

**The psychoanalytic facet of attachment theory and research: “Behind” and
“beyond” attachment disorganization**

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to enrich and elucidate the connections between attachment research and psychoanalytic practice, linking Bowlby's psychoanalytic origins with the influential body of research produced in this field. The findings on attachment disorganization will be examined from two standpoints. The first regards what is "behind" it, namely the origins of disorganized attachment, as illustrated by Beatrice Beebe's research on the precursors of attachment styles identified from microanalytic nonverbal communication between four-month-old infants and their mothers. The second pertains to what is "beyond" it, namely the trajectories of attachment disorganization after childhood and specifically in the context of the couple bond, where disorganized attachment patterns may be observed. Drawing on Bowlby's proposal that conflict arises when two or more incompatible systems are at play, this paper will propose that the compelling need of being seen and known frequently coexists with fear, activating the attachment system in contradictory ways. The paper will then explore the clinical value of considering attachment and recognition in their entanglements. A clinical vignette will illustrate the ways in which these systems may act simultaneously determining conflict, competition, dissociation, and even disorganized/disorganizing states.

Keywords: attachment, disorganization, fear, couple's bond, recognition

The psychoanalytic facet of attachment theory and research: “Behind” and “beyond” attachment disorganization

John Bowlby’s formulation of the attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969/1980) significantly altered the way many psychoanalysts and other clinicians and theorists considered the impact of loss and separation on emotions and behaviors, as well as the development of specific representational configurations. The attachment system is an innate, cybernetic, goal-corrected system that is activated to promote survival in the presence of threats. The core of attachment is fear, the primary emotional state for the mobilization of those behaviors (e.g., touching, clinging, cuddling) aimed at regaining proximity, safety, and security, as infants have a higher chance of surviving danger when they are closer to their caregivers. As Bell (2009) noted, research after Bowlby’s time has confirmed via neurobiology many of his assertions regarding the powerful role of fear in activating both proximity seeking and fight-or-flight responses. In this line, according to Lyons-Ruth and colleagues (Lyons-Ruth, Melnick, Bronfman, Sherry & Llanas, 2004), “[...] an emphasis on fearful arousal and the relational modulation of that arousal lies at the heart of attachment theory and is clearly a departure from an emphasis on libidinal and aggressive drives as the central motivational systems.” (p. 67).

Main and Solomon (1986; 1990) described how, in certain circumstances, fear might generate a paradox: the threat evokes fear, which in turn triggers the attachment-seeking behavioral responses; however, the person who is supposed to provide security through proximity is actually the very source of danger. This phenomenon is widely known as a “fright without solution” (Main & Hesse, 1990; 1992) and constitutes the core of disorganized attachment. Simultaneous displays of contradictory behaviors, incomplete or undirected movements, stereotypies, and overt signs of disorientation are among the main indices of a disorganized classification (D) at the Ainsworth’s *Strange Situation*. Hesse and Main (2000; 2006) also provided a description of the various aspects of frightening parental behaviors, which

directly evoked infant alarm and disorganized attachment patterns, such as: indices of entrance into a dissociative state (e.g., parent suddenly completely “freezes” with eyes unmoving, half-lidded, despite nearby movement); threatening behaviors (e.g., “looming”); frightened behaviors inexplicable in origin and/or anomalous in form (e.g., backing away from the infant while stammering in an unusual and frightened voice); sexualized behaviors towards the infant (e.g., excessive intimate or sexualized caressing of the baby); deferential/timid or role-inverting behaviors (e.g., turning to the offspring as a haven of safety when alarmed); and disorganized/disoriented behaviors (e.g., mistimed or asymmetrical movements, becoming motionless while infant is crying).

