

# Attachment in Sport, Exercise, and Wellness

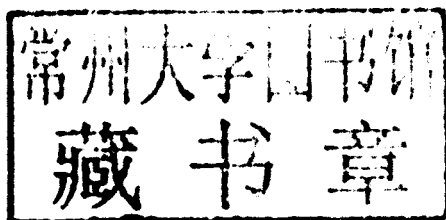
Sam Carr



Routledge Research in Sport and Exercise Science

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# Attachment in Sport, Exercise, and Wellness

Attachment theory is a concept well known to 'mainstream' psychologists, informing the literature in areas as diverse as psychodynamics, developmental psychology, social psychology, and counselling. This important new book is the first to demonstrate the relevance of attachment theory to the psychology of sport, exercise, and wellness, opening up important new avenues for research and professional practice.

In this book, Sam Carr explains that attachment theory can help us to better understand well-established themes and processes in sport and exercise, including motivation, social relationships, cognitive models of coping, and group processes. By introducing the core elements of attachment theory, and mapping out those areas in which it can inform the knowledge and practice of psychologists working in sport, exercise, and wellness, this book represents an innovative and important contribution to the psychological literature.

**Sam Carr** is a lecturer in the Department of Education at the University of Bath. His research interests are linked to social relationships in sport-related contexts. He has published a number of articles relating to attachment in the sport and exercise psychology literature.

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Perhaps most importantly, in the process of writing this book I have gained significant insight into the concept of attachment within human relationships. Much of this insight has been gained from the opportunity to reflect upon my own close relationships in light of the ideas and concepts I have been lucky enough to engage with during the writing process. I am indebted to the significant attachment figures of my childhood (Mum, Dad, Grandma, and Grandpa) in ways that I could not appreciate prior to writing this book. However, most of all I would like to thank my wife (Ira) and my son (Alex). Without the special attachment we share I would never have mustered the strength, inspiration, or motivation to write this book and you have each taught me more about attachment than I could possibly have learned from my efforts on this book.

# Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	vi
Introduction	1
1 Sketching the origins and assumptions of attachment theory	6
2 Contrasting perspectives and measurement in adult attachment research	26
3 Attachment and sport motivation	42
4 Attachment and group cohesion in sport	59
5 Attachment, reactions to stress, and coping in sport	74
6 Attachment and social relationships in sport	89
7 Attachment, exercise, and health	107
Concluding thoughts	122
<i>References</i>	129
<i>Index</i>	156

# Introduction

Some months ago a graduate student came to my office visibly excited after reading the prologue section in Colby Pearce's (2009) text *A Short Introduction to Attachment and Attachment Disorder*. The student felt that although he had been studying attachment theory for a number of years he was so intensely focused upon its numerous intricacies and nuances that he had failed to recognise the striking simplicity that underpins this complexity. With Pearce's permission, I make no apologies for paraphrasing his excellent example below. I agree with my graduate student's initial interpretation.

Pearce (2009) recites a story about three mice. The first mouse resided in a comfortable house that was furnished and supplied with modern conveniences. Inside the house was a button and a hole in the wall and the mouse was able to press the button to receive tasty food through the hole. The mechanism worked well and the mouse appreciated that when he was hungry he would be able to press the button and consistently receive his food. It was comforting to have this knowledge and the mouse liked the predictable nature of his button, only tending to press it when he really needed food.

In contrast, the second mouse (who lived in an identical house) had the misfortune of dealing with a faulty button mechanism. That is, pressing his button only resulted in food being delivered some of the time. There was no predictability to the button mechanism and on some occasions he would receive food immediately on pressing the button whereas on others he would be required to press it 10 or 20 times. At other times it seemed that no matter how often he pressed it nothing was ever going to happen. His distrust of the button led him to be preoccupied with pressing it, even when he was not actually hungry. He would press it many, many times in order to ensure he would have food when he did grow hungry. When the button was fixed he found it hard to trust that it was now in good working order and spent much time storing up food for a rainy day.

