Theories help us to comprehend situations, give us ideas about what is going on and why things are happening that way (Maclean and Harrison 2008). In this essay, I have considered to give attention to John Bowlby’s attachment theory and Jean Paiget’s cognitive theory focusing on child development. An outline of the above mentioned two theories will be given and how it informs knowledge of human development. I will go on to critically discuss the links to social work practice. In conclusion, I will demonstrate application of attachment theory to social work practice.

Attachment theory
Bowlby (1969: 13) describes attachment as ‘an invisible affectionate bond between two people that consists of instinctive interactions’. Howe et al. (1999) asserts that attachment is viewed as a biological response designed to get children into close, protective relationships.

Bowlby outlined four phases of the development of attachment as an integrated system of behaviours in infants: Phase 1:- Birth – 2/3 months

The infant directs his attachment to human figures on an instinctual bias; all are equally likely to elicit smiling or crying because the infant is not discriminating.

Phase 2:- 3-6 months

The infant’s attachment focuses on one figure, typically the primary caregiver.

Phase 3:- 6-9 months

The intensity of attachment to the mother or caregiver increases. Due to this and newly acquired motor skills, the infant now readily seeks the proximity to the caregiver.

Phase 4:- 9-12 months

The elements of attachment listed above become integrated into a mutual system of attachment to which both infant and mother contribute.

Bowlby asserts that mothers have an important role to play in children’s early relationships. Bowlby, (1952) cited in Beckett (2006:53) contends that, ‘mother love in infancy is as important for mental health as are vitamins and proteins for the physical health’ The theory establishes that children’s behaviour is linked to either secure or insecure attachments. However, there are three types of insecure attachment which are listed by Wilson et al. (2008) as insecure avoidant attachment group A, insecure ambivalent attachment group C and insecure disorganised or disoriented attachment group D each of which has a consequence of undesirable responses.

With secure attachment group A according to Wilson et al. (2008), a child is securely attached in the mother’s presence when she positively responds and meets the needs of the child in a suitable manner. As Howe (2010) highlights, this attachment experience fosters security, it gives a sense of worth, faith in the helpfulness of others. According to Howe (2008), the child builds internal working models of the world and of himself in it, with the aid of which he perceives events, forecasts the future, constructs his plans and works as mitigation in times of trauma by forming resilience mechanisms. However, insecure attachment is contrary to this.

Insecure-avoidant group A develops from a disengaged parenting style. The mother’s behaviour is cold, angry and rejecting. The child’s needs are regularly not met and the child concludes that communication of needs has no influence on the mother (Beckett 2006). The child who fits into this category shows odd behaviour.

With an ambivalent insecure attachment group C, the mother’s behaviour appears relatively warm, but she shows less sensitivity to the baby’s signals, responding at inappropriate times (Maclean and Harrison 2008). As Howe et al. (1999) points out, a common characteristic of these children is that they cry a lot, show more distress and are not enthusiastic about physical contact. Ainsworth et al. (1978) conducted a research to observe these children’s behaviour when reunited with the mother after a short separation. The children were filled with anxiety before separation from mother, got upset when the mother left and were ambivalent when she returned. This is known as the ‘strange situation’ and it became widely used to determine whether children’s attachments were secure or insecure.

The disorganised insecure attachment group D, comes from Main and Solomon’s work. They view a caregiver as unpredictable, rejecting and violent at times. Children who fall in this category are flooded with emotions
of fear and anger (Main and Solomon 1986). Maclean and Harrison (2008; 82) assert that, ‘these toddlers show contradictory behaviour patterns, e.g. avoidance, resistance, tantrums plus unusual expressions of arrogant and negative emotion’.

Application of attachment theory to social work practice

This theory therefore provides social workers with part of the model of analysis in judging the quality of relationships (Walker and Crawford 2010). It provides a way of understanding the impression and consequences of a child’s difficult experiences. Walker and Crawford (2010; 54) claim this to be essential in knowing when to intervene or even remove a child where there are concerns in relation to risks of insecure attachment. Wilson et al (2008) claim that, practitioners would be in a position to form strategies that can help children recover from difficult experiences and/or damage. As Gerhart (2004) elucidates, children can recover from abuse or other negative experiences even though it is more difficult for those who have been seriously maltreated. According to Doherty and Hughes (2009) early intervention with children who display discipline problems and problematic behaviours such as noncompliance, temper loss and aggression is very important and must be applied early. Howe (2005) affirms that intervention to dissuade aggressive behaviour at a later time can be less effectual because adolescents become increasingly refractory to behavioural management therapies.

