From attachment to recognition for children in care

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Abstract

Attachment theory has, over the last half century, offered important insights into the nature of early experience and into human relationships more generally. These lessons have been influential in improving child care attitudes and provision. While acknowledging such advances, our argument in this article is that the dominance accorded attachment theory in policy and professional discourse has reached a point where understandings of human relationships have become totalised within an attachment paradigm; it has become the 'master theory' to which other ways of conceiving of child care and of relationships more generally, become subordinated. Yet, many of the assumptions underlying attachment theory, and the claims made for it, are contestable. We trace the growing prominence of attachment theory in child care, proceeding to critique the provenance of many claims made for it and the implications of these for practice. At the heart of the critique is a concern that an over-reliance on attachment contributes to the biologisation of how we bring up children to the detriment of socio-cultural perspectives. We go on to offer one suggestive alternative way through which we might conceive of child care relationships, drawing on Axel Honneth's theory of recognition.

Introduction

In recent years, attachment theory has dominated the thinking and direction of policy-makers, managers and practitioners in children and families social work. In practice contexts attachment has become almost shorthand to signal the importance of

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relationships. At a policy level, it has been co-opted as the theory base for fostering standards (DfE, 2012), as the basis of multiple interventions aimed at parenting and care work and, in 2015, was the subject of NICE guidelines for teachers working with children in care and other vulnerable groups (NICE, 2015). Attachment has become the 'master theory' informing social work with children in care; its reach assumes global and globalising proportions. This article draws upon both UK and German examples to identify the ubiquity of attachment theory. It goes on to raise questions about the conceptual and practical utility of the theory with regards to the everyday realities of how to relate to or care for children and young people in out-of-home care. Moreover, attachment's dominance may inhibit consideration of other, complementary or alternative ideas. One alternative we explore here is the German social theorist, Axel Honneth's theory of recognition. This extends the human requirement for rewarding relationships beyond the individual to encompass social, political and community contexts as sites of human development. In doing so it foregrounds socio-educational – or social pedagogic – practice.

The paper is in three parts: i) a brief account of attachment theory, its origins, empirical base and applications; ii) a critique of attachment in relation to the care and education of children in foster and residential care; and iii) an alternative framework for practice based on an adapted version of Honneth's theory of recognition.

Origins of attachment theory

Most readers will be aware of the basic premises of attachment theory, so we offer only a brief reprise. Although the term had been used by the Polish social pedagogue Janusz Korczak (1878-1942) it was first elaborated theoretically by child psychiatrist and psychoanalyst, John Bowlby, and has gone on to dominate psychological, professional and popular understandings of child development. Bowlby's articulation of attachment can be traced back to the growth of psychoanalysis from the 1920s onwards and a growing appreciation of the importance of personal and emotional dimensions to caring relationships. Bowlby himself was influenced by Lorenz's (1952) ethological studies of

imprinting in baby geese and by Harlow and Zimmerman's (1959) observations of rhesus monkeys, which explicates the importance of contact and comfort in the mother-baby relationship. His work, thus, connects clinical- psychoanalytical knowledge with evolutionary-biological thinking (Grossmann & Grossmann 2012).

Picking up on Harlow's work, Bowlby's study of the needs and psychological development of orphans for the World Health Organisation following World War 2, concluded that 'the infant and young child should experience a warm, intimate, and continuous relationship with his mother (or permanent mother substitute) in which both find satisfaction and enjoyment' (1951, p 11). This early work developed into what has become known as attachment theory, within which the connection between a child and their carer (assumed in early articulations of the theory to be the mother) is posited to be a primary human need (Ahnert 2008; Grossmann & Grossmann 2012). The theory has, since, been continuously developed, empirically studied and elaborated (Grossmann & Grossmann 2012, p.25-26), spawning a massive psychological literature (see Cassidy and Shaver, 2008).

