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# Adult Attachment and Couple Psychotherapy

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The 'secure base' in practice  
and research

Edited by Christopher Clulow



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# Foreword

*Jeremy Holmes*

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Coupling is where all human life starts. From a Bowlbian perspective, the search for, establishment, maintenance and mourning of couple relationships are central themes of adult existence. Yet theorising couplehood is not easy. Within psychotherapy there are three major contenders, each of which, in varying degrees, is represented in this volume.

The first is the psychoanalytic tradition, and especially the Klein–Bion contribution. Here the basic concepts are those of projection and projective identification, and by extension from the therapeutic situation, transference. Each member of a couple is both a source and a receptacle of projections, and of transference perceptions. One member of a dyad may, for example, express primitive feelings of rage and disappointment that ‘belong’ to and originate from the unconscious of the other. If the relationship is threatened, the individuals who comprise it will then rightly fear that they will lose these split-off parts of themselves if they separate. Equally, each member of a couple can perceive and will treat the other as though they represent a primitive internal object – such as an uncaring mother or a seducing father. Not infrequently, partners are chosen because they appear to be the very opposite of the parental introject, and then turn out, through the unconscious mutual shaping that is part of coupledness, to be either uncannily similar to that which is avoided or unsatisfactory because they are so unlike what is expected and known.

Since these processes are probably universal, theory needs normative criteria by which couples in difficulty can be distinguished from those that are functioning well. Here, the Kleinian tradition relies on the distinction between paranoid-schizoid and depressive position functioning. Where each member of the dyad treats the other as an extension of themselves, where there is rigid splitting and division of roles, or where one member feels persecuted by his or her partner, especially if he has unconsciously provoked that persecution, problems are likely to arise. When the members of the partnership can see one another as whole human beings, a mixture of good and bad, and can accept the inevitable differences and separations that are the counterpart of intimacy and passion, things are likely to go well.

This interpersonal perspective in psychoanalysis has been hard won. Freud's theorising started from isolated monads that only gradually encounter the 'other' as they emerge from a dream-world of drive-driven primary narcissism. One response to this was the emergence of the systemic tradition based on cybernetics and an anthropological/sociological perspective which takes as its starting point the couple as a system in which individual members are merely sub-units. Here the major themes include:

- maintaining a boundary around the couple – one that is sufficiently permeable for children and others to have access to their parents yet close-woven enough for the couple to protect their privacy and distinctness as a unit;
- the power relationship within the dyad – the resulting contractual relationship and the extent to which negotiations around it are based on mutual respect or driven by dominance and submission;
- roles – how they are parcelled out between the couple and how rigidly they are adhered to;
- communication between the members of the couple – how open or restricted it is, the major channels through which it is conducted, and whether it is predominantly instrumental or affective in nature.

From this tradition the normative perspective depicts the well-functioning couple as protected by a semi-permeable boundary, able to share power and roles but in a flexible and interchangeable way, having a clearly adhered-to overt and implicit contract, with broad and open channels of communication – especially of feelings – and with the capacity for mutual enjoyment.

As a third force in psychotherapy, attachment theory has had a long gestation, partly because of its ambivalent relationship with psychoanalysis, which, with ethology, was one of its principal forebears. Attachment theory is both monistic *and* systemic, and so seems an ideal vehicle for thinking about couples. Its starting point is two separate individuals who are, at the same time, inescapably in relationship to one another. The original dyad studied by Bowlby and Ainsworth and their students was, of course, not the adult couple, but that of parent and child. Ainsworth's Strange Situation Test provided a way of classifying different patterns of security and insecurity. Later, researchers such as Hazan, Shaver and Bartholomew (one of the distinguished contributors to this volume) began to apply attachment ideas to their research on adult couples. At this stage attachment theory remained more of a research tool than a therapeutic modality. The same was true of the next significant step, Main's development of the Adult Attachment Interview, a research instrument that mirrors the Strange Situation Test producing a similarly broad classification of attachment patterns, but in this case for adults.

Attachment ideas are at last beginning to percolate into psychotherapeutic practice. This volume is an example of the exciting possibilities that can come from the cross-fertilisation of ideas between researchers and therapists. As a means of orienting readers I will outline the current state of attachment theory as a guide to clinical practice as I see it. Six main attachment domains are delineated, each of which can be applied to individuals, couples and families. These comprise the secure base, exploration and play, protest and assertiveness, loss, internal working models, reflective function and narrative competence.

*Secure base* The first, and most important domain is that of the secure base, the domain that constitutes the conceptual anchor for this book. Early attachment thinkers tended to see the secure base in behavioural terms, and defined as the caregiver to whom the infant visibly turns when threatened or ill, and who is able, to a greater or lesser extent, to provide the essential protection needed if the infant is to survive. The concept seemed to have limited application to adults until it was realised that the secure base can be seen not just as an external figure, but also as a *representation* of security within the individual psyche.

The original caregiver/child secure base experience can be thought of as comprising:

- a set of behaviours activated by threat;
- a response to those behaviours by the caregiver;
- a psycho-physiological state which is the end result of those behaviours.