Considering the wide literature produced on attachment disorganization in infancy, Duschinsky and Solomon (2017) have suggested the necessity for clarifications regarding what is captured by the concept of “disorganized” (D) attachment, as it can refer to different phenomena. Three distinctive aspects have been identified: 1) *D-classification*, referring to the attachment classification as coded in the Strange Situation; 2) *D-behaviors*, referring to the contradictory behaviors listed by Main and Solomon (1990); 3) and *D-system*, which refers to “the *imputed disruption or disturbance of the attachment system* and its plan to gain the physical and attentional availability of the caregiver” (p. 530). Bowlby was particularly interested in this third level of analysis. In fact, in examining his published and unpublished manuscripts, Duschinsky and colleagues (Duschinsky, 2015; Solomon, Duschinsky, Bakkum & Schuengel, 2017; Reizs, Duschinsky & Siegel, 2018) noted that he did not refer to attachment disorganization as we have come to do thanks to the work of Mary Main. Throughout his career, Bowlby extensively examined the “pathological” outcomes related to attachment system activation, focusing his attention on what occurs when the attachment system cannot be successfully disabled, as in cases of “conflicts arising when two or more incompatible systems are activated at once” (Bowlby, 1969, p. 174). Bowlby observed that intense stress responses can occur in these moments, preventing

integration of the different psychic systems, though he expressed uncertainty about how unfavorable these outcomes would be, recommending further investigation.

“Behind” attachment disorganization: Infant-parent microanalytic exchanges

Beatrice Beebe’s research on dyadic non-verbal communication significantly deepened our understanding of the roots of attachment disorganization. Starting from Daniel Stern’s research on the dyadic communications processes (Stern, 1971, 1974), and Joseph Jaffe’s research on the “rhythm of dialogues” (Jaffe, Beebe, Feldstein, Crown & Jasnow, 2001), Beebe has revolutionized its use by considering microanalysis as a “social microscope” capable of detecting the infant-mother micro-interactive exchanges through the analysis of four indicators: a) attention (gaze at or away from the partner’s face); b) affect (facial and vocal expressions); c) touch; and, d) spatial orientation (Beebe, 2014). One of the most captivating findings of her research has been the prediction of disorganized attachment at one year from microanalyses at four months, through several variables of infant-mother communication which proved unpredictable in terms of self and interactive contingencies. For example, mothers of infants who would later exhibit a disorganized attachment were less likely to follow their infants’ gaze and looked away from them for longer periods and unpredictably. Moreover, they emotionally withdrew, lowering their interactive coordination with infant facial-visual engagement, and showed significantly less facially positive emotions when their infants were in a positive state. When the infants showed a negative state indicating distress, these mothers were less likely to show interest or a “woe face” towards them. These mothers appeared more likely to show inscrutable facial expressions, similar to what happens in Tronick’s *Still Face* procedure (SF; Tronick, 1989).

Another noteworthy variable pertained to the mother’s “looming” quickly with the head and body towards the infant, which was linked to the vicious cycle of mother “chasing” and infant “dodging” (Beebe & Stern, 1977). Specifically, mothers of infants who would later be classified as having a disorganized attachment style showed higher patterns (20% or more of the total interaction) of “pursuing” the infant by abruptly and/or threateningly moving towards the

infant's face (looming) in unpredictable ways (reduced self-contingency of space orientation). These mothers' behavior elicited a protective response from the infant, who instinctively shielded the forehead with hands and dodged the mother with the movement away of the head. Furthermore, findings showed that these infants exhibited more discrepant affects, such as manifesting both smiles and whimpers within the same second; they also exhibited heightened signals of distress through contradictory facial and vocal patterns and showed lowered self-predictability of facial-visual engagement, spending more time in "no physical contact".