Attachment behaviour is said to be activated when a child is separated from their attachment figure or feels pain or threat. The attachment figure's function is to protect the infant from harm and to provide physical and emotional security, which, in turn, allows the infant to feel confident to explore their environment (Ahnert 2008). Other key ideas are that there is a critical or sensitive period, from six to 30 months, for an attachment relationship to develop and that the consequence of a failure to establish such a bond was considered to be 'severe and irreversible' (Tizard, 2009, p.901). Early experiences with attachment figures are said to be incorporated into 'internal working models' (Bowlby 1973), from which socialisation proceeds and upon which expectations in subsequent emotional relationships are structured (Daudert 2001). This attention to the first three years of a child's development has become prominent in the current policy turn to attachment theory, a point to which we return.

Ainsworth developed a typology of attachment patterns in infants based on a 'strange

situation procedure' (Ainsworth *et al*. 1978). She identified three patterns of attachment - secure, avoidant or anxious. A fourth, disorganised attachment, was added later (Main and Solomon 1986; Brisch 2011). Further sub-classifications for each type followed (Wilkins, Shemmings and Shemmings 2015). It is believed that by the age of about five, one attachment pattern dominates (Cassidy and Shaver 2008). Optimum development is associated with secure attachment, with other types being implicated in behavioural or emotional difficulties.

There is no doubt that Bowlby's ideas and their subsequent refinements have brought about better understandings of children – especially infants – and their needs for meaningful relationships that offer attention, care and love (deMause 1989). Attachment theory lent scientific credibility to the importance of sensitive behaviour towards children. Robertson and Bowlby's (1952) early work on infant separation, for example, had specific impact on practices in hospital visiting, facilitating visits to newborn siblings. In education and nursery settings, the influence of attachment theory can be seen in practices such as graduated introductions to new settings, ideally together with the attachment figure (Laewen, Andres & Hedevari, 2003). The theory has also had a profound impact on policies, some politically inspired, and practices affecting mothers' employment, care and education services for children and parenting policy.

Influencing mother's employment

Attachment theory has been used to support a view of the traditional family within a social structure dependant on the caring labour of women in the context of full male employment (Thomson, 2013). Mothers were advised that they should stay at home until children were three years old, to support the development of secure attachment relationships (Tizard, Moss and Perry 1976). Parents were warned that children risked being psychologically damaged by non-parental supervision (e.g. in nurseries) before the age of three (Vinken 2001). Even as the limitations of attachment theory began to appear (Vinken 2001; Rutter 1972), mothers' responsibilities to stay at home to care for

young children remained subject to debate.

Influencing care and education services

In the UK, the landmark *Children Who Wait* report (Rowe and Lambert, 1973) drew upon attachment theory to argue that every child had a right to a family and that essential attachment relationships could not be experienced in residential care (Milligan, 1998). The Report was central to the growth of the permanency movement that has informed children's care since and is currently resurgent. It has contributed to a taken for granted assumption that family or substitute family care is a preferred option to residential care, largely on account of a belief, not necessarily supported by evidence (see below), that family care can provide a consistency in relationships that residential care cannot. In German legislation child welfare promotes young people's development. Attachment theorists argue this includes secure attachment which is more likely to be developed in foster care than in residential care (Schleiffer 2008; Nowacki 2007).

Influencing parenting guidance

Attachment ideas have, more recently, been co-opted in state parenting programmes. Taking its cue from American initiatives such as the Head Start programme, New Labour in the UK presided over a massive expansion of parenting support initiatives, marking an interventionist policy ethos, linking parenting practices to broader social justice claims (Edwards, Gillies and Horsely, 2016). Across Germany, attachment parenting programmes such as Save ® for young parents (and for pregnant women and their partners) or WIR2 for single parents, are offered. Some also offer SAFE ® courses for professionals in contact with young parents such as midwives, and paediatricians, to train them as mentors for young parents.