Caregiver responses associated with the secure base include responsiveness, sensitivity, consistency, reliability, attunement, the capacity to absorb protest, and what Meins (1999) calls ‘mind-mindedness’: the ability to see the distressed child as an autonomous and sentient being with feelings and projects of her or his own. The psycho-physiological state includes such physiological elements as relaxedness, warmth, closeness, feeling soothed, satiation, a full stomach, steady breathing, a reduced pulse rate and calmness. Psychological components include thoughts such as ‘all’s well with the world’, ‘everything will be all right’, ‘where there was chaos and confusion there is now order’ and ‘all is under control’.

Adults, however seemingly autonomous, will, as well as making physical contact with loved ones, have an internal secure base zone to which they turn at times of stress, especially as part of affect regulation. This zone can also be conceptualised as a schema or object relationship. Activating the internal secure base may come about through comforting thoughts or images, and behaviour such as resorting to hot baths, bed, favourite foods, alcohol, duvets, music, books or television programmes. Security must be achieved whatever the cost: psychological survival requires some kind of secure base

experience, compromised though this may be by the limitations of the caregiver and the recipient's capacity to elicit appropriate care. The internal representation of the secure base can be activated by different parts of the cycle: that is presumably why baths, bed and warmth produce the desired state of calmness.

Pathological variants of secure base behaviour include comfort eating, substance abuse, compulsive masturbation or deliberate self-harm. These create some element of the secure base cycle described above, and this, in turn, can have a soothing function however self-destructively it has been achieved. For example, experiences of escalating chaos followed by relief are characteristic of self-harming episodes in people suffering from borderline personality disorder. Many will describe how soothed they feel when they see the blood flow after cutting themselves, or when they lie down after taking an overdose of tablets, or following a stomach wash-out. Ingredients of these behaviours are to be found in couples who are in severe difficulties, such as those for whom a sexual relationship is only possible after a major row.

The Strange Situation Test and Adult Attachment Interview, both of which are described in this book, delineate insecure patterns of attachment security. Although both are categorical measures as used in research, it is possible to imagine two separate axes: one describing a bipolar continuum from dismissing/avoidant through secure base to preoccupied/ambivalent strategies for managing threat, the other describing a unipolar axis running from coherent/autonomous to incoherent/disorganised representational worlds. Insecure variants are essentially trade-offs. The avoidant individual stays close enough to a rejecting caregiver to get a measure of protection, but not so close as to feel the full pain of rejection. The ambivalent person will cling to a caregiver as a way of compensating for inconsistency. Neither achieves the full secure base state of security, and so a sacrifice has to be made: for infants exploratory play is inhibited, for adults intimacy is compromised or autonomy restricted in the service of security.

Similarly, disorganisation and incoherence are so disruptive of the caregiving environment that people will go to great lengths to create some sort of order, however problematic and sub-optimal their efforts may be. For example, there may be attempts at control through obsessional behaviour, the use of dissociative strategies (in which overall chaos is reduced by splitting), delusional attempts to impose coherence from within on an inchoate external environment, or the predictability of a sick role.

As this volume so well testifies, both secure and insecure variants of secure base phenomena are to be found within couple relationships. In couples each partner acts as a secure base for the other, and each brings her or his own internal secure base representations and expectations – with varying degrees of in-built insecurity – into the partnership. If the relationship is stable, a 'third element' can be forged out of these representations: the partnership itself, and the pattern

of mutual expectations it implies. This provides far greater security than either member of the couple can achieve on their own.

Seeing the relationship as separate from each of its component parts is a key point of contact between psychoanalytic and attachment perspectives. Coupledness offers the possibility of moving from a two-person, pre-oedipal position, to a three-person oedipal constellation. From a neo-Kleinian perspective, the oedipal situation is seen as a developmental step where, if the child can tolerate the parental couple and the loss of exclusive possession of mother that implies, s/he gains a decentered perspective and a freedom of thought essential for interpersonal success. The attachment analogue of this process is the establishment of a secure base *representation* – and especially representation in language – so that the child is no longer wholly dependent on the physical presence of the caregiver but can be comforted by the thought of ‘mum-and-dad’, or ‘home’. This, in turn, depends on the caregiver’s ability to represent her child’s representations: to see the child as a separate and sentient being (Fonagy, 1999a). Similarly, healthy functioning in couples depends on the capacity to see, think and talk about their relationship as an entity in its own right, separate from the two individuals who comprise it.

*Exploration and play* Companionable interaction, and the capacity for mutual pleasure – whether sexual, playful or intellectual – is central to coupledness. Attachment theory postulates that there is a reciprocal relationship between secure base behaviour and exploration. When people feel threatened they will seek out their secure base, and, for the moment, fun and play will be correspondingly inhibited. Anxiety is the enemy of enjoyment. If one member of a couple does not feel secure – worrying, for example, that the other will abandon her at any minute – it is unlikely that s/he will be able to enjoy their sexual relationship. Helping couples to grasp this very simple concept is often a gateway to understanding sexual difficulties, or an inability to profit from the ‘quality time’ so beloved of agony aunts and informal advice givers.