Overall, the most salient predictors of future attachment disorganization were the *cross-modal discrepancies* (e.g., when the infant or the mother exhibited simultaneous discrepant smile and whimper, or the mother's response to infant facial or vocal distress was of a smile). Following Beebe's argumentation, disorganized attachment originates from the infant's expectation of not being capable of obtaining empathy and comfort during moments of distress, significantly affecting his/her experience of being known and recognized as a subject. Specifically, the infant would "experience and represent *not being sensed, known, or recognized* by their mothers" (Beebe, 2014, p. 17); specularly, the infant would develop a "difficulty knowing themselves, particularly in states of distress," (p.17). These failures or distortions in the processes of recognition would determine "a trajectory in development which may disturb the fundamental integration of the person," (Beebe, Jaffe, Markese, Buck, Chen, Cohen, Bahrnick, Andrews & Feldstein, 2010, p. 7). Thus, Beebe's research suggested that attachment disorganization originates in a failure of the recognition processes in terms of contradictory and discrepant microanalytic interactions where affects, attention, body orientation, and physical contact cannot be organized in a mutual engagement. Her elaborations are in line with those of another prominent figure of infant research, Louis Sander (2002), who posited that the inability to identify the specific infant's inner state is linked to the more general failure in seeing, knowing, and understanding the infant. According to Sander, in fact, the caregiver's accurate recognition of the infant's intentions would facilitate reciprocal coordination, which, in turn,

determines a more accurate inner perception, fostering self-recognition. In this line, failed processes of recognition critically disrupt the capacity for self-definition, self-integration, and self-cohesion.

Something more on the disorganizing power of fear

In the preface to the Italian edition of Beebe and Lachmann's book, *The Origins of Attachment: Infant Research and Adult Treatment*, Nino Dazzi (2015) emphasized the ambitious project and the value of Beebe's results, as well as her "rare epistemological and clinical sensitivity" (p. xiii). However, he raised inquiries about the collocation of attachment theory on the basis of these findings, suggesting that her research entails an attempt to incorporate, or "reabsorb" attachment theory within the broader framework of communicative interaction.

Further understanding of the relationship between attachment and recognition processes would surely inspire both the theoretical and empirical elaborations, not to mention clinical work. Specifically, in understanding the roots of micro-interactive processes, undoubtedly the failure/distortion of the recognition processes is a key aspect of the subsequent developmental trajectories of the sense of Self; nonetheless, attachment is another central dimension of human functioning and, as previously noted, Bowlby was very attentive in considering how, more so than a convergence on a specific aspect, a simultaneous activation of two or more systems required careful investigation. Thus, infant-mother communication predictors of attachment disorganization, such as maternal gaze aversion, inscrutable faces, and the numerous cross-modal discrepancies, should also be considered in light of the powerful role of fear in activating the attachment system. For example, Beebe has illustrated that infants who will later be found to have a disorganized attachment style often perceive a sense of threat by their mothers, and, in commenting on the frames of infant-mother microanalytic interactions, there is a clear reference to how a parent can be frightening. The mother's looming is clearly defined as generating fear and infants respond to it with the behavioral responses of dodge and flight (e.g., covering one's face or looking downwards) in a condition in which there is no other escape. On this issue,

Beebe highlighted that the attachment system is organized around “the fear aroused in the infant and how the threat of separation and the reunion with the mother is managed” (Beebe, 2014, p. 20). However, these reflections would benefit from a wider discussion of both the three different phenomena concerning attachment disorganization as well as the interplay between two or more systems, such as the need for relatedness, for recognition and for proximity, and the fight-flight responses. In this line, it can be argued that, when infants experience intense distress, fear may play a significant role in shaping attachment responses aimed at searching for protection that coexist and interact with the equally strong longing for intersubjective relatedness. Moreover, it can be inferred that, in some cases, this simultaneous activation can initiate a conflict where paradoxical attachment responses are triggered by fear and interact with the difficulty in re-establishing the intersubjective relatedness; they *are mutually fueled* in a potentially disorganizing/disorganized process that prevents any positive resolution.