Reifying attachment

The reification of attachment theory in policy and practice betrays a greater certainty about the concept than Bowlby himself ever claimed for it. By 1956, he acknowledged

that he and others had over-stated the inevitable deleterious consequences of poor early attachment (Tizard, 2009). Indeed, earlier claims about the irreversibility of poor attachment have subsequently been challenged by Rutter *et al.'s* (2007) studies of children adopted from Romanian orphanages who, once given warm and loving care and stimulation, mostly recovered from their early deprivation. Subsequent studies show that attachment patterns and internal working models may be transformed throughout the life-course (Brisch 2011). Bowlby also withdrew his earlier thesis around the importance of a critical period and, influenced by Rutter, re-framed children's development as being about understanding the interactions between internal and external factors, introducing the prospect of developmental pathways rather than specific stages of development. However, as Tizard notes: 'Unfortunately, it is (Bowlby's) original crude theory that has stuck in the public mind' (2009, p. 903). Arguably, it remains so in current day social work policy and practice, which faces a revival of the belief in the criticality of the first three years.

Critiques of attachment

Many of the basic premises of attachment theory are rendered problematic by empirical data, which suggests that only 55% of the general population might be considered to be securely attached, 23% can be identified as suffering insecure avoidant attachments, eight per cent from insecure ambivalent attachment patterns and 15% from disorganised attachment (Bergin and Bergin, 2009). In a similar vein, the Sutton Trust, in a plea for attachment-based practice, states that: 'while the majority of children are securely attached, 40 per cent are insecurely attached' (2014, p.4). Moreover, at least a third of parents do not provide what might be thought of as good enough attachment due to their own emotional needs (Sutton Trust 2014). Clearly, the lack of an ideal type attachment experience in approaching half of the population, does not prove problematic for everyone so afflicted. In fact, there is some evidence that insecure attachment may prove adaptive in some situations (Ein-Dor et al, 2010). Moreover, Burman (2008) points to some of the difficulties in assuming a universal experience of

attachment behaviours through reference to Japanese studies, which indicate that Ainsworth *et al.'s* (1978) strange situation procedure has no cultural relevance there.

At another level, the identification of attachment patterns that deviate from the ideal - and presumed norm - of secure attachment, lends itself to ever-more elaborate diagnostic categories (see Crittenden, 2005) which, on the one hand, are argued to facilitate more appropriate interventions. On the other hand, this very notion that we can diagnose faulty patterns of attachment, and prescribe particular interventions in response, risks conceptualising non-standard relationship experiences within a frame of psychopathology and deficit, as opposed to the 'rich child' of that might emerge out of other ways of thinking about children and how to work or be with them (Moss et al., 2000).

Impact of attachment on practice

Despite its dominance, it is questionable what impact attachment theory has actually had on social work practice over the past thirty years. While policy has professed the centrality of attachment perspectives, and practitioners are encouraged to practise in attachment informed or attachment promoting ways (Schleiffer 2008), the outcomes of such efforts do not seem to reflect proponents' promises. Placement instability is one of the major reasons why outcomes for children in care are often so disappointing (Ward, Munro and Dearden, 2006); of care episodes ceasing in England in 2016, 77% lasted less than a year (DfE 2016). Ward (2008) indicates that 56% of a large sample of children in care followed over time had two or more placements in the first 12 months. In Germany, a third of placements in foster care disrupt (Blandow 2004).

The dissonance between empirical findings and policy and professional rhetoric around attachment might suggest that a 'master theory' is at work to 'casualise' claims that bear little resemblance to what actually happens on the ground. For example, agencies lay claim to being attachment promoting or attachment informed while attempting to be so in the context of caring for adolescents, long past any 'critical' developmental

period. In work with adolescents, ideas of 'mattering' may be more appropriate than attachment. The concept of mattering, developed through co-constructed relationships of meaning, would suggest that when a young person feels they matter to others and to themselves then they tend to do well. Conversely, if they believe they don't matter to others, then they are more likely to struggle (Charles and Alexander, 2014). Such relationships can develop irrespective of early attachment experience. This notion of mattering resonates with Honneth's work, as we go on to develop.