*Protest and assertiveness* Rows, violence and rage are among the commonest reasons for couples seeking help. From an attachment perspective, anger is triggered when there is a threat of separation and has the function, in what is essentially a negative reinforcement schedule, of ensuring that the attachment bond remains intact. This can be seen in many different ways in couples. If one member of a couple threatens the bond by having an affair, this will evoke straightforward rage in the betrayed one as their security and self-esteem is so bound up with their partner. More subtly, anger is often provoked when one member of a couple fails to be considerate, or to take into account the other’s point of view. As we have seen, a crucial component of the secure base is mind-mindedness, the capacity to see the other as having a mind and feelings of his or her own.

Inconsiderateness ignores the other’s feelings, threatens this aspect of the secure base and so inevitably triggers protest. Assertiveness training, which in



a formal or informal way is an important component of working with couples, helps people to escape from the traps of submission or uncontrollable rage, to use anger effectively to restore attachment bonds and to maintain the secure base.

*Loss* For Bowlby, loss, or threatened loss, was central to much psychological distress. He also saw that the capacity to cope with loss is a key component of psychological maturity. Loss is the main theme in several chapters of this book. A paradox of coupledness, of two people being together, is that it can only be achieved if its members can negotiate a separateness in their relationship. Getting together involves giving up the uncommitted and sexually free state of being single, and being in a couple means running the risk that the loved one may be lost: for the English philosopher Francis Bacon, a wife and children were ‘hostages to fortune’. Taking *this* path means that one cannot take *that* one, and having something inevitably means that one may lose it. Each member of a couple brings with them a history of separations and losses that will colour their relationship. As Chapter 9 shows so movingly, one reason why the death of a child is devastating for couples, and divorce rates are so high after such a tragedy, is that each partner is so grief-stricken that neither is able to provide secure base comfort for the other. Working with the histories of loss that partners bring to their relationship, and coming to understand how they may influence current difficulties, are essential aspects of couple work.

*Internal working models* It is impossible to practise an atheoretical psychotherapy. Any attempt to help people in psychological distress will be underpinned by a set of models about the structure of the mind, the nature of thought, characteristics of intimate relationships and so on. Different approaches use different languages, and it is often hard to distinguish between points of overlap and real differences. For example, the notion of internal representation is described psychoanalytically in terms of an inner world populated with internal objects and the relationships between them. Cognitive therapy focuses on ‘schemata’, the fundamental and relatively immutable assumptions about the self and its relationships. Systemic therapists are interested in ‘event scripts’, sequences of behaviour of self in relation to others that are laid down in childhood, and which give colour and shape to subsequent relationships. Bowlby’s version of this phenomenon was the ‘internal working model’, a term chosen deliberately as an ‘action language’ which would capture the Piagetian ‘scientist-practitioner’ process by which children construe their world (Bretherton, 1999).

Eschewing the notion of the unconscious, Bowlby wrote of ‘defensive exclusion’ to describe ways in which unwanted painful feelings and thoughts are kept out of awareness, and the consequent restrictions to internal working models, and therefore adaptability, that entails. Thus the internal working model is a more cognitive construct than the psychoanalytic theories which most contributors to this volume espouse. The distinction between implicit and explicit

memory can perhaps help overcome this gap. Implicit, or procedural, memories are those that are laid down in the early years of life. They consist of the ‘ways in which things are done’, patterns of relationship, and include, for example, parental responses to infant distress that are stored within the child’s mind and will influence subsequent relationships even if there is no explicit awareness of their role. Explicit, or episodic, memories are the specific events and self–other behaviours which comprise people’s ‘memories’. Psychotherapy works with both.

Each member of a couple brings to their relationship a complex set of working models, schemata, scripts and/or object relationships. Couples are attracted to one another if there is some kind of ‘fit’ between their own inner world and that of the other. Each must consciously or unconsciously know the steps of the other’s dance. The more intimate they are able to be with one another, the more their own inner world will be exposed. Areas of pain and vulnerability will inevitably come into play. Thus, paradoxically, a certain maturity or self-confidence in the coherence and survivability of the self is needed for the childlike regression that is inherent in coupledness to take place successfully.

The three main variants of insecure attachment provide a useful framework for thinking about the vicissitudes of this process. Avoidant strategies sacrifice intimacy for an exaggerated form of autonomy, while ambivalent strategies give up autonomy for the sake of a dependent form of intimacy (Holmes, 1996). Individuals relying on these strategies will seek out a partner who can tolerate the pattern dictated by their own internal working models. But each will also be unhappy with the restrictions it brings, so every relationship also contains the hope that old patterns will be transcended. This hope is the starting point for successful couple therapy. Couples need to come to understand how the ‘trigger’ points in their relationship – for rows, or disappointment, or misery – arise at these nodal connections between one person’s set of painful assumptions and those of the other. The dance between Martha and George in Albee’s play *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, so beautifully analysed in Chapter 8, is a good example of this process.

