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celebrating the publication of a new landmark**

WATERS, E and PETTERS, Dean

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**Cornerstones and Discourses in Attachment Study:  
Celebrating the Publication of a New Landmark**

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Everett Waters<sup>1</sup>

Dean. D. Petters<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>State University of New York at Stony Brook

<sup>2</sup>University of Sheffield Hallam (UK)

### Abstract

*Cornerstones in attachment research* (Duschinsky, 2020) is a landmark history of five major research groups that have helped establish the empirical foundations of the Bowlby-Ainsworth attachment tradition. This essay highlights Duschinsky's use of historical methodology rather than the narrative-style review more familiar to psychologists. We then turn to a recurring theme in the book, the inconsistent use of language and theoretical misunderstandings, especially as they arise at the interface between attachment study and more applied disciplines. We discuss Duschinsky's sociological analysis of how these difficulties arose and are maintained and our own perspective, which emphasizes more difficulties attending communication across declining and emerging paradigms. Clearly, expository writing and ordinary collaborations alone have not resolved these difficulties or provided much defense against new ones arising. We expect *Cornerstones* will be a significant asset as we try to establish new modes of collaboration and communication with educators, clinicians and other practitioners who work not with abstractions and populations but with individuals presenting complex histories and living complex lives.

**Cornerstones and Discourses in Attachment Study:  
Celebrating the Publication of a New Landmark**

Part of knowing what you are doing in research is having a clear idea of the end point. Of course, research horizons change with time, as they do if the work turns a corner or ascends a summit. In the event, it is good to follow Paul Meehl's advice that, "It helps, from time to time, for us to go back to the beginning and to formulate just what we are trying to do" (Meehl, 1959, pp. 102-103). Attachment study is lucky to have, in *Cornerstones of attachment research* (Duschinsky, 2020), the scholarly history it richly deserves and the summary needed to recruit and orient new generations of contributors.

In addition to its extensive review of literature on attachment theory and research, *Cornerstones* draws attention to, and makes superb use of, materials from the Wellcome Collection's John Bowlby Archive. This has allowed Duschinsky to clarify many points of continuing historical and theoretical interest and importance to attachment study. In addition to the detailed and elegantly written chapters, the footnotes and bibliography are clarifying on many points and will support years of further research and new ideas. The book's release will surely generate a tidal wave of discussion and debate, and inevitably bring to light new material on attachment history. Presumably, much of this will be incorporated into a 2nd edition.

All who work in the Bowlby-Ainsworth tradition appreciate the Wellcome Trust's generosity in supporting Duschinsky's research and funding the book's availability online at (<https://global.oup.com/academic/product/cornerstones-of-attachment-research-9780198842064>). Releasing such a valuable work in digital (and thus searchable) format and free of charge will certainly speed and extend its uptake by current and new generations of attachment theorists and researchers. It is also an innovative strategy for increasing conversation,

and resolving misunderstandings, among researchers, clinical and legal practitioners, policy professionals, and the public. Well done Robbie Duschinsky and the Wellcome Trust.

The target essay, *Six attachment discourses* (Duschinsky et al., this issue) discusses communication across domains/communities involved in attachment study and applications, and takes stock of where the field is heading. We appreciate the opportunity to comment. The essay is a good start to a long process of mining *Cornerstones* for new perspective, ideas, and directions, and sets a high bar for further commentary and reflection. It would have fit well among the reflections at the end of the book. Nonetheless, it is probably better that *Cornerstones* stand on its own as an unparalleled historical review of major research programs. This way it retains its value as an authoritative voice helping readers collect their own thoughts and speak for themselves.