Neuroscience meets attachment theory

Attachment theory has been bolstered by insights from neuroscience (Cozolino, 2014). This is a complicated and contested area (Belsky and de Haan 2011; Ward and Brown 2012 vs. Wastell and White 2012). Much of the application of neuroscience to practice, however, does not engage with academic debate, but operates at a more populist level. A particularly prominent example of this is Perry's (2010) use of neuro-images of the brains of apparently healthily and unhealthily attached infants. The brain images employed indicate obvious differences in the size and bulk of the brains of two three year olds; the larger, fuller brain being that of a healthily attached child and the more shrivelled version that of a neglected child. They ostensibly provide graphic illustration of the impact of neglect, which insights from attachment theory might suggest, but cannot empirically prove (Wastell and White 2012) and are potentially misleading and likely to be far more complicated than can be presumed to be from Perry's images (Blakemore and McCrory 2014). The human brain is, in most respects, plastic and resilient and not prone to irreversible damage as a result of psychosocial experience (Wastell and White 2012). Burman (2008, p153) notes that the link between early experience and later development has been 'spectacularly difficult to establish'. This is fortunate in that the task of caring for children who have encountered difficult early life experiences would otherwise be somewhat forlorn.

Translation of neuroscience to social work practice

Plafky (2016) charts some of the processes through which complex neuroscientific concepts are translated from research into knowledge that can be applied by practitioners. Specifically, she identifies 'knowledge entrepreneurs' within the training community who, based on a 'pick and mix' understanding of neuro-science, choose what knowledge is deemed relevant for practice. Thus, images suggesting the impact on the brain of poor attachment experiences become packaged as offering a window on how to understand some of the puzzling and challenging behaviours that social workers encounter. This reflects a more general 'biologising' of what is appropriately social scientific terrain. Biological sciences according to White and Wastell 'are currently in the cultural ascent, promising to provide a theory of everything in the natural and social worlds' (2016 p 1). Canter argues that 'The idea that the brain causes behaviour is easier to get across than the subtler and more complex explanation embedded in learning, interpersonal transactions and culture' (2012: 112). This biologising of social scientific problems risks social work being characterised as an essentialising and deterministic discourse whereby children become victims of their pasts, rather than considering what might be a more optimistic and strengths-based socio-educational paradigm.

Other perspectives on relationships

As an advocate of attachment theory, Shemmings (2016 np) claims that we tend to overuse the term attachment. He advises: 'So next time you are about to write something like: "I'm worried about the attachment between a parent and child", try using the word relationship, and see if fits the bill just as well". He goes on to caution against **"**imprecise jargon such as good attachment, strong attachment, attachment problems (and never use attachment disorders as it's a term restricted to qualified clinicians)". Yet, it is the very use of the term and its associated typology and diagnostic promise that lend attachment theory the kind of 'scientific' credentials that offer it credibility. Social workers and social pedagogues casually use terms such as insecure and anxious attachment, often without any depth of clinical understanding. Moreover, if

we can use the terms attachment and relationships interchangeably then it perhaps begs the question of what attachment brings to the table. Might we just talk about relationships, which may be meaningful or not?

Relationships, of course, exist and thrive beyond any biological determinism. Enlightenment philosophers identify an innate sympathy that predisposes human beings to reach out to the other (see Hearn, 2016), while more contemporary philosophy (e.g., Levinas, 1969) suggests that we are drawn, metaphysically, to 'the face' of the other. MacMurray (See McIntosh 2004) tells us that caring relationships do not derive from duty (or the kind of demands that attachment parenting might impose) but can only emerge through love, while Miller (2008) contends that attachment theory has difficulty in adequately conceptualising ideas of companionship. So, while social work must be centrally concerned with relationships, the way in which these are conceived does not depend upon attachment theory.

