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Attachment Disorganization and Severe Psychopathology: A Possible Dialogue Between Attachment Theory and Control-Mastery Theory

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A good enough theory of psychological functioning and development, and of how psychotherapy works, should take into account recent scientific developments about emotional, motivational, and cognitive functioning. They show how human beings are “wired” to adapt to reality and share a set of evolutionary-based emotions, motivations and skills that are shaped by the cognitive-affective structures (schemas) developed on the basis of the emotionally relevant experiences, in particular of the first years of life. Attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980) represents the first real attempt in this direction, although the clinical implications of this theory are still fragmented and not specific enough. We think that control mastery theory (CMT; Weiss, 1993) could be useful for integrating attachment, psychodynamic, and cognitive-evolutionary thinking. Such an integrated model is based on the centrality of adaptation, sense of safety, and real experiences; on the central role of inner representations/beliefs/schemas in linking adverse developmental experiences and attentional strategies, perception organization, emotional reactions, behavior, and psychopathology; and on the necessity to modify this relational knowledge in order to help patients get better. To explore the possible integration between attachment theory and CMT, we will focus on a specific topic, the disorganization of attachment and its psychopathological consequences, and we will illustrate the implications of this integration with a brief clinical example. We chose to focus on attachment disorganization because it is the attachment category more consistently related to psychopathology.

Keywords: attachment theory, disorganized attachment, control-mastery theory, trauma, psychotherapy

A good enough psychodynamic theory of psychological functioning, development, and of how psychotherapy works should take into account recent scientific data¹ about emotional, motivational, and cognitive functioning developed by neuroscience (Panksepp & Biven, 2012), moral psychology (Cortina, 2017; Haidt, 2012; Tomasello, 2016), and social cognition (e.g., Bargh, 2017). Moreover, this theory should be coherent with the theory of natural selection as put forward by contemporary evolutionary theorists (Wilson, 1978; Wilson & Sober, 1994; Wilson & Wilson, 2008).

Bowlby’s attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980) represents one of the first and best attempts to construct an evolutionary based and empirically validated theory of personality development that may explain important aspects of the psychological and relational functioning of human beings. “Bowlby was one of

the first psychotherapists to root human experiences in the inborn mechanisms of the mind, as they conceived by evolutionary biology and ethology” (Liotti, 2000, p. 232). The attachment behavioral/motivational system identified and investigated by Bowlby is innate because every young mammal needs the closeness and sensitivity of a caregiver to survive. Moreover, the child attachment behavior is shaped by the experiences of the first years of life because it needs to learn how to survive in *that* specific environment adapting to *that* specific parent. In accordance with these first experiences, the child builds a series of internal cognitive-affective structures (the internal working models [IWMs]) of the self, others, and the self in relation to others that will guide him in subsequent attachment experiences within his interpersonal environment.

These models then govern how he feels towards each parent and about himself, how he expects each of them to treat him, and how he plans his own behavior towards them. They govern too both the fears and the wishes expressed in his day dreams. Once built, evidence suggests, these models of a parent and self in interaction tend to persist and are so taken for granted that they come to operate at an unconscious level. (Bowlby, 1988; p. 130).

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¹ By “scientific theory” we mean a theory that is based on empirical data or is consistent with what has been showed by empirical research.