Trauma can altogether destroy part of the security regulating system (Garland, 1998), leaving partners bereft of strategies for responding to threat. Internal working models are not just restricted but also have lacunae – for example, in the area of sexual or physical violence. Disorganised attachment, typified clinically in patients suffering with borderline personality disorder, provide no consistent relationship pattern for their partners to adapt to, and, except when partners are excessively avoidant, tend to have radically unstable relationships. Couple therapy here needs to occur in parallel with individual help.

*Reflective function and narrative competence* A key finding in the attachment literature is the relationship between ‘reflective function’ as revealed in the Adult Attachment Interview (the capacity to talk cogently and coherently about oneself and one’s difficulties) and security of attachment. The importance of

this for psychotherapy is self-evident. Psychotherapy is essentially a narrative process in which therapist and patient together develop a dialogue about both the patient's life and the nature of the therapist–patient relationship itself (Holmes, 1999). Therapy is an *in vivo* situation in which the patient learns to become self-reflexive. This is particularly exploited by the transference-based approaches used by most of the contributors to this volume. When representations can be made explicit in language, they are then available for 'thinking about thinking', and so for modification. This is the cognitive aspect of the neo-Kleinian conceptualisation of the Oedipal situation already referred to. Simply asking couples to describe how they met, a typical row, or what they both want for the future will not only reveal their difficulties but also start them on the road of mutual self-reflexion, which is a key to successful outcome. While implicit in analytic therapies, this is made explicit in behavioural and systemic ones where couples may be asked to write letters to one another, bring family photographs to sessions, draw pictures and in general use any technique that will enhance representations of their relationship patterns.

To conclude these introductory comments, attachment theory has never aimed to become a therapy in its own right. Nevertheless, it provides a framework in which theory, research and clinical practice can meet and begin to speak a common language. Just as with individuals and couples, so it is for theories: exploration and intercourse is not possible until security has been established. A shared language and set of assumptions has to be laid down before useful thinking can begin. This book is a perfect illustration of the creativity that can be released when different disciplines begin to talk to one another within a common setting.

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# Introduction

*Christopher Clulow*

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When I first heard John Bowlby talk about his theory of attachment he left me with a lasting image. A mother is seated on a park bench. In front of her plays her toddler son. As his confidence grows he ranges in ever-increasing circles away from her, investigating his new surroundings while occasionally checking on her continuing presence. The approach of a stranger, or a frightening sound, sends him running back to her for reassurance and comfort. If his retreat is blocked – for example, by a barking dog coming between him and her – he becomes distressed, and may even run into danger trying to get back to her. Touching base with mother becomes an imperative, and is the precondition for him continuing to play and explore.

The image will be instantly recognisable to anyone familiar with attachment theory. It illustrates the concept of a ‘secure base’, a term first coined by one of Bowlby’s closest colleagues, Mary Ainsworth,

and which he took for the title of his collected papers on the clinical implications of attachment theory (Bowlby, 1988). The image also hints at a relationship dilemma that is particularly apposite for adults in committed partnerships: what to do when the person who provides you with security also constitutes the threat from which you seek refuge? This conundrum surfaces repeatedly in this book because it contains a paradox that is central to human development: in the adult couple, as in the parent–child relationship, there can be no intimacy without a capacity for being apart; yet the capacity to be apart results from intimate involvement with others.

But what does ‘security’ mean in the context of a secure base? The word can be problematic insofar as it carries different associations. Often it is used in a constrictive sense to describe the policing or regulation of relationships and behaviour that are thought to be threatening. Sometimes it is used as a synonym for safety, describing the metaphorical burrows most of us habitually retreat to from time to time to reassure ourselves that nothing has changed and all’s well with the world. For attachment theorists, however, the word has a quite specific meaning.

Bowlby conceived of individual security as the product of social relatedness. For him, security resulted from accessible and responsive caregiving. It was

visibly evident in the behaviour of young children who were confident in seeking out their parents when frightened or distressed, could protest when separated from them and would use them as a base from which to explore other relationships and activities. Security was associated not with compliance or competitiveness, but with a capacity to need and value the care provided by others *and* to act autonomously. Enterprise and endearment are inextricably linked in this psychology of security, a marriage of values that has proved both creative and problematic in its working out in the private and public theatres of life.

Mary Ainsworth increased our understanding of security by closely observing how very young children and their mothers managed separation and reunion experiences in a standardised laboratory procedure that she and her colleagues described as the Strange Situation Test (see Chapter 1). Her focus of attention was not just on how infants managed the tension between attachment and exploratory behaviours, but also how their parents managed the reciprocal tension between protecting them and letting them go. What was observed was an interaction, a kind of dance, in which the behaviour of one party had to be understood in relation to that of the other. Secure infants sought out their parents when they felt threatened, protested at being separated from them and were quickly comforted upon reunion. Their parents were attentive and responsive to their needs. Insecure infants either mirrored the distance and disconnection of their parents, or clung to them in an anxious and ambivalent way that reflected the inconsistencies in the parenting they received. Security was a feature of relatedness, not a fixed personality characteristic. The same infant could behave securely with one caregiver and insecurely with another; he or she could elicit different responses from the same person. However, patterns of relatedness were not simply dictated by a succession of externally defined experiences; they reflected enduring constellations of assumptions about relationships that had become embedded within the child's inner world and persisted over time. These matrices of internalised assumptions were what Bowlby (1969, 1973, 1980) described as 'internal working models': relational templates that children unconsciously constructed from their reading of past social experience, and upon which they relied for guidance in their current dealings with others.