Caring as everyday expertise

Biologising adult child relationships conceives of bringing up children as requiring some psychological insight. Yet, foster carers and residential care workers are not trained in this in any clinical sense, and only rarely are they skilled therapists or counsellors. Moreover, 'treatment' approaches do not have a good record of success in care settings (Gharabhagi 2012). Care is more appropriately considered a moral and/or practical task (Moss and Petrie, 2002). Pithouse and Rees identify its expression 'within the interdependencies and everyday moral 'workings out' between people in caring relationships. These relationships emerge from care itself as a social process and daily human activity in which the self exists through and with others' (2011, p.196). Care, they go on to assert, is demonstrated in broadly cultural and practical actions such as the symbolism of food, issues of the body, and aspects of touch. Such symbolism is central to the deep relational bonds that find expression in the everyday life of foster or

residential care settings (Emond, 2016). This is where foster and residential carers' expertise comes into play; they might be best described as 'experts in the everyday' (author et al., 2015).

From attachment to recognition as a conceptual framework for working with children in care

Space precludes more than a brief outline of the work of the German social theorist Axel Honneth, who offers an alternative, tripartite framework within which to consider the needs, including relational needs, of children in care. Honneth's (1992, 1995) concept of recognition is a key one around which the normative life of society is structured (Ohlström 2011). At its centre is the quality of mutuality, communicated through interactions between individuals, between individuals and states and between individuals and communities. Honneth argues that recognition is interactive, reciprocal, and changes over time, as it is produced through struggle. Honneth is regularly cited in German social work and pedagogy discourse (Heite 2008; author 2017a) and has been taken up by a small number of Anglophone social work theorists. Applications of his work in relation to children and young people are rare; Thomas (2012) and Warming (2015) both criticise him for being adult-centric. Nevertheless, Houston (2017) suggests that an 'applied recognition theory' is emerging and Hafeneger, Henkenborg and Scherr (2013) consider recognition as one basic pedagogical dimension. We consider what this might offer as a conceptual framework for the care and education of looked after children.

Rather than a singular focus on dyadic, familial and essentialised relationships, as represented by attachment theory, Honneth sees the foundation of positive relationships in terms of a basic moral demand for recognition of and being recognised by others. Compared with attachment, recognition offers an alternative 'image of man' or 'world view'. Whereas attachment theory identifies children as vulnerable, and

described in terms of disorders and abnormalities, derived from a clinical or biological perspective, recognition is fundamentally a humanistic perspective, with a more active and interactive view about autonomy, interdependence, dignity and self-realization (Winkler 2006; author et al 2017). Such a world view lends itself to a more holistic, reciprocal and respectful perspective on professional – child relationships, which align with what children and young people value in their encounters with social work (Turney 2012).

Building on the work of Hegel and Mead, Honneth identifies three spheres of recognition: (i) love, or emotional recognition of the need for love and care; (ii) legal recognition of rights as a human being; and (iii) solidarity or social esteem as part of one's contribution to a community. We proceed to describe these three dimensions, together with how they might be operationalized in work with children and young people.

Love

'Love' in professional contexts is problematic in current UK and German social work (author 2016; Drieschner and Gaus 2010). For Honneth, love refers to multiple sources of strong emotional attachments among a small number of people. Inspired by the work of Winnicott and Benjamin, Honneth argues that early development is a period of practised interaction through which each party acquires the capacity for shared experience of emotions and perceptions – ideally affective approval and mutual encouragement. All love relationships are driven by the unconscious recollections of the original experience of 'merging' that characterised the first months of life for both 'mother' and child[1]. The love relationship represents a 'symbiosis refracted by recognition' (Honneth 1995 np). Love, or emotional recognition, becomes the basis for

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[1] Honneth puts 'mother' in inverted commas to emphasise the role and not the reproductive link between the pair.

self-confidence (Bainbridge 2015). Thomas (2012) points out that Honneth did not use Bowlby or attachment theory as the basis for his argument but took his starting point from Winnicottian ideas about interpersonal playfulness as a foundation for infant (and subsequent) learning in a context of 'good enough' responsive mothering (Bainbridge 2015). For Honneth, 'it is the loving recognition of an 'other' that enables the child to learn that they matter and exist, separate from others' (Bainbridge 2015, 12).