Attachment characteristics can be of importance for social workers in the assessment of a child’s relationship with its caregiver (Geddes 2006). This assessment is an important requirement of safeguarding children’s welfare as it informs the practitioner of any concerns on the child’s wellbeing as informed by the Green Paper ‘Every Child Matters 2003’ (Geddes 2006). Howe (2010) asserts that these attachment characteristics portrayed will help practitioners to gather useful information to be analysed and evaluated so as to make neither non-judgemental nor non oppressive decisions. As Thompson (2005) notes, failure to obtain enough information is an example of ineffective practice which can lead to biased decisions being made. For example, if practitioners do not critically consider their professional values and principles, and assess the impact of stressful attachment experiences of children as informed by the theory principles, it is easy to typecast a child to have disruptive behaviour disorders such as ADHD which will prove the practitioner’s incompetence.

The attachment theory highlights the behaviour of parents in both secure and insecure situations. Equipped with this information, the social workers can assess and intervene on some adults’ parenting styles and find out if they need a support system to help them learn how to be good and responsive parent or carers thereby reducing the number of looked after children and maintaining family units in the community (Howe 1995). Even the Children Act 1989 rests on the belief that children are generally best looked after within the family with both parents playing a full part without resorting to legal proceedings (Wilson et al 2008). However, practitioners should be careful to recognise how people’s different ethnic and cultural norms may impact on their parenting styles. Therefore, it is important that practitioners dismiss preconceived biases and stereotypical judgements but should develop anti oppressive ethos (Thompson 2005).

Children are part of a social network and if attachment relationships were weak with caregivers this could possibly explains why the child have problems in making up own relationship thereby proving social workers with children’s personality background information. Background information will assist social workers to understand causes of some children’s behavioural problems like neurotic and delinquent behaviour and mental illness in older age (Howe 1995). This valuable perspective on the development of feelings and behaviours relating to human needs can therefore provide a social worker with an understanding of individuals’ unpredictable reactions.

Critical analysis of attachment theory

Even though the attachment theory adds significantly to our understanding of child development, however, the first major weakness of this theory is that it puts much focus on one primary attachment figure, that is the mother and fails to take into account other important adults for example the father, siblings and/or a key worker at preschool with whom children can form relationships. Thus Neaum (2010) makes it clear that, children forming attachments and forming relationships with others is equally important as with the mother. Feminist movements would argue that the theory is oppressive and gender biased.

Ainsworth et al (1978)’s categories are based on short separations and reunions implying that it will work for all children. Taking into consideration that the attachment observation was based on few minutes of
behaviour can make it difficult to recognise relevant qualities of attachment. This same concept may not
provide the same anxiety every child. Howe (2010) acknowledges that children are distinct and unique
individuals with dissimilar feelings and experiences, hence their development should be considered on
individual basis. Difficulties may arise, however, when attempting to implement the procedure to children
whose cultural norms, values beliefs and background differ. In some cultures, young children are left for a
long time as training for independence while others identify a greater emphasis on maintaining relationships.
The theoretical conceptual model therefore fails to recognise that in certain cultures uncles, brothers and
sisters can provide the role of a mother forming several good relations with immediate families which could
later help the child.
This theory can misguide practitioners to think that when a child behaves badly it is because of insecure
relationships with parents and not putting into considerations other care givers. Therefore social workers
should not always assume that if a child has non-secure base it is the parents’ fault and tend to ignore
cultural differences, undiagnosed illnesses and parental depression. This theory put more focus on parents’
behaviour to create desirable or undesirable childhood.
Last but not least, the attachment theory assumes that secure attachment always leads to positive future
relationships and tend not to pay attention on the predictable variables like the death of the attachment
figure, divorce and economic factors. Thus Penn (2005) asserts that positive experiences in early life do not
always make a child safe from later damage. There is therefore a danger that attachment theory can lead to a
conflicting single-dimensional psychodynamic pathology of family model which puts no consideration of the
influence of the wider context of probabilities upon parenting (Flynn and Rai 2003).

Jean Paiget's cognitive theory.
The cognitive approach seeks to understand the internal thinking and mental processes that underpin human
actions as opposed to behavioural approach which focuses upon learning by experience, response to stimulus
in the environment.

Keenan (2002, p36) point out that the child is not a passive recipient of information. It is possible that a lack
of information can result in unacceptable behaviours that can be punishable. However, Keenan (2002)
reported that it is a learning process for the child. According to Piaget’s (1971)’s theory of cognitive
development, well supported by Keenan (2002) acknowledge evolutionary biology. This highlights where
people are coming from, where they are going and how they live (Buss, 1995). The works of human mind is
significant, it helps to communicate and interact with the world and interpret the world to make meanings
and sense out of events and situations to better understand the world in which people live. Children tend to
fail to anticipate and recognise differences in opinion to the situation and perhaps the consequences, hence
end up in arguments. As a social worker the ability to identify the source of arguments facilitate an amicable
conflict resolution strategy. It is important to realise that children retain any information given by the parents,
teachers. This supports the old saying that ‘whatever comes from the mouth of the child is from their
parents’. In terms of theory, Piaget identified four stages; qualitatively, as a period of development;
sensorimotor stage, from birth to 2 year; preoperational, 2-7 years and formal operational, when the child can
think of possible things and develop hypothesis. However Piaget failed to recognise that children pass the
development stages at a different rate. In a real situation, it is not fair to compare the capabilities of children
as will bring a lot of anger, frustration and hurt from the failing child. A good parent should be seen
encouraging and praise even little achievements.
Piaget’s cognitive theory suggests that reasoning develops in four stages and changes as the child passes
from one stage to another.