The persistence of these models over time has been demonstrated by subsequent study. The work of Mary Main and her colleagues (1985), resulting in the Adult Attachment Interview (see Chapters 1 and 2), was notable in shifting the focus of attention from children to adults, and from observed behaviour to representations of attachment disclosed by the different ways adults spoke about their early family experiences. The hallmarks of security were to be found in the coherence of the stories people told about their early years, and their capacity to engage simultaneously with themselves in remembering experience and with the interviewer in focusing upon the questions asked.

Attending to the interconnections between childhood and adult experience has been the province of both attachment research and psychoanalytic psychotherapy. But can *adult partnerships* in any sense be described as attachment relationships?

The first study to conceptualise romantic relationships in attachment terms recorded considerable continuity between them and previous attachments: 'The best predictors of adult attachment type were respondents' perceptions of the quality of their relationship with each parent and the parents' relationship with each other' (Hazan and Shaver, 1987: 516). The researchers in this study distinguished adult romantic from childhood attachment in terms of the activation of sexual and caregiving behavioural systems.

Following their work there has been a proliferation of research that assumes the pair bond is accurately described as an attachment relationship (see Feeney, 1999, for a review). Some continue to argue that this assumption is fallacious because adults do not need each other for protection in the same way that infants need their parents. A recent investigation of this proposition has concluded that the functions of attachment in adult life *are* essentially the same as in infancy: helping to ensure the development of an enduring bond that enhances survival and reproductive fitness in direct and indirect ways (Hazan and Zeifman, 1999). The significant differences between childhood and adult attachment are that, in the latter, attachment is reciprocal, the initial motivation for proximity-seeking is sexual attraction rather than the alleviation of distress, and that it tends to result in rather than follow from genetic relatedness. Through the physical proximity afforded by sexual behaviour there are opportunities for developing emotional closeness; emotional closeness fosters conditions in which attachment and caregiving are valued; valuing attachment and caregiving is good for the continuance of the species. It is not just a question of breeding, but of pedigree. Contemporary evolutionists, such as Cronin (1999), are clear that human behaviour is guided by qualitative as well as quantitative factors, and that a changing environment changes behaviour. From an evolutionary perspective, committed caregiving can be more adaptive than promiscuous sexuality, especially when health can be taken for granted and education bears powerfully on life opportunities.

Practitioners have thought about the couple relationship in attachment terms for longer than researchers, although their conceptualisations have been various and, by and large, not subjected to the tests of conventional research. Concurrent with Bowlby's work there evolved within the Tavistock Centre (at the Tavistock Marital Studies Institute and the Marital Unit of the Tavistock Clinic) a formulation of marriages and partnerships as transference relationships capable of collapsing boundaries of time and psychological space through their capacity to awaken and replay the dramas of early childhood (Bannister, 1955; Pincus, 1960; Dicks, 1967; Mattinson and Sinclair, 1979; Clulow, 1985; Clulow and Mattinson, 1988; Ruszczynski, 1993; Ruszczynski and Fisher, 1995;

Fisher, 1999). These studies are rooted in the British object relations tradition of psychoanalysis, and directed towards practitioner rather than researcher communities.

Generally speaking, practitioners and researchers have communicated very little with each other, each tending to believe the methods of the other were antithetical to their primary purpose. Bowlby himself acknowledged the communication gap in a paper that distinguished between the art of psychoanalytic therapy and the science of psychoanalytic psychology. He proposed that a principal difference lay in the mental outlooks of practitioners and researchers: 'The practitioner must deal with complexity, the scientist strives to simplify. The practitioner uses theory as a guide, the scientist challenges theory. The practitioner's modes of enquiry are inevitably limited whereas progress in science requires that data obtained by one method be cross-checked by data obtained by others' (Bowlby, 1979: 13). He espoused the discipline of direct observation as a check against clinical inference, a method that has been used to good effect in both clinical training and attachment research, along with more recent developments that permit the systematic analysis of mental representation. Happily, there is a growing rapprochement between attachment research and clinical practice which augurs well for the development of both (for example, Sinclair and McCluskey, 1996; Steele and Steele, 1998).

One aim of this book is to further the dialogue between practice and research. I want to suggest that, as well as there being differences, there are similarities between clinical and research activities that allow each discipline to learn from the other. Both clinicians and researchers operate as participant observers when it comes to studying human behaviour. Each must engage with and take account of intersubjective processes in carrying out their different tasks. Clinicians and researchers constitute part of the field of their studies; they cannot pretend they are separate from it. The truth of this proposition first presented itself to me years ago when reading an account of a sociological study of the transition to parenthood in which the researcher described how interviewing women to understand their experience of becoming mothers actually changed that experience. Research processes, I then understood, could have therapeutic effects. This understanding has been reinforced by my subsequent experience of action and clinical research. It is only a small step to reverse the proposition and assert that therapeutic processes might have research utility.