Warming (2015) illuminates the importance of feeling recognised in a case analysis of a 14 year old girl living in residential care in Denmark where the adults she comes across are warm and friendly but the girl feels rejected and alone. From an emotional recognition perspective, the potential exists to nurture nascent emotional bonds between the girl and her peers, and carers, but these are rarely analysed because, Warming argues, the dominant construction of 'care' is of professional intervention and accountability. The result is a discursive construction of children as 'objects' for adult care, and professional treatment, 'rather than persons with whom you can actually get emotionally involved' (Warming, 2015, p256). The casualised use of attachment theory might direct the attention of practitioners towards offering empathic warmth or care, but has little to offer in terms of understanding how this might be reciprocated (or not).

Recognition does not prioritize a biological attachment relationship but does acknowledge the important source of comfort, warmth and familiarity to be gained from close relationships with a small number of people. Foster carers or residential care workers are, in most cases, not trying to be a child's 'mother' but, nevertheless, offer a close emotional connection that may be called love (author et al 2017). Equally, fathers, siblings or friends might perform this role. Such relationships have elements of mutuality; each can learn, grow and be comforted by the other; each can learn about themselves from the other. 'Knowing' the other and how to care for them is a process of mutual discovery in which each party learns how to be with the other. It is akin to the type of relationship discussed by author (2013) as an 'ethical encounter' where the

parties (staff and child in a residential home) begin a relationship from a mutual position of 'sitting together'. There is a focus on setting and on creating spaces in which people can reflect and do things together. Although communication and dialogue are important, they are not enough. Recognition becomes emotional when the relationship takes on meaning for each party. This type of recognition, which involves foregrounding relationships as sources of wellbeing, may have its origins in early infancy, but becomes a virtuous circle of mutual support/love, often framed as 'going the extra mile' for someone you care about. This process might be thought to have much in common with the idea of a 'secure base' from attachment theory. However, the obverse 'insecure base' would be an unlikely foundation for wellbeing.

Rights

Honneth's sphere of rights extends responsibility for the development of self away from the immediate familial environment of attachment theory into a need for legal recognition, which is seen as the acquisition and exercise of citizenship rights as members of communities. One becomes a bearer of rights if socially recognized. Rights, through their public character to empower the bearer, both legitimate the demand for mutual respect and enable the development of self-respect. With legal recognition, one is able to view oneself as a person who shares with all members of a community the qualities that make participation in will formation possible.

In schools, Graham *et al*. (2016) found that respect was often discussed in terms of something that teachers expect from students but was not reciprocated. The reciprocal character of respect, as in fairness, having privacy and being able to contribute to decision-making, was emphasized by students. Teachers, for their part, considered active participation as engendering a sense of belonging. For Warming, rights are violated when, for example, a child's much anticipated event or treat is abruptly cancelled as her right to a social network is undermined. In care settings, reporting

children to the police for disruptive or socially irksome behaviour might also be considered a violation of legal rights to be a child. Children in residential care in England were found to have a much higher criminal record than in Denmark or Germany (Petrie et al., 2006), at least a proportion of which was attributed to reporting of incidents that occurred within the residential care home.

Legal recognition means that young people who are fostered or living in residential care are fundamentally citizens, with rights of citizenship as a starting and constant reference point. This does not necessarily equate to actual equality or a denial of needs for care and nourishment. Instead it means there is a presumption of mutuality in all matters concerning the child. There is an imperative to consult, pay attention and enable participation through structures of care, about issues that are important to young people, as is their right according to the UN Convention of Children's Rights, 1989. For example, this might be their own care plans or the ways in which decision-making happens in a residential care home. author and Wolf (2011) suggest the need to define participation as a process that includes age-appropriate information, listening to the child's hopes, wishes and fears and respecting them, taking decisions as far as possible together with the child and in cases where decisions need to be taken against the child's will, negotiating the child's agreement. Furthermore, in order to implement participation rights for children in care, social workers need to attend to ideas of childhood and the child's capabilities need to be reflected. Including legal recognition as integral to the development of self-identity underscores the significance of respectful societal and judicial arrangements for the exercise of 'care' to avoid misrecognition, and what Honneth identifies as the social pathology of 'invisibilisation' (Houston 2017).

