are over-interpreted as a sign of abuse in child protection work, and has also examined the way that complex aspects of attachment theory are turned into simplistic and sometimes poorly validated tools, which then inform important decisions about children's futures, both in child protection and the family courts. He concluded that *‘the field faces a transmission gap between basic attachment research and application.’* (Granqvist, 2016: 532).

It seems that when a theoretical perspective is as popular, even ubiquitous as attachment theory, the expectation is that it will readily translate from research into practical applications. This research suggests that when practitioners examine their experiences of supervision, some ideas make the transition well, but other ideas do not have the practical applications that are expected of them - they are too complex, they are not unique enough from other ideas, or they just do not fit.

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