Finally, the third mouse lived in a house with a button that consistently failed to work. In short, he never received any food from his button. He



## 2 Introduction

quickly came to the understanding that access to food would require him to employ other means and had no belief in the utility of the button. Even when he moved home and found a house with an effectively functioning button his lack of faith in buttons persisted and he continued to find food the way he always had.

The above story highlights how attachment theory can be seen to be grounded in simple assumptions that retain remarkable logical sense even when talk of mice and food is substituted for young children, emotional care, and security. Pearce (2009) has cleverly recognised this in his prologue. However, although there are some simple logical principles at the core of attachment theory, the fact that Bowlby (1969/1982, 1973, 1980) required close to 1000 pages to articulate his ideas suggests that there are complexities, assumptions, and arguments that cannot be overlooked if one is to begin to develop a fuller understanding of Bowlby's position. Furthermore, given that attachment theory has been intuitively appealing to researchers whose ideas are allied to contrasting paradigmatic approaches (e.g. Pearce's example seems couched in behaviourist principles – but attachment theory also reflects ideas that resemble other schools of thought) and from various disciplines it is unsurprising that further methodological and conceptual intricacies have arisen as the ideas have been nurtured and developed according to the assumptions of differing schools of thought.

My intention with this book is to facilitate discussion, debate, and the formulation of ideas in relation to the interface between attachment theory and the fields of sport, exercise, and wellness. Researchers (e.g. Carr, 2009a; Jowett & Wylleman, 2006; Poczwadowski *et al.*; Smith, 2003; Wylleman, 2000) in sport-related fields have already recognised that the understanding of human relationships has a central role to play in the development of our ideas and theoretical frameworks. Accordingly, I believe that attachment theory can serve as a particularly useful lens through which we might examine and better understand the contexts of sport, exercise, and wellness.

Attachment theory offers a particularly useful insight into the interplay between human relationships that are experienced outside of the sport-related context and those that are formulated within it. To this end, previous sport-related research has explored the role of parental relationships from the perspective of a role modelling hypothesis (e.g. Gustafson & Rhodes, 2006), parental belief systems (e.g. Bois *et al.*, 2005), and the construction of the parental motivational climate (e.g. Carr & Weigand, 2001; Carr *et al.*, 1999, 2000). Ullrich-French and Smith (2009) have recognised the importance of exploring how different social relationships in children's lives are interconnected and how they may interact to regulate broader experiences of sport. Attachment theory offers an interesting and new perspective in relation to the reverberation of parental relationships in the sporting context. However, in addition to this, attachment perspectives also offer a way of understanding the reciprocal influence that sporting relationships

themselves have on individuals' attachment-related apparatus. Accordingly, the theory offers a framework by which we are able to develop our understanding of the dynamics involved as individuals experience the world of sport and exercise in the context of their attachment-related beliefs, cognitions, and emotions.

In the chapters that follow I seek to provide a platform for initial discussion about the link between attachment theory and some of the most popular theoretical frameworks relating to motivation, cohesion, stress, and coping, and relationships in sport, exercise, and wellness. In Chapter 7 I offer some thoughts related to the integration of attachment theory in the context of exercise, drawing upon ideas about attachment and health to support my argument.

In Chapter 1 I hope to help readers appreciate the predominant assumptions made by attachment theorists. In this chapter, the conceptual history, intricacies, and complexities I mentioned above are sketched and I have sought to provide readers with a basic understanding of the central assumptions at the core of Bowlby's ideas to help them appreciate the numerous complexities that have arisen as the theory has been adapted and extended by researchers.