Solidarity

Honneth's third principle, solidarity, posits that an ethical life is the basis for mutual esteem and shared value-horizons. Solidarity ties people through shared values but also

recognizes the unique strengths and talents of individuals. Having ones' contribution recognized by social networks, communities and groups to which one belongs helps build pride and competence (Houston 2016). Such recognition of competence enhances resilience and the ability to deal with difficulties in other areas of one's life. Solidarity, thus, builds both societal - and through this - self- esteem (Honneth 1995).

Graham et al. (2016) found that being valued was seen as necessary for well-being by school students and teachers. This involved being accepted for their individual differences and talents, including self-acceptance on the part of students, so as to avoid excessive self-criticism and to make good decisions. However, being valued was seen as a more individualist, teacher-led enterprise, within which teachers showed students they valued their work and listened to them. Warming (2015), similarly, highlights this individualisation of response to young people. She found that there was little active valorisation of the case study child, whose participation was tolerated or, worse, problematized, in her engagements in the social world. Warming concludes that the potential for social recognition is undermined, in her native Denmark, by a growing, 'individual-oriented approach to pedagogical work and children's development' (Warming 2015, 258).

More broadly, a predominant focus on individuals and families and their attachments may be argued to detract from the development of shared values between carers and young people, extending their horizons beyond the immediate environment and family background, to, for example, political discussions and supporting participation in civil society. Hollingworth (2012) documents the self-esteem value to care leavers of recognition of leisure time pursuits and voluntary work. There is some evidence of greater engagement in such activities in countries such as Denmark and Germany that use a social pedagogic approach in practice (Petrie et al. 2006).

At the same time, solidarity can be a "tension field" in foster care (author 2011): unlike non-fostering families who share a common life experience, this is more problematic in alternative care (Gehres and Hildenbrand 2008), requiring negotiation. For example, former fostered young people reported a lack of certainty about whether they would be welcome to visit their foster families for Christmas or important birthdays (author 2011). The question of the 'solidarity of the path of life' becomes thus a question of belonging. In the same spirit, young people from foster care also wonder for example if they will inherit from the foster carers or if foster carers may take on a role as grandparents to their children.

Conclusion

We have sought, in this article, to put a stutter into the seemingly inexorable turn to attachment theory in children and families social work. We do not dismiss insights the theory offers in making links from past experience to present-day functioning. However, we would question whether the diagnostic validity of such insights is of much value in the practical and moral task of bringing up children. Regardless of attachment histories, upbringing is enacted through everyday caring activities but more so through the development of reciprocal relationships that such 'being together' facilitates. The kind of warm and close relationships that attachment theory advocates are vital and all of those working with children and young people should learn how to form and sustain them; they provide the basis of learning, emotional stability and belonging. Practising in such a way does not, however, depend upon adherence to the particular way of understanding relationships that attachment theory demands.

Moreover, good relationships alone, however necessary, are not sufficient to bring up children. The conditions for securing such relationships are not solely located in the personalities and practices of foster carers and residential workers but also in the conditions supporting the stability of placements. This makes Honneth's tripartite

recognition theory attractive – it recognises the importance of emotional connection, and in this sense resonates with Bowlby's concept of attachment (Fleming and Finnegan, 2010) but sets this alongside legal protection and civil engagement. It, thus, gives legitimacy and force to societal responsibility and the inter-connections of individual to others.

Our wider concern is the overuse or misuse of attachment theory. The current prominence given to it risks 'biologising', individualising and politicising the cultural and practical aspects of bringing up children. Honneth's ideas, on the other hand, stem from a humanistic world view and offer a basis from which to critique current social work terrain. Recognition might suggest itself as a framework for empirical research in relation to social work/foster care/residential care practice with children in out of home care.

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