The previously mentioned Still Face procedure (SF) is another monumental illustration of the disruption of early mutual regulatory processes. In this regard, Mesman, van Ijzendoorn and Bakermans-Kranenburg (2009) reported a fascinating comparison between SF and maternal frightening behavior as detected by Hesse and Main from the *Strange Situation*. According to the authors,

Frightening behavior is very similar to the mother’s experimentally manipulated behavior during the still-face episode. Maternal frightening behavior has been found to predict infant disorganized attachment, as characterized by the display of contradictory behaviors, undirected or misdirected expressions, or direct indices of apprehension in the Strange Situation Procedure [...]. These infant behaviors are very similar to those found in the still-face literature, such as the combination of gazing away and bids for attention (i.e., contradictory and misdirected) or attempts to increase the physical distance from the mother combined with crying (p. 38).

The authors concluded that further reflection on the associations between the SF reactions and attachment dynamics would offer a deeper understanding of infant social-emotional development. In this line, it could be asserted that the SF elicits the infant's efforts to restore the intersubjective connection (for example, pointing their finger, waving their hands, etc.), but at the same time, it may also elicit fear and the consequent attachment behaviors, which can act in contradictory ways. The infant's longing for connectedness seems to be exhibited alongside other "contrasting" behaviors, affects, and intentions. Attachment responses due to a fear that cannot disable the attachment system and simultaneously attempts and failures to restore the relatedness are at play.

In this scenario, the higher role assigned to the activation of the attachment system, in its interlacement with the longing for connectedness, would provide a broader explanation for the infant's reactions and difficulties in regulation. The forward and backward movements of body and gaze, the quality and intensity of affects, and the cross-modal discrepancies can be analyzed in terms of a massive perturbation involving both attachment and the vital need for connection and recognition. Following Tronick (2013), prolonged or intense failures in reparation can lead to dramatic effects, disrupting intersubjectivity. The author sustains that "too much disorganization may lead to derailment. Unfortunately, we do not know when disorganization becomes too much" (p. 67). Therefore, referring back to Bowlby's ideas regarding two or more systems that are simultaneously activated, it is possible to open up a reflection on how these systems may interfere with each other in many ways, mutually interrupting the possibility of producing an organized response in any of these systems. When this happens early and very significantly in infancy, damage to the foundations of the Self occurs, involving both the attachment reactions to fear of being abandoned and in danger, and the difficulty in defining oneself in connection with the other.

Intersubjectivity, recognition, and protection

In line with Beebe's work, other relational psychoanalytic and self-psychological authors (Benjamin, 2017; Sander, 2002; Stern, 2004) have asserted that at the heart of self-organization is the process of recognition of an infant's own subjectivity and differentiation. Cortina and Liotti (2010) provided an in-depth analysis suggesting that attachment and intersubjectivity are two distinct motivational systems with specific characteristics, but with related and intertwined functions. Lyons-Ruth (2007) asserted that intersubjective motives linked to the need for relatedness permeate all other motivational systems, including the attachment system. In her view, intersubjectivity is a "domain-general" motivation, while attachment is "domain-specific." To be clear, intersubjectivity and the recognition processes are not the same concept. Colwyn Trevarthen (1979) distinguished primary and secondary forms of intersubjectivity, and sustained that infant-mother nonverbal communication (nonverbal cues, vocalizations, gestures, and emotions) represents a sort of "proto-conversation" that resembles a well-orchestrated dance, coordinated in timing, form, and intensity (in other terms, all *cross-modally integrated*). Of course, this match is not a perfect mirroring response, but involves ongoing cycles of disruption and repair (Beebe & Lachmann, 2002; 2014).

The differences between the "domain-general" system of intersubjectivity and the "domain-specific" systems of attachment and recognition inspire further exploration of their interlacement. As suggested by Stephen Seligman (2017), in fact, "Overall, the description of attachment is rendered more complex and located not just in attachment per se, but also in the dialectics and dynamics of recognition and intersubjectivity," (p. 162). Along these lines, it is important to re-emphasize that an infant's basic needs are not only to be seen, but also to be protected; in some cases, the need to be seen, recognized, and known in their own specificity is dominant, yet in others, it is crucial to be protected from threats. As Jessica Benjamin (2017) remarked, in fact, "Knowing and being known from the 'inside' can also be seen as an essential motivation separate from the basic need for attachment, which is associated with safety" (p. 9). Their dominance as well as their ongoing mutual influence spread from their integration up to

the multiple forms of “deficits,” namely the creation of conflicts, dissociation, and paradoxical entanglements.