In Chapter 2 I seek to outline current debate that has largely come to pass as a consequence of attachment theory being embraced by researchers with differing underpinning paradigmatic assumptions. After reading this chapter, readers will hopefully appreciate that broadly contrasting conceptual and methodological ideas (that often reflect differing interpretations of Bowlby's key themes) have given rise to emerging 'schools of thought' within the literature that adopt particular positions in relation to attachment theory. These positions have subsequently given rise to the emergence of specific traditions in relation to the measurement and methodological treatment of attachment. It is my belief that the content in Chapters 1 and 2 is important groundwork for the later discussion of the interface between attachment theory and the contexts of sport, exercise, and wellness.

In Chapter 3 I am concerned with the integration of attachment theory with popular frameworks for motivation research in sport and exercise psychology. Specifically, I seek to explore links with achievement goal and self-determination approaches to human motivation. There are a number of interesting links to be made in these popular research areas. For example, attachment theory puts forward the attachment system as one of a number of psychological 'systems' that are integral to an organism's survival and procreation. The attachment system is hypothesised to be balanced with a system of exploration. That is, the attachment system serves the predominant function of ensuring proximity to the caregiver when threatened or distressed, securing a sense of safety and protection from harm. This sense of security facilitates a sense of confidence and activation of the exploration system to gradually explore the surrounding environment, enhancing individuals' development and individuation. Given their conceptual links, different attachment histories are likely to correspond to

#### 4 Introduction

different exploration tendencies (e.g. those who find it difficult to develop a sense of attachment security may be less willing to explore or may explore in a more cautious or inhibited manner). The achievement goal constructs that occupy a central role in sport motivation literature are closely linked to the manner in which individuals engage in exploratory environments and this issue is discussed in depth in this chapter. I also explore how issues such as the motivational climate might impinge upon the activation or development of working models of attachment in the sporting context. Furthermore, the chapter also examines how central aspects of self-determination theory (e.g. the basic needs of competence, autonomy, and relatedness) may be integrally linked to the notion of attachment.

Chapter 4 is concerned with the relationship that attachment might share with cohesion and group processes in the context of sport. In this chapter I address issues such as (a) whether cohesion in the context of groups might be seen as a 'buffer' for the attachment concerns of those with insecure attachment histories (serving to dampen their social concerns about rejection and lack of self-worth), (b) how working models of attachment might be seen as a filter in the construction of perceptions about group cohesiveness, and (c) how different conceptualisations of cohesion may have very different implications for a link with attachment theory.

Attachment is strongly linked to the manner in which individuals respond to potentially threatening or stressful experiences. Individual attachment histories tend to reflect the manner in which they process and experience such threat or distress on a cognitive, emotional, and behavioural level. Accordingly, Chapter 5 explores the interface between attachment, stress, and coping in sport-related contexts. I also use this chapter as a space for a discussion of how ideas from attachment shed light on issues related to coping and stress response in the specific context of athletic injury.

Chapter 6 deals with attachment and the notion of sporting relationships, with a specific focus on sporting friendships and coach-athlete bonds. I focus specifically upon conceptual integration in the areas of sport friendship and coach-athlete bonds because a number of authors in this field have begun to implicate attachment theory in their work. Hence, these areas of research provide particularly interesting platforms for discussion and debate. Areas of discussion relate to (a) how internal working models of attachment underpin characteristics of sport friendships, (b) whether sporting relationships (such as the coach-athlete bond) themselves might be considered as attachment bonds, and (c) whether (if they can be considered attachment bonds) relationships in the context of sport have some sort of 'therapeutic potential' as spaces for reworking attachment characteristics.

Finally, Chapter 7 is concerned with attachment in the broader contexts of exercise and health. Ideas are discussed that recognise the usefulness of attachment theory in relation to a number of important research avenues. For example, researchers have outlined how contrasting attachment histories

may predispose individuals to different developmental pathways in relation to neurological and physiological development. These differing pathways may have significant implications for physical and mental health and it will be important to identify environmental and lifestyle factors that might buffer this effect. In this chapter I discuss the role of exercise as one such buffer. Furthermore, I also discuss attachment in relation to issues such as cohesion, role modelling, and client–provider relationship formation in the context of exercise and health.

