

FORENSIC FOCUS 25

# A Matter of Security

The Application of Attachment Theory  
to Forensic Psychiatry  
and Psychotherapy

Edited by  
Friedemann Pfäfflin  
and Gwen Adshead



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**A Matter of Security**  
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to Forensic Psychiatry and Psychotherapy  
*Edited by Friedemann Pfäfflin and Gwen Adshead*



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# Contents

Foreword	7
<i>Friedemann Pfäfflin, University of Ulm, and Gwen Adshead, Broadmoor Hospital</i>	

## Part I: Theory

1. The Developmental Roots of Violence in the Failure of Mentalization	13
<i>Peter Fonagy, University College London</i>	
2. Attachment Representation, Attachment Style or Attachment Pattern? Usage of Terminology in Attachment Theory	57
<i>Thomas Ross, University of Ulm</i>	
3. Fragmented Attachment Representations	85
<i>Franziska Lamott, University of Ulm, Elisabeth Fremmer-Bombik, Hospital for Child and Youth Psychiatry, Regensburg and Friedemann Pfäfflin</i>	

## Part II: Clinical Issues

4. The Link Between Childhood Trauma and Later Violent Offending: The Application of Attachment Theory in a Probation Setting	109
<i>Paul Renn, Centre for Attachment-based Psychoanalytic Psychotherapy</i>	

## Part III: Institutional Issues

5. Three Degrees of Security: Attachment and Forensic Institutions	147
<i>Gwen Adshead</i>	

6. Forensic Mental Health Nursing: Care with Security in Mind	167
<i>Anne Aiyegbusi, Broadmoor Hospital</i>	
7. Finding a Secure Base: Attachment in Grendon Prison	193
<i>Michael Parker, HMP Grendon, and Mark Morris, The Portman Clinic</i>	

## Part IV: Research Data

8. Attachment Representations and Factitious Illness by Proxy: Relevance for Assessment of Parenting Capacity in Child Maltreatment	211
<i>Gwen Adshead and Kerry Bluglass, The Woodbourne Clinic</i>	
9. Violence and Attachment: Attachment Styles, Self-regulation and Interpersonal Problems in a Prison Population	225
<i>Thomas Ross and Friedemann Pfäfflin</i>	
10. Attachment Representations and Attachment Styles in Traumatized Women	250
<i>Franziska Lamott, Natalie Sammet, psychotherapist in private practice, and Friedemann Pfäfflin</i>	
Conclusion: A Matter of Security	260
<i>Gwen Adshead and Friedemann Pfäfflin</i>	
The Contributors	266
Subject Index	269
Author Index	276

# Foreword

Attachment theory as developed by John Bowlby has since the 1960s stimulated theorizing about the normal and psychopathological development of children, women and men. In an unprecedented way it demonstrated how psychological functioning depends on adequate emphatic interaction from the very beginning of life. The quality of the interaction between the newborn and his or her caregiver, the attachment patterns experienced, the developing process of mentalization of these experiences and the resulting attachment representations are crucial for how an adult will interact with other persons and his or her environment.

Taking this into account, it is not surprising that forensic psychotherapists and psychiatrists enthusiastically engage in attachment research, using its achievements for a better understanding of their clients and for the improvement of the care they offer, both as individual therapists and as protagonists of the systems of detention in secure psychiatric units and in prisons, which have to offer a milieu of security for the sake of society as well as staff and their clients. In both settings one finds an accumulation of failed primary attachment processes that need remedy to interrupt the 'circuit of misery, violence and anxiety' which Sherlock Holmes (Conan Doyle 1895) identified as one of our greatest problems, and which Murray Cox, the founder of the Forensic Focus series, cited in his seminal work, *Mutative Metaphors in Psychotherapy. The Aeolian Mode* (Cox and Alice Theilgaard (1987), London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

This volume gathers a body of original work on attachment theory applied to forensic psychiatry and psychotherapy, and also some previously published seminal work from this field.

In the first section on theoretical issues, Peter Fonagy gives a survey of research findings on the developmental roots of violence in the failure of

mentalization. He focuses on a time of violence which is predominantly encountered in the lives of forensic psychiatry and psychotherapy patients, and which is embodied as an act of overwhelming rage, and he suggests 'that violent acts are only possible when a decoupling occurs between the representations of subjective states of the self and actions'. Paradoxically, he comes to the conclusion that 'violence is a gesture of hope, a wish for a new beginning, even if in reality it is usually just a tragic end'.

Thomas Ross examines the heterogeneous terminology used in attachment theory and research. According to him, the terms '(attachment) representation', '(attachment) style', and '(attachment) prototype' are usually used adequately and in accordance with the corresponding construct. They denote an intrapsychic mode of handling interpersonal relationship experiences (attachment representation) or relate to manifest behavioural correlates of attachment (attachment style). When the focus is on testing clinical hypotheses and the differentiation of manifest attachment behaviour ('attachment style'), the usage of 'attachment type/prototype' seems appropriate. '(Attachment) pattern' and '(attachment) organisation' are applied in inconsistent ways in the literature. The terms 'attachment status', 'attachment quality', and 'attachment classification' (as a result of a classification process) are not really helpful, or rather useless, as they do not add information beyond what is denoted by the above-mentioned terms. Furthermore, they contain social connotations, which might lead to misunderstandings when discussing human attachment. The same applies to the occasionally used terms 'attachment pathology' and 'attachment difficulty'. They imply social judgments that are not empirically justified.

Drawing on incoherent narratives from the investigation of women who have killed, Franziska Lamott, Elisabeth Fremmer-Bombik and Friedemann Pfäfflin suggest classifying them as 'fragmented attachment representations' (FRAG), thus taking their specificity into account, instead of using the category 'cannot classify' (CC).

In the second section, clinical issues are presented that reflect the application of attachment theory to individual treatment. Paul Renn gives a lucid report of the validity of attachment theory when applied to short-term counseling in a probation setting, which may encourage other clinicians to make use of it.

The third section deals with clinical and institutional aspects of attachment theory within the framework of settings typical for forensic psychiatry



and psychotherapy. Gwen Adshead emphasizes the need for psychiatric secure institutions for forensic patients to truly provide a secure base for dealing with intrapsychic as well as interactional conflicts. Anne Aiyegbusi exemplifies the significance of attachment theory for the milieu of forensic institutions, and especially for the work of nurses. Michael Parker and Mark Morris draw on their experience of reflecting on attachment theory for practical purposes in a prison setting.

The fourth section reports attachment research data on specific forensic patient samples. Gwen Adshead investigates the precursors of personality disorders and identifies attachment shortcomings in childhood as a prominent cause of the development of a personality disorder. Thomas Ross and Friedemann Pfäfflin investigate attachment styles, self-regulation and interpersonal problems in a group of 31 imprisoned offenders convicted of at least one violent crime against another person and serving a prison sentence of at least three years. Their data are compared with the data of two comparison groups of non-violent men, prison service trainees and members of a Christian congregation. Finally, Franziska Lamott, Natalie Sammet and Friedemann Pfäfflin report comparative attachment data from samples of women who have killed and been sentenced to either imprisonment or detention in a secure psychiatric hospital, and a group of women who escaped domestic violence by taking refuge in a women's shelter.

In a concluding chapter the editors reflect on the benefits that forensic staff may draw from attachment theory, as well as from attachment research, for their work. Providing a secure basis for patients as well as for staff seems to be essential in order to deal with former deficits of attachment development and to increase security for patients, staff, and society at large.

*Friedemann Pfäfflin and Gwen Adshead*