Mark: Between Fear and Shame

According to Steele and Steele (1998), “The discovery of the disorganized/disoriented set of responses brought attachment theory and research closer to the work of the psychoanalytical clinician, the place where Bowlby began” (p. 107). The clinical encounter is, in fact, the psychoanalytic tool capable of detecting the complex ways in which different systems feed on each other in paradoxical ways, shedding light on the multiple processes within which many patients may be entangled. The following clinical case is presented with the aim of detailing the microanalytic exploration of the intertwining between attachment and recognition in a patient who started therapy in his thirties with panic attacks and a strong hypochondriac symptomatology. Exploration of his childhood had to be undertaken carefully, as it seemed to reactivate intense feelings of shame and fear. As he narrated his troubles, his eyes would well up with unshed tears and his voice would break. At times he would stare into space or evidence rigidity and stiffness in his body.

The most remarkable aspect of the encounter with Mark was a pervasive sense of not being seen, respected, and protected. His parents had always had a highly conflictual relationship, and early in his childhood, Mark realized that his father betrayed his mother, causing her overwhelming feelings of despair. She sought support in her only son, whom she identified as her sole reason for continuing to remain alive. Mark described feelings of intense anguish in the exchanges with his mother when he was a child. He couldn’t rely on her support when in trouble because her intrusiveness increased his sense of threat. However, the deactivation of his attachment needs was reversed by her quests for closeness. She appeared *helpless* to him due to her desperation after being rejected by her husband and Mark was terrified that his mother would succumb to her extreme sorrow. In response to this dread, he felt compelled to become her savior. However, she also made Mark feel *fearful*, as her “chasing”

could not be escaped. Thus, Mark was trapped in another paradox: In order to avoid being a persecutor, he felt he must fill the savior role; however, by doing so, he ended up being a helpless victim (Liotti, 2004). Adjacent to Mark's fear was a profound feeling of shame due to his sense of exposure in this dynamic. At the same time, he experienced anger and hatred for his father. Nevertheless, he reported that he could not rebel. His mother admonished him to be a good person, completely different from his father. Consequently, a more complex intertwining was created in his mind. In fact, the need to reject his mother's intrusiveness also activated the fear of being bad, like his father, who betrayed her. This risk paralyzed him, increasing his shame, which triggered the imperative of coerced loyalty, suppressing rage.

Certainly, Mark's functioning was characterized by the experience of not being seen, known, and respected as a person with his own needs and role. He could be seen only as the good boy. The shame linked to the risk of being like his father was dramatically enmeshed with the shame of the exposure coming from the proximity to his mother. In attempting to create an image of being as good as possible, he dissociated both the fear of the excessive closeness and the rage and badness in himself. His functioning was also likely characterized by a broader, underlying experience of loneliness, since he could not seek comfort for his distress from caregiver, as that very caregiver was the source of his distress. Predictably, Mark also dissociated this feeling of abandonment to protect himself.

In early adolescence, Mark was even more trapped between the need to physically "dodge" his mother, who responded with increased requests for intimacy, and the impossibility of avoiding her. The dissociation of anger, resulting in the inability to activate any form of protest, extended well beyond the relationship with his parents. With the progression of therapy, it became evident that throughout his adolescence, Mark had experienced a growing "freezing" and dissociation of feelings due to the multiple dangers involved in expressing them. The multiple forms of fear and shame - of losing the other and being lost in them - were at play in an entangled way. Consequently, a dissociative functioning was the only solution in response to the

impossibility of creating a mutually “well-orchestrated” dance between attachment and recognition in the field of intersubjective relatedness. The pervasive anxiety and hypochondrial symptomatology were the unique witnesses of his profound sense of damage.