Today I tend to conceive of the psychotherapeutic process with couples as sharing some of the features of research (see Chapter 5). Psychotherapy tries to promote a collaborative endeavour between couple and therapist(s) for understanding the meaning of what happens when they meet within predefined parameters to explore problems that the partners locate within their relationship as a couple. The processes of developing theory and practice are inextricably linked – even in this context. They derive from testing hypotheses generated within the clinical situation against the couples' and therapists' experience. To

be viable and credible these hypotheses must take account of different realities and viewpoints. Observation and experiment overlap. Collecting and analysing data is an ongoing and reciprocal process. Insofar as the efficacy of the endeavour relies on a collaborative relationship between couple and therapists, the process of establishing that collaboration is part of the research data. The focus of study is intersubjective and requires a reflexive approach: couples are called on to reflect on their own experience (including their experience of therapy); therapists must likewise reflect on their responses to the couple and the therapeutic situation in order to access data about unconscious processes. Much can be learned through the process of implementing change, and clinicians have privileged access to data that tend to elude conventional research procedures.

This open systems view of the therapeutic process implies an open systems view of marriage and partnership. Neither is at odds with the basic assumption underpinning attachment and object relations theories: that human behaviour can only be understood in a social context. While systems theory reminds us that the study of one system is always the study of a sub-system of a wider system, attachment and object relations theories can be relied upon to retain the complementary, and equally valid, perspective, that systems are created in the image of their sub-systems.

This brings me to the second aim of the book: to encourage dialogue between different theoretical stances – specifically, between attachment and object relations theories. Historically, these different approaches have not always been comfortable bedfellows. Although both conceive of humans as relationship-seeking rather than instinct-driven beings, this very commonality has contained the seeds of dissent that pitted Bowlby's ideas against those of the psychoanalytic community of his time. His criticism of Freud for disbelieving his patients when they told him they had been seduced and abused as children (opting instead for a theory of unconscious phantasy that placed infantile sexuality centre stage), and of Klein for the place she accorded to the role of auto-generated phantasy as a primary motivational drive in human relationships, seemed to overturn the central tenets of psychoanalysis. He was read as dismissing the significance of psychic realities in favour of accepting, as fact, the reported accounts of patients. In the polarisation that followed, psychoanalysis was represented as being preoccupied with unconscious phantasy at the expense of external realities, and attachment theory as preoccupied with biologically and environmentally programmed behavioural systems at the expense of internal realities. The connection between inner and outer worlds, central to both theoretical approaches, was sometimes lost sight of as the various protagonists took up their positions.

Because Bowlby and his theory have been regarded as the 'black sheep' of the psychoanalytic family (Fonagy, 1999a) it sometimes needs to be restated that attachment theory *is* psychoanalytic. In understanding human development and behaviour it takes account of unconscious and defensive processes, the



formation and persistence of an internal world and the relationship of reciprocal influence between this and the individual's environment. But Bowlby was also influenced by other lines of thinking in constructing an empirically based theory of personality and social development (for example, evolution, ethology, control systems and cognition), and it was this, perhaps, that made him suspect. Courting different ideas can be as problematic in professional circles as it can be in marriages and partnerships; working across disciplines can be regarded as a form of infidelity.

Time has moved on. Attachment theory is providing an empirical basis for many of the clinical assertions rooted in object relations theory, and offering a conceptual bridge that allows conversations to develop between different approaches to providing psychotherapeutic help. There are satisfying convergences of meaning between terms such as 'psychic reality', 'internal world', 'internal working models' and 'mental representations', that have allowed object relations and attachment theorists to learn from rather than fight with each other. So, I hope, this book will provide opportunities to open and continue the dialogue between different ways of understanding the same phenomena – a task that is, after all, close to the hearts of couple psychotherapists given the nature of their work.

However, my experience as a couple psychotherapist alerts me to the challenges posed for the reader in engaging with the dialogue between practice and research, and with the linguistic and conceptual differences between attachment and (predominantly Kleinian) object relations paradigms contained in this book. The chapters speak in voices whose differences are not simply accounted for by the fact that there are seventeen contributors to the volume. The dialect of the practitioner is different from that of the researcher. The cadence of each reflects different emphases, assumptions and concerns. Moreover, the same is true within as well as between the disciplines. The conversations represented here are in the process of becoming rather than already formed, and there are places where the dialogue is halting and circumscribed. How could it be otherwise? Moving from hypothesis to evidence, from attribution to recognition, 'from narcissism to marriage' (Fisher, 1999), is a hard-won struggle, as every therapist, researcher and human being knows.