### CORNERSTONES

John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth always worked with a clear idea of what they were trying to accomplish. Many projects have followed the model of programmatic research Mary Ainsworth set forth in her Baltimore longitudinal study (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978/2005). These include many of the measurement and construct validation studies, major longitudinal projects (see Grossmann, Grossmann, & Waters (2005), and translational studies such as the Circle of Security Intervention (Marvin, Cooper, Hoffman & Powell, 2002) and the ABC Intervention (Dozier & Bernard, 2019) projects reviewed in *Cornerstones*. To be sure, there are the usual, and at times useful, instrument driven studies, especially by researchers first learning the paradigm. Nevertheless, programmatic thinking has been a significant factor in attachment study's longevity and the good health in which we find it today. Undoubtedly, this underlying coherence helped make the *Cornerstones* project manageable.

*The Historian's Method.*

There is much to learn from the historian's methodology that Duschinsky deployed in writing *Cornerstones*. His approach to data management and analysis has allowed him to keep his bearings throughout a truly formidable task. Historiographic methodology is complex and subject to many trends and fashions. It is too much to expect psychologists to recognize or fully appreciate what a historian brings to a project like *Cornerstones*. It would be interesting if, for a second edition, or perhaps in reply to these essays, Duschinsky would provide some insights into his methodology. In addition to the general method, there are specific questions such as, How does an historian deal with quotations from letters? What kind of context is necessary to make the best use of such material?

We would also be interested in the kinds of considerations in play in Duschinsky & White's (2020) analysis of unpublished manuscripts in the Wellcome Trust's John Bowlby archive. We all have outlines, drafts, and unrevised manuscripts around. How does a historian know what to make of them? Which ones are dead letters? Which ones might have been revised and submitted? How does a historian move ahead if answers are not available? At the very least, it would seem that such material should be mapped onto work that did get published, to see whether incipient thoughts found expression in other work. Some insight into the historian's method would be interesting and useful.

Finally, future historians will not have the kind of archival records left by John Bowlby, Mary Ainsworth, and other avid correspondents. However, as one source disappears, another becomes available. E-mail, blogs, and hard drives likely preserve a wider (if somewhat different) range of material, and from a much wider range of individuals, than we have from each generation's few great letter writers. In addition, research journal's archived reviews might also

become a valuable resource. Perhaps there could be an agreed upon embargo period after which journal reviews (blinded, of course) and responses could be made available to historians. Perhaps historians could help attachment scholars (and others) better conserve their digital legacies. This is a pressing issue. The first generation with substantial digital records is already well into retirement. It would be interesting to have Duschinsky's perspective on such matters.

## SIX ATTACHMENT DISCOURSES: CONVERGENCE, DIVERGENCE AND RELAY

### Attachment Language Across Disciplines

The tension between ordinary and scientific language is a theme throughout *Cornerstones*. Duschinsky et al. address this issue systematically by analyzing how attachment concepts and language are used (and misused) in developmental psychology, social psychology, psychiatric diagnosis, psychotherapy, child welfare practice, and the media. Within developmental psychology, they find a reasonably coherent paradigm based on shared understanding of key concepts, tools, and terminology. Across disciplines they find, if not quite a conceptual/terminological Tower of Babel, a case study in what can happen when a scientific paradigm becomes a bandwagon.

The situation, as they find it, is nicely summarized in terms of how "attachment", "security", "internal working model", "attachment related trauma", and "disorganization" are used in the different disciplines. Their analysis is useful

and interesting. Useful because they have reviewed attachment language use across a wider range of disciplines and publications than most readers monitor. Interesting because the differences they find are considerable. Moreover, their picture of diverse usage necessarily understates the total diversity because there is considerable diversity even within each of the disciplines. Indeed, there is enough diversity in usage even among developmental attachment researchers to be troublesome. This raises the question, how does consistent usage become so attenuated?

### *Moving Targets*

Even within the developmental attachment literature, concepts and terminology have never been entirely consistent. Particularly during the transition from existing paradigms to new ones, the literature includes work from both traditions. A scholar from another discipline would have to see into the future to know which threads to follow. Moreover, as a new paradigm emerges and matures, concepts and terminology evolve with theoretical insights and new research. Thus, even the new paradigm is a moving target. Misunderstandings are inevitable,



especially if the new paradigm is engaged primarily on the printed page rather than through significant collaborations and engagements.