Critical analysis of cognitive theory
Even though this theory has gone some way towards enhancing our understanding of children’s stages of
development, two important limitations need to be considered. First, Piaget’s research is too narrow because
it does not include socioeconomic factors, gender, ethnic background, or sexual orientation in the study. The
cognitive perspective also gives consideration of learning styles as learning is thought to progress either
verbally or visually and often through a combination of the two.
Cognitive theory is too generalised and involves designing very frequent assessment of the students’ learning and retention, since new experiences build directly upon previous ones. There is a need to constantly evaluate the needs of each student and designing new activities that address the evolving educational needs and stages of each student. This can be a challenge, entailing great deal of time and effort.

Implications to social work practice

Conclusion

Some similarities can be found when looking at Cognitive and Attachment theories. Both theories also believe that experiences in the early stages either positive or negative have a great consequence on the child’s wellbeing and experiences in the later stages a view which is supported by Howe (2010) that children’s early experiences and relationships are the best predictions of tomorrow’s adults. However, there is one main difference that can be noted between these two theories. Unlike the Attachment theory which focuses mainly on the mother as having influence on the child’s future relationships and behaviour, Piaget’s theory gives great emphasis on the child’s mind.

Even though both the attachment and cognitive theory contribute a lot to social work practice, it is evident from the discussion above that understanding child development theories such as attachment theory is relevant and of paramount importance. It gives a bigger picture of what a child should be able to do at a particular age and establishes causes if a child is below expected standard of development. Attachment theory seems to be more feasible and has more practical efficacy to social work practice. This is because the theory provides an insight of the quality of relationships between children and their parents or caregivers and how they influence or affect children’s care and future relationships. It offers explanations to the diversities amongst relationships. In other words, this answers questions like why children may behave differently from other siblings or they may react differently to a similar situation which is explained by the theory of resilience. Attachment theory is concerned with what happens in the early stages of the child’s growth; it therefore assures us that insecure attachments can be reversed if proper interventions are put in place to safeguard the children’s wellbeing.

Attachment theory brings out some points to consider when supporting service users on parenting skills which lead to the development of secure attachment for example that they need to respond to the child’s needs appropriately through feeding, touching, smiling, talking, soothing and rocking them. One may argue that attachment theory offers a valuable perspective on the development of feelings and behaviour relating to human needs. The theory also deals with the impact of separation and loss and explains their significance to emotional development and subsequent well being (Howe 1995).

Therefore, for social workers whose responsibility is to focus more on children, protect them, observe and assess signs of difficulty, analyse the information and considering how those difficulties might be tackled as recommended and emphasised in Munro review influenced by the death of baby Peter (Munro Review 2011), it is of paramount importance to consider and implement these theories in their daily practice.

About Essay Sauce

EssaySauce.com is a completely free resource to help students research their academic work and learn from great essays!

View all posts by Essay Sauce

...(download the rest of the essay above)
About EssaySauce, the student essay site:

EssaySauce.com is a free resource for students, providing thousands of example essays to help them complete their college and university coursework. Students can use our free essays as examples to write their own.

Latest student essays:

- Ocular disease
- HUMAN action recognition
- Analysing data production
- Desorption study
- Surfactants (surface active agents)
- Islamic Finance and Its Impact on Customer Satisfaction
- Persian gulf
- Feminist approach (Bhumika) (notes)
- What does it mean to be a Muslim woman in 21st century? (Shari‘ah)
- Appellate Body’s analysis under section XIV(c)
Student essay categories:

Accounting essays
Architecture essays
Business essays
Computer science essays
Criminology essays
Economics essays
Education essays
Engineering essays
English language essays
English literature essays
Environmental studies essays
Finance essays
Geography essays
Health essays
History essays
Hospitability and tourism essays
Human rights essays
Information technology essays
International Relations
Law essays
Leadership essays
Linguistics essays
Literature essays
Management essays
Marketing essays
Media essays
Medicine essays
Miscellaneous essays
Music Essays
Philosophy essays
Photography and arts essays
Politics essays
Project management essays
Psychology essays
Religious studies and Theology essays
Science essays
Social work essays
Sociology essays
Uncategorized
Zoology essays
Q: Is EssaySauce.com free?

Yes! EssaySauce.com is a completely free resource for students. You can view our terms of use here.

Why use Essay Sauce?

The brightest students know that the best way to learn is by example! EssaySauce.com has thousands of great essay examples for students to use as inspiration when writing their own essays.

Is Essay Sauce completely free?

Yes! EssaySauce.com is a completely free resource for students. You can view our terms of use here.