I again ask readers to keep in mind that my ultimate aim for this book is to facilitate discussion, debate, and the formulation of new ideas and research on the interface between attachment theory and sport, exercise, and wellness. I hope the book satisfies this objective and that attachment theory might be carried forward, helping to further enrich the development of research in sport, exercise, and wellness. Additionally, I also hope that such integration can facilitate a reciprocal relationship between the areas of sport and exercise psychology and attachment research, with ideas and findings from the sport-related literature ultimately helping to extend and develop ideas in attachment.

# 1 Sketching the origins and assumptions of attachment theory

## A brief introduction

One of the central tenets of attachment theory is the notion that early childhood lays the foundations for the development of personality through the life-span. Bowlby's ideas (e.g. Bowlby, 1969/1982, 1973, 1979/2005, 1980) reflected this assumption and he believed that infants are biologically predisposed to form selective bonds with special and proximate caring figures in their environment, proposing that experiences in relation to such bonds are a critical factor in the development of internal working models of the world, the self, and self-in-relation-to-world. Attachment theory proposes that there is evolutionary advantage (Bowlby, 1969/1982) in the capacity to equate concepts such as unfamiliarity, loneliness, and rapid approach with danger, and to seek proximity to an attachment figure in response to such threat is the hypothesised goal of the attachment system. The attachment system therefore serves to regulate, maintain, or obtain proximity to a caregiver (or caregivers), who is perceived to be a secure base from which to engage in environmental exploration (Ainsworth, 1963; Bowlby, 1973). Based upon their experiences and perception of caregiver availability, ability, responsiveness, and willingness in relation to their attachment needs Bowlby (1973) hypothesised that children construct mental models related to their thoughts, memories, beliefs, expectations, and emotional and behavioural apparatus in relation to the self and others. These internal working models are thought to provide the basis for subsequent psychological and social development. The purpose of this chapter is to lay out some of the fundamental tenets of attachment theory and provide a basic overview of its development. Readers interested in a more thorough description of the ideas, concepts, and arguments that frame attachment theory are referred to Bowlby's complete works (e.g. Bowlby, 1973, 1980, 1969/1982).

## Historical development

### *Psychoanalysis*

Van der Horst (2009) has suggested that while 'Bowlby was a psychoanalyst by training, he was really an ethologist at heart' (p. 105) and while he

embraced psychoanalytic schools of thought on the one hand, he saw shortcomings in relation to issues such as scientific rigour and a perceived overemphasis on internal distortion of early experiences as an explanation for children's emotional problems and psychopathology. Bretherton (1992) has outlined Bowlby's early grounding in the Kleinian (Klein, 1932) object relations approach to psychoanalysis, highlighting how he saw great value in central tenets of this approach, such as the notion that early childhood lays the foundations for the development of personality or the psychopathology surrounding loss. However, a particular point of departure from Kleinian psychoanalysis related to the credence Bowlby allotted to the value of children's actual early childhood experiences in explaining emotional problems, as opposed to internally distorted fantasy (arising, according to Kleinian thinking, from conflict between aggressive and libidinal drives). Bowlby's work led him to believe that actual family experiences in early childhood occupied a more central role in the development of emotional disturbances than Kleinian thought had permitted. He suggested (Bowlby, 1940, p. 23) that 'like nurserymen, psychoanalysts should study the nature of the organism, the properties of the soil, and their interaction' (cf. Bretherton, 1992, p. 761). However, despite such departure from Kleinian thinking it has also been recognised that Bowlby retained an acute recognition of Kleinian ideas. For example, Bretherton (1992, p. 765) has astutely asserted:

I detect remnants of Kleinian ideas in Bowlby's discussions of children's violent fantasies on returning to parents after a prolonged separation and 'the intense depression that humans experience as a result of hating the person they most dearly love and need' (Bowlby, 1951, p. 57).