### *Personal Meanings*

Bowlby and Ainsworth were both lucky and unlucky in their choice of terminology. Terms such as *attachment* and *security* have sparked the popular imagination as earlier terms such as *cathexis* and *discriminative stimulus* never could. This has helped recruit generations of new researchers, and attracted wide media interest. At the same time, attracting interest across the entire spectrum of social and behavioral sciences, as well as the arts and media, risks outstripping the lines of communication and collaboration necessary to maintain coherent discourse. Many attachment-related terms are so evocative that consumers in other fields understandably assume their meaning is rooted in ordinary language. Others conjure up meanings as if key terms were so many Rorschach cards – conflating personal meaning with scientific meaning and undermining consistent use.

### *Lack of a Stabilizing Context*

Attachment concepts and terminology also lose focus when they are adopted for use far from the discipline in which they originated. This removes the socializing, standardizing context of colleagues, reviewers, and tradition that calibrate and stabilize their use in developmental attachment study. More meaningful collaborations and engagement can help resolve existing language difficulties and theoretical misunderstandings. They can also help avoid new ones. Of course, attachment theory and research have never operated in isolation. There have always been dialogues across disciplines. Both Bowlby and Ainsworth had very diverse networks of friends in other disciplines. More recently, consultations and collaborations with educators, clinicians, and practitioners in other disciplines have become increasingly common at least since the late 1970's. Why, then, do the language problems and theoretical misunderstandings persist? Is it as simple as the incommensurability of different paradigms? Or is there something about the goals, focus, or conduct of current collaborations and engagements that preserves or distracts from addressing language issues? Duschinsky is, for the moment, uniquely placed to reflect on these issues.

*A Good Review Can Help*

By drawing attention to how key terms are used and misused, Duschinsky et al. encourage attachment theorists and researchers to be more careful and consistent. Attachment language can only be used as carefully and consistently across disciplines as it is throughout the attachment community. It's often rich, non-technical meanings in ordinary language make it prone to associative, connotative drift as it encounters cognate concepts and terminology in other disciplines. In light of the usage patterns Duschinsky et al. review, we find ourselves tending toward ever more specific language – *secure base relationship* in place of attachment and *skillful use of an adult as a secure base or expectations of availability and responsiveness* in place of security (e.g., Waters et al. 2020).

We hope Duschinsky et al.'s review will stimulate discussions addressing implicit meanings and significant, researchable disagreements underlying how attachment language is used within and across disciplines and motivate attachment researchers to address themselves more often to audiences in other disciplines. Not only in writing but also in meaningful interactions, comment, and collaboration. It is

important that their essay encourage as well as caution those who are primarily consumers of attachment theory and research to better negotiate the complexities and contradictions in the attachment literature.

### Media and Policy Engagement

#### *Bowlby's Voice*

John Bowlby clearly hoped his work on attachment theory would have practical consequences. This made sense on several levels. He was born into a social class that, at its best, felt an obligation to help (advise) the less fortunate. In addition, his father, Sir Anthony Bowlby, had been Surgeon to King Edward VII's household and honored by the British Crown for innovations in the Army Medical Services in WWI. Asked whether the family had placed great expectations on the sons, Bowlby's son, Richard, replied, "Oh, I think there were; I think they would have placed expectations on themselves... I think he would have liked to have pleased his own father" (Waters, 2006). As a physician and psychotherapist, it was Bowlby's role (and privilege) to give advice and, when necessary, to act. To do no harm and yet tell people what (in his view) was good for them. Attentive to his career, and keen to have his contributions recognized, how better to amplify his impact than by wading into policy?