It needs also to be said that by focusing on heterosexual couples there is no intention by any of the contributors to exclude the concerns of gay couples. Indeed, there is every reason to believe that much of what applies to different-sex partnerships will also apply to same-sex partnerships (see Chapter 3). That these connections are not pursued here simply reflects the populations of the research and clinical studies referred to in this book.

The book is divided into three parts. Part I conceptualises security in committed adult heterosexual partnerships, drawing principally on contemporary research. Conceptualising the secure couple is not simply an academic exercise. It has real utility for clinicians as they review their assessment criteria for couples

seeking help, consider the nature of the therapeutic process, review their part in effecting or obstructing change, and explore appropriate benchmarks for measuring outcome in a culture that increasingly expects practice to be evidence-based.

In Chapter 1, James Fisher and Lisa Crandell draw on clinical and research sources in proposing the capacity of each partner to move between positions of depending on and being depended upon in their relationship as the hallmark of adult attachment security (what they term ‘complex’ attachment). They describe a prototype research measure for capturing the security of a partnership, as contrasted to the security of the adults within it, and so prepare the ground for re-conceptualising couples in attachment terms. By offering a typology of partnerships based on different pairings of individual attachment status they suggest which kinds of partnership are likely to generate what kinds of difficulties, and speculate about the likelihood of couples seeking help on the basis of their orientation to attachment.

Their concept of ‘complex attachment’ is identical to the secure base phenomenon in adult partnerships that Judith Crowell and Dominique Treboux describe in Chapter 2, and for which they have created a system of assessment based on observations of how couples interact together. In examining connections between the different domains from which attachment security is measured, they provide empirical evidence that addresses questions of central importance for therapeutic work with couples: In what ways does adult attachment differ from that between children and parents? What influence has past family experience on current relationships? Do people choose partners who are alike or dissimilar? How important is gender when considering whether the attachment security of one partner affects that of the other? What are the best attachment predictors of marital stability and satisfaction?

In Chapter 3, Kim Bartholomew, Antonia Henderson and Donald Dutton explore the nature of insecure attachment. They comment on the stability of many insecure relationships, despite the dissatisfactions they can cause the partners and the recurrence of abusive behaviour that sometimes occurs within them. In exploring why partners might stay in abusive relationships they outline a four-category model of attachment. This develops the classifications of Ainsworth and colleagues (1978) and Main and Goldwyn (1994) by identifying a fearful as well as dismissing orientation to attachment that drives avoidant behaviour, and by assessing interactions between attachment security and dimensions of regard for self and others. Breaking the mould of conventional thinking about abusive relationships, they provide evidence from four studies to support the view that relationship factors (as well as environmental or individual factors) may both predispose partners towards and protect them from violence.

In Chapter 4, Philip and Carolyn Cowan consider how attachment security is mediated across generations, and draw attention to the potential significance

of fathers in this regard. They provide evidence that links the academic performance and behaviour of children with the quality of their parents' relationship as a couple, an original and challenging perspective that tends to be overlooked in public debates about parenting. Providing a bridge between Parts I and II, they bring the results of their research to bear on the design and implementation of a preventive intervention programme designed to help couples with young children who are on the verge of starting school. They show how non-didactic, facilitative groups that focus on the couple's relationship can be more effective than groups focusing on parenting in promoting the well-being of adults and children, and suggest how the groups acted as a secure base for the couples who participated in them.

Part II considers the implications of attachment theory for responding to distress in the couple relationship. Every change that couples experience combines a measure of gain and loss. The weighting of their experience will depend on the nature of the change and what it means to the partners. Attachment theory, through the proposition that childhood experiences influence the way losses are managed in later life, has something to say about whether and how relationships are used to manage change. But does it have a utility that extends beyond other conceptual frameworks, and can it guide the thinking of practitioners as they consider what they do when they work with couples? In considering these questions, contributors invite a dialogue between the paradigms of attachment and object relations theories, as well as between process aspects of research and practice.

Chapter 5 introduces this section by considering the implications of attachment theory and research for recasting the nature of the therapeutic frame for psychoanalytic work with couples. In it I outline some basic assumptions underpinning the work of practitioners who are informed by attachment and object relations theories, and consider the therapeutic process as a co-research endeavour for couples and their therapists, one that shares some features of attachment research methods.

In Chapter 6, Jenny Riddell and Avi Shmueli join me in presenting two contrasting perspectives of a couple in therapy. One is drawn from the results of Adult Attachment Interviews conducted with each partner; the other derives from data (and especially counter-transference data) generated within the context of therapy. These perspectives are brought to bear on dilemmas that frequently affect couples and their therapists as they consider the potential significance of separation and loss in relation to ending therapy.

The importance of counter-transference in detecting and responding to unresolved/disorganised couple states of mind is developed by Christopher Vincent in Chapter 7. He considers the roles therapists are unconsciously invited to take up by couples to protect them from psychological pain, and the sudden eruptions of feeling – and collapse of thinking – that can occur in sessions. He argues that such eruptions bear some similarity to the 'blips' that denote

unresolved/disorganised states of mind in the Adult Attachment Interview. He compares these with responses to partners who, as a couple, jointly present features of a ‘cannot classify’ grading on the basis of this research interview. He considers how far one can extrapolate from the observed behaviour of children to adult attachment dilemmas and states of mind, and introduces a classification conundrum when the couple (rather than either partner) is the ‘subject’ or ‘patient’.