Despite points of departure, the above quote suggests that Bowlby continued to recognise some of the central features of psychodynamic ideas, such as the central role occupied by intra-psychic conflict.

By more closely tying the development of emotional disturbances to actual family experiences, Bowlby paved the way for more scientific, rigorous investigation of his hypotheses. This was another aspect of his psychoanalytic grounding that he seemed uncomfortable with:

As one who strives to be both a clinician and scientist I have been acutely alive to this conflict. As a clinician, I have found Freud's approach the more rewarding ... his series of concepts invoking a dynamic unconscious has been a practically useful way of ordering the data. Yet as a scientist I have felt uneasy about the unreliable status of many of our observations, the obscurity of many of our hypotheses and, above all, the absence of any tradition which demands the hypotheses to be tested.

(Bowlby, 1979/2005, p. 36)

With a greater emphasis on more clear-cut, actual experiences during childhood (e.g. mother-child separation) he was better able to document and trace the effects of such childhood events on the child and on the parent-child interaction. He viewed early research documenting the ill effects of institutionalisation and hospitalisation on children (e.g. Goldfarb, 1943; Skodak & Skeels, 1949; Spitz, 1946) to be heavily linked to the issue of maternal deprivation.

### ***Ethology***

For Bowlby, the behavioural system of attachment occupied as important a role as the systems related to feeding, care giving, exploration, and sexual reproduction in terms of its relationship to survival and evolution. He outlined the evolutionary advantages (e.g. safety and survival) of instinctive behaviours that he believed were designed to tie human infants to a primary caregiver and considered that such attachment behaviour was best explained as instinctive and 'built on the same general pattern as in other mammalian species' (1979/2005, p. 37). He described a fixed set of behavioural patterns, such as crying, smiling, and clinging, which he saw primarily as evolutionary behavioural apparatus designed to facilitate the development of a maternal bond:

It would be odd were the biological security which comes from fixed patterns to have been wholly abandoned. Crying, sucking, and smiling I suspect are some of our many built-in motor patterns and represent nature's insurance against leaving everything to the hazard of learning.

(Bowlby, 1979/2005, p. 51)

In discussing such behaviours Bowlby introduced ethological concepts (Tinbergen, 1951) such as 'sign stimuli', 'social releasers', and 'social suppressors', recognising and exploring the external and internal stimuli seemingly responsible for the activation and termination of these behavioural responses. For example, he viewed (Bowlby, 1979/2005) experimental findings of Ahrens (1954) and Spitz and Wolf (1946), suggesting that the smiles of babies from two months of age (drawn from cross-cultural and cross-racial samples) were specifically evoked by visual configurations similar to the human face, as evidence for potential visual gestalts that act as a 'sign stimulus' for eliciting the specific attachment behaviour of smiling.

Furthermore, he was also attuned to early ethological work (e.g. Hunt, 1941; Lorenz, 1935; Padilla, 1935; Thorpe, 1956; Weidmann, 1956) exploring the existence of 'sensitive phases of development' (typically occurring early in the life cycle), during which certain characteristics are permanently determined or significantly affected, depending on a creature's experiences during the sensitive phase. He explored how specific behavioural responses, their intensity, the precise form they take, and the specific stimuli involved in their activation and termination could be markedly influenced by experiences

during these sensitive stages of development. For example, he (Bowlby, 1979/2005) was intrigued by Lorenz's (1935) work on 'imprinting' in young goslings; identifying that whereas a young gosling:

would at first follow any moving object that is within certain wide limits of size, after a few days he will follow only the kind of objects to which he is accustomed, be it mother goose or man; and he does that irrespective of whether he has received food or comfort from the object.

(Bowlby, 1979/2005, p. 47)

Bowlby viewed such findings as interesting evidence of how an interaction between environmental and internal factors during sensitive stages of early development could play a significant role in the development of atypical behaviour.