There is no doubting Bowlby's sincerity or his ability to write. Or, even into his later years, his ability to adopt the voice of a sympathetic, trusted personal physician. Yet, friends and critics alike notice a difference between his modest 1958 pamphlet, *Can I leave my baby?*, the workmanlike clarity of his 1950 and 1965 W.H.O. reports, and the urgency with which he expressed his ideas about out of home care later in his career. Our own impression has always

been that his was the voice of a concerned physician seeing families swept up in social change. Although contemporary critics occasionally mention Bowlby's early, at times intemperate opinions, his views moderated significantly over time (Rutter, 1995, p. 566). Thus, it hardly seems fair to hold early opinions against Bowlby or attachment theory in general.

### *Ainsworth's Voice*

Surveying attachment study from the Tavistock era (1950's - 1960's) into the Baltimore era (mid-1960's – 1975), Duchinsky et al. see the beginnings of a “withdrawal of Ainsworth and her group from applied and interdisciplinary discourse”. Surveying the same material, we see instead, Mary Ainsworth coming into her own. Not changing her own interests and style but finally finding her own niche and resources at Johns Hopkins. From the Baltimore study's inception, she avoided media interactions, lest participants in her studies learn of the study hypotheses or encounter misinformation (Ainsworth, personal communication, 1972). She was also cautious and modest about potential applications before the reliability and significance of the basic findings were nailed down. Moreover, she did not want to arouse the criticism that would certainly attend prematurely advocating clinical applications or policy prescriptions. Thus, where Duschinsky et al. see an unexplained change of focus over time, we see a difference between John Bowlby the physician and Mary Ainsworth the scientist.<sup>Footnote 1</sup>

As to the origins of inconsistent language use in attachment study and across disciplinary dialogues, we note only that prior to and during the Baltimore era, much of attachment language was, at best, tentative, under investigation, and explicitly open to revision. It was toward the end of the Baltimore era, as attachment study gained some momentum, that terminology began causing problems. Indeed, Ainsworth's papers on object relations, attachment, and dependency (Ainsworth, 1969; 1972) were written more to ease the transition to a new paradigm than to

address already problematic usage. That is, language problems did not emerge at once or depend on a change in Bowlby's or Ainsworth's engagement of other disciplines. They continue to emerge every time a young developmentalist or a scholar or practitioner in another discipline first opens the pages of Bowlby's *Attachment* trilogy, Ainsworth's *Infancy in Uganda* or *Patterns of attachment*, or any other primary source.

### Surmountable Obstacles

Discussions of attachment theory and methods often focus on the difficulties of mastering terminology and techniques. Add to this the notable inconsistencies in how attachment language is used and how measures are interpreted, and one might suspect the difficulties lie in obtuse internal logic or in overly complex or ill-defined measures. Alternatively, attachment theory is (a) simply more complex than new readers expect - integrating as it does, ideas from evolution and behavioral biology (ethology), cognitive psychology, and control systems, not to mention Bowlby's clinical experience, and (b) a genuinely new paradigm, something many in the social and behavioral sciences might not encounter in an entire career. That is to say, perhaps scholars have simply underestimated the effort involved in meeting the challenge. One would hardly expect to become proficient in medicine, or acquire the skills of a historian, or even the proficiency of a union carpenter in six weeks, or six months, or even several years. Yet, much of the misuse of attachment language and many of the complaints seem based on little more than reading a few articles.

Perhaps attachment theorists should have done more early on to encourage cross-disciplinary discourse and clarify difficult aspects of the attachment paradigm. Students working closely with Mary Ainsworth had access to authoritative comments, criticism, and John Bowlby's latest thinking from Ainsworth herself and a strong, extended cohort of her colleagues

and friends from many disciplines. In that context, everything seemed clear. It was easy to underestimate the difficulties someone differently situated might have mastering a genuinely new paradigm.