In Chapter 8 I explore violence in marriage as a product of attachment insecurity (both patterned and episodic) and narcissistic object relating. The case illustration used for this purpose is Edward Albee’s play, *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* The play not only provides a vivid picture of violent dynamics operating within a relationship but also suggests how easily others are drawn into the unfolding drama. Some implications for therapeutic practice are suggested on the basis of the experience of the guests in the play, who were invited to both witness and respond to what was unfolding before them.

Chapter 9 concludes this section of the book with an examination of the results of a clinical research project that looked at the impact of bereavement on the couple relationship and its capacity to act as a secure base for the partners. Drawing on this experience, Lynne Cudmore and Dorothy Judd consider the trauma of child death and its impact on parents as individuals and on their relationship as a couple. The significance of how past losses were managed is highlighted for the individuals, and for the capacity of their partnership to act as a secure base that allowed them to experience and express their grief together and apart. They conclude with some observations about the impact of trauma on the responses of therapists and researchers, and ask about the professional and personal bases that provide the necessary platforms from which to engage with painful experience.

Their observations form a natural bridge to the concluding section of the book. Part III considers the professional, organisational and wider contexts that can support and undermine couples and those who try to help them. It may surprise some readers to come across chapters that address training, institutional and social issues in a book that is primarily concerned with different ways of accessing, understanding and responding to the couple relationship. Yet a moment’s reflection will show how mutually sensitive are research and practice endeavours to organisational and cultural influences. There can be no service delivery system that fails to include agency task, although there may be a more faltering commitment to the continuing professional development that equips and supports those who carry it out. There also can be no practitioner or agency that remains unaffected by the nature of the task being carried out. Processing experience, unconscious as well as conscious, requires therapists to lend themselves to being recruited into the inner as well as the outer world dramas of the couples they see *and* – and this is crucial to the therapeutic enterprise – to be able to think about that experience rather than to replicate it. In this endeavour

they, too, will need the support and containment – what, in attachment terms, we have been referring to as a secure base – that professional training, ongoing supervision and agency awareness can provide.

In Chapter 10, Felicia Olney draws on her experience of managing and delivering training services for the Tavistock Marital Studies Institute to consider how training and consultation can act as both safe haven and secure base for professional practice. She outlines how environmental pressures both challenge and increase the need for practitioners to have a secure professional base, and examines some opportunities and hazards for trainers in trying to keep clients, practitioners and agencies in mind when developing training programmes. She illustrates her themes from work with individuals and organisations in the private, public and voluntary sectors.

In Chapter 11, Anton Obholzer questions how well the secure base concept travels from the field of child development to the domain of work organisations. He examines the nature of the connections between individuals and the institutions in which they work, and considers what makes for a creative enterprise. He also addresses the impact of work-related anxiety on practitioners and organisations, and extends an invitation to consider the factors that make for vulnerability and resilience at work. Some organisational themes resonate closely with dilemmas of the couple in managing a balance between personal autonomy and collective belonging, and between the formal and informal structuring of relationships.

The book concludes in Chapter 12 with some personal reflections on the interconnections that foster and develop our understanding of what makes for secure partnerships. The couple relationship is not defined exclusively by the inner worlds of the partners. They inhabit an environment that will influence their felt and actual security. That environment may be shaped by a research relationship, or by a therapeutic frame. It will also be shaped by socio-economic and cultural factors. To adapt the aphorism of child psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott, there is no such thing as a couple, only a couple in a relational context – whether the relations are between internal objects or external people (and recognising the permeability of the boundary separating these two contexts). How couple problems are fashioned from the complex interpenetration of social circumstance and personal meaning is something that has continued to fascinate me (Clulow, 1993, 1995, 1996), and it seems to me self-evident that contextual factors – social and material – are as relevant as intra-psychic realities when thinking about how able the couple relationship is to function as a secure base for partners.

So what does this have to say about the institutionalisation of the couple relationship in marriage? Because partnerships are open systems that mediate between the inner worlds of the partners and the environment which supports – or fails to support – them as a couple, their capacity to operate as a secure base cannot be thought about in isolation from the broader contexts that influence

how women and men relate to each other. Some argue that the institution of marriage has undermined that base and become the cause of its own demise through perpetuating patriarchal structures, demarcations and attitudes that are deeply at odds not only with contemporary socioeconomic realities but also with the aspirations of women and men today (whose assumptions about gender roles are quite different from those when marriage was at its peak). Others observe that marriage is a public symbol of, and support for, the private commitment partners make to each other, a commitment that is likely to be the most important they ever make in their lives.

Whatever position one adopts in relation to this and other questions that concern the synergy between inner and outer realities, experience and meaning result from an interplay between the two. This is the domain of both attachment theory and psychoanalysis, and the message of hope is that, for good or ill, relationships have the power to affect relationships.