“Beyond” Attachment Disorganization in Infancy

Attachment theory has provided valuable insights into the ways in which disorganized attachment evolves over time, after the first few years of life. Specifically, the findings on the developmental trajectories of disorganized attachment in childhood and in adulthood have revealed that, over time, clearly contradictory behaviors are replaced by modes of relating that would provide the child with heightened control strategies, characterized by *punitive* or *solicitous* stances (Jacobvitz & Hazen, 1999). These developmental modifications represent the most effective behavioral adaptation to the total absence of a coherent behavioral strategy, while a disorganized representation is maintained (Teti, 1999).

Adult attachment disorganization has been conceptualized as stemming from fear associated with contradictory and paradoxical responses that interfere with the individual’s capacity to mentally process the overwhelming experience. Such definition, which is significantly informed by the remarkable work of Mary Main, stimulated several elaborations on the dissociative core of disorganized attachment in adulthood and its association with specific forms of maladaptive functioning and psychopathology in adulthood (e.g., Liotti, 1992; Fonagy, Target, Gergely, Allen & Bateman, 2003). However, in adulthood, new attachments commonly develop, and the couple relationship can be considered a new attachment bond (Hazan & Shaver, 1994); it is a new relational context where the current attachment experiences lead to the creation of *specific* attachment representations that guide partners in anticipating and giving meaning to their exchanges about the possibility of seeking protection if discomfort arises (Crowell, Treboux & Waters, 2002). Along these lines, the couple’s relationship might represent the possibility for the adult to revisit past and present experiences, giving them new meanings about the availability for protection and the personal sense of worthiness.

Drawing upon these assumptions, the extent to which the couple bond can determine disorganized attachment responses (and mental states), which can become pervasive to the point of causing negative outcomes in adult functioning, is a promising topic of investigation. Overall, Jacobvitz and Reisz (2019) suggested that “future research will hopefully continue to expand and refine our understanding of disorganized states of mind in the context of romantic relationships” (p. 174).

Attachment Disorganization in the Couple Bond

Observing and defining the mental states involved with attachment disorganization in couple relationships is a challenging task, to be sure. Nonetheless, the clinical encounter with adults and couples offers a proving ground in which all the paradoxical and contradictory attachment reactions are simultaneously at play. This occurs because the couple bond may activate devastating feelings, up to traumatic experiences. For example, in line with Bowlby (1980), the disruption of a couple bond may determine frantic feelings of grief and pain. In cases of overwhelming contradictory feelings, it is possible to observe disorganized attachment reactions because the threat of losing the bond represents a paradoxical trigger, activating the attachment system. The paradox lies in seeking closeness with that person who is the very source of the threat. In other words, for certain individuals, the fear of the partner’s detachment may activate the search for proximity, determining an exacerbated protest against the risk of being abandoned. In an inspiring paper titled ‘Romantic bonds, binds, and ruptures: Couples on the brink’, Virginia Goldner (2014) asserted that, “In the formal lexicon of attachment theory, these are bonds that would be considered ‘disorganized’” (p. 406). In this sense, again, the analytic encounter is the context where disorganization can show its pervasive impact. Experiences with patients falling to the floor, punching themselves on the head and shouting, or blocked in a freezing state or in frantic crying at the idea of losing a threatening/fearful attachment figure are not uncommon for psychoanalysts working with adults and couples. Even the patients’ description of what Main defined as “extreme behavioral reactions” (Main & Goldwyn, 1998) to

the threat of losing the bond, has the potential of completely disabling, in a fraction of seconds, the analyst's own capacity of mentalization, surmounted by confusion and disorientation. Not to mention those situations in which the couple bond can be threatening to the point of the extreme experiences of violence within intimate relationships.