If early Baltimore and Minnesota attachment groups were derelict in not addressing themselves more frequently and explicitly to other disciplines, readers should remember that (hard as it is to imagine today) attachment theory was not always popular, not always welcomed as an alternative to well-established paradigms. Rather than giving a new paradigm a fair hearing and time and space to prove its mettle, the dominant learning theory and psychoanalytic paradigms fought hard from the very beginning. The battle was joined even before the first volume of Bowlby's *Attachment* trilogy was in print. Attachment theorists had to establish a beachhead before giving much thought to cross-disciplinary dialogues. Today, several generations later, a discriminating reader can absolutely find excellent discussions of every key aspect of core attachment theory. In addition, attachment researchers have repeatedly proven their willingness to host and mentor young researchers and scholars from other disciplines.

Duschinsky et al. (ms. page 11, lines 1-10) wonder whether Ainsworth and her students might have created some of their own problems, seeming to restrict access to the inner workings of attachment theory by insisting on specialized training. Quite the opposite. If anything, the problem early on was to recruit the talent necessary to insure the work's future. Nonetheless, there is quite a bit of implicit knowledge and measurement/ observation-related meaning in attachment theory. Although critics may have sensed arbitrary obstacles, complex measurement was never deployed as an obstacle *per se*. We did, though, warn against assigning ordinary meanings to technical language.

In many disciplines, from spectroscopy to structural equation modeling, familiarity with paradigmatic procedures is the royal road to understanding key concepts, connotations, and research questions. Concepts, such as the secure base, avoidance and resistance, and narrative coherence, are best communicated through experience with specific tools and types of questions. Attachment researchers might have designed simpler tools but they would not been adequate to the phenomenon. This is not a design feature or a shortcoming of attachment theory and research. It is how we experience new paradigms. Time and again, students and colleagues, even journalists, who have put in the time report a palpable *Ah-ha!* experience as words and behavior suddenly cohere.

In our experience, few early critics sought the opportunity to accompany experienced observers on home visits, sit in on Strange Situation procedures and scoring, and AAI interviews and coding. Their misunderstandings still stand in the literature, landmines that can handicap new investigators and interdisciplinary scholars early in their work. Perhaps video conferencing will make these experiences more routine for new generations, who will also have *Cornerstones* to help them through difficult territory.

In brief, we agree with Duschinsky et al. that there are problems in the use of attachment language; that they are not trivial, and the best solution is more interaction across disciplines. But what kind of interactions? Although it can be useful to write for other disciplines, we wonder whether one can effectively address disciplines (as opposed to individuals) on such matters. Perhaps it is as simple as building invitations and mechanisms for extended interaction into such addresses. A caution: It is easy to become over-enthusiastic, flattered by someone else's interest, and to begin selling, even over-selling, attachment theory. Recognizing that expertise requires time and repetition, we should instead engage colleagues from other disciplines in terms of their



goals, not ours. Perhaps in this way we can communicate more clearly and, more than advancing attachment study, realize the kinds of social benefits both John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth valued.

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#### FOOTNOTES

- 1. This is not to say that Mary Ainsworth didn't share Bowlby's hope of making children's lives better. However, founded in by 1883 G Stanley Hall in as the first laboratory for experimental psychology in America, Johns Hopkins did not have a clinical Ph.D. program. This obviously shaped the interest profiles of applicants for graduate training. With the possible exceptions of Sylvia Bell and Alicia Lieberman, clinical training was not a primary career goal among Ainsworth's students. Doubtless there would have been studies on clinical populations and intervention projects, and more interaction with psychiatry and social work if Hopkins had a clinical program. Mark Greenberg, who worked on the Baltimore project as an undergraduate assistant, informs us that, when Ainsworth moved to Virginia, with its excellent clinical Ph.D.

program, she was “quite open and involved in discussions about clinical applications, but was always clear that the classifications (mostly A-B-C at that point) not be considered as clinical diagnoses or as sole justifications for therapy (personal communication, October 5, 2020). This was in the mid-1980’s. Some of these discussions are reflected in the 1987 Belsky & Nezworski volume, *Clinical implications of attachment*.