Bretherton (1992, p. 769) has outlined that in reaction to his openness to ethological principles 'some psychoanalysts accused Bowlby of behaviorism because he supposedly ignored mental phenomena'. However, it seems that he was alert to the complementary spaces occupied by ethology and psychoanalysis:

in so far as psychoanalysis is dealing with Man as a symbol-using animal with extraordinary capacities for learning and therefore for delaying, distorting, and disguising the expression of instinctual responses, it is exploring a region adjacent and complementary to ethology. In so far as it is dealing with the responses themselves, it seems probable that the disciplines overlap.

(Bowlby, 1979/2005, p. 54)

In many respects, Bowlby's ideas reflected a complex fusion of psychological, ethological, and evolutionary ideas.

### *The attachment behavioural system*

The culmination of Bowlby's engagement with ideas from ethology was his proposal of an innate 'attachment behavioural system' which is a central tenet of attachment theory. Bretherton (1985) has described the attachment system as a 'psychological organization' that exists within individuals and has the predominant goal of regulating behaviours that are designed to maintain and initiate proximity and contact with a discriminate attachment figure. However, it is important to note (Bischof, 1975; Bretherton, 1985) that the internal goal of the system is not proximity or contact per se, but the sense of felt psychological security that is subsequently elicited. Bowlby (1969/1982) proposed that the attachment behavioural system is likely to be most 'active' in situations where individuals are under stress, frightened, fatigued, or ill and the system is toned down when the attachment figure provides



needed comfort. Furthermore, Hazan and Shaver (1994a) have outlined that the degree of proximity to attachment figures that will likely be required to satisfy the attachment system (when activated by perceptions of threat) is likely to be dependent upon a range of variables, including the level of emotional and physical response to threat, the nature of the environmental threat, and children's age.

Bowlby (1968, 1977) linked this attachment behavioural system with what he proposed to be an inbuilt phylogenetic bias to approach certain classes of stimuli and avoid others. He proposed a 'familiar-strange parameter' that has significant import with regard to survival, hypothesising that 'environmental familiarity' is often synonymous with safety, whereas 'strangeness' is generally responded to with ambivalence (i.e. it can elicit fear and withdrawal or it can elicit curiosity and investigation). The attachment behavioural system serves a protective function that is closely related to the familiarity-strangeness parameter, ensuring that attachment behaviour towards a discriminate figure is activated in strange, novel, or threatening situations (i.e. situations evoking fear and the need for withdrawal) yet does not obstruct exploratory efforts when the degree of strangeness is not excessive. Bowlby suggested that the issue about which of the antithetic individual responses to strangeness (i.e. fear or exploration) predominated would depend upon factors such as the degree of strangeness, the presence or absence of a companion, the maturity of the individual, or the state of health of the individual.

Thus, the attachment behavioural system is hypothesised to function as part of an interrelated group of behavioural systems that serve the overarching objective of maintaining a sense of homeostasis between individual and environment (Bowlby, 1973). The prominence of the attachment system is hypothesised to function homeostatically with the need for exploration. Cassidy (1999) has outlined how the maintenance of proximity and contact with the caregiver would change in accordance with the balance of the systems of attachment and exploration, with the sudden presence of a stranger or onset of physical harm activating the attachment system and diminishing exploratory impulses accordingly. Bowlby (1973) described these behavioural systems as an 'outer-ring' of life-maintaining homeostatic systems that serve to complement what he termed the 'inner-ring' of physiological systems. If the outer-ring systems of attachment and exploration (for example) are able to keep individuals within a familiar environment and maintain a sense of security it is hypothesised as less stressful for the 'inner-ring' systems.

### ***Formation of attachment***

It is suggested that in the first two months of life infants do not focus their attention exclusively on their mothers but simply behave in ways that are designed to facilitate the formation of an attachment relationship with a potential attachment figure from the adult world. Bowlby hypothesised