Returning to Mark's case offers us an opportunity to observe how the states of fear, shame, rage, and guilt surrounding the value of the attachment bonds and the necessity to be seen and protected take shape in the romantic relationships in contradictory, conflictual, and dysregulated ways. When he started therapy, Mark was involved in a relationship for three years, and, eight months before, his partner Amanda had moved abroad for work. The relationship continued long distance, and initially he had imposed himself to accept and encourage his partner's personal growth; a good boyfriend does this. In fact, in the first months of our sessions, this topic was completely absent, totally covered by his physical symptoms of alarm. Over time, around the second year of our work, he started progressively being attracted to other women. A "bad part" surfaced and anguished him. He couldn't believe that he could be unfaithful. In fact, the risk of hurting his girlfriend paralyzed him from approaching any other girl, but he became progressively confused and frightened. He was overwhelmed by fears about losing Amanda, both due to his possible betrayal and as a result of the physical distance that would have impaired their bond. At the same time, a powerful rage arose: It was the fault of the distance if he was feeling attracted to other women!

Mark became increasingly resentful towards his partner's decision to prioritize her career over their bond. Was he trying to punish her for having abandoned him? Or was he trying to emerge in his needs to explore something new when the other was distant? At this stage of the therapy, the echo of his father's "bad" behavior was still too strong to explore these questions deeply, as Mark was too scared of these feelings, perceived as too dangerous both for himself and the other. His need to be protected against becoming an unfaithful, unresponsive, and selfish

man was mixed with the unbearable fear that rage would unavoidably determine the destruction of the bond.

At a certain point, taking the risk of expressing his distress began to feel as less threatening than the growing risk of danger or paralysis due to the contradictory and suppressed feelings that were taking over. Thus, he talked to his girlfriend about his suffering from their distance. At his request to have her closer to him, she proposed Mark relocate and live with her. Her job position was more stable, and he could have found a new job in a short time. Suddenly, a sense of constriction completely cornered all his needs related to the bond. In his mind, his claim for affirmation and his desire for being seen and recognized had given power to the other, who was proposing a pseudo-choice that felt to him like an imposition. In this way, any possibility to take into account a desire to consider this opportunity was completely prevented. He put off the issue with a “we’ll see,” suppressing his attraction towards other girls and increasing the phone contact with her.

This sort of stability went on for nine months until Amanda started to express distress about their situation. Now, he had to decide. Mark’s sense of constriction increased, determining a strong rage towards her selfishness and his being forced to submit to the other’s desires while she did not question his feelings, needs, and desires. He felt humiliated, not seen and intimately known. At the same time, that overwhelming rage containing protest and rebellion was mixed with the fear of consequences. His disorientation became progressively pervasive, determining obsessive thoughts about the risks of detachment and the risks of being a hostage of the other’s desires and decisions. At the same time, he was envious towards his father, who had been so selfish, and resentful towards his mother who had always imposed the demand upon him to be a kind person. He was in a trap. At least two entangled affective states, the multiple forms of fear and shame, orchestrated contradictory perceptions concerning relatedness. Between these, the previously dissociated anger emerged in a way that was difficult to manage, also because it seemed to keep abreast with fear; he was terribly scared of a feeling that would be too dangerous

to the point that he could destroy everything: the bond and his version of himself as a good guy. Mark perceived an extremely painful sense of impotence derived from the sensation that, once again, the other was intrusive and manipulative, but could not be hurt.

As months went by, he became increasingly able to distinguish his hyperactivation as a response to the threat of attachment disruption, and his distress as stemming from not feeling seen or respected — making his emotions feel less overwhelming. In our work, he was trying to contact different self-states by taking his time to decide. However, the complexity of the work with Mark became particularly challenging when his girlfriend announced her decision to end the relationship. At that moment, an “extreme behavioral reaction” came out in Mark, without the possibility to access any form of mentalization, despite all of the work we had been doing on his self-states. All his needs of being seen, recognized, and respected seemed to completely disappear. In two days, he left his work, picked up, and moved to his girlfriend’s town. Here, she told him that it was too late; she was involved in another relationship. The shock was devastating. After his plea to give him a chance, he remained silent for an extended amount of time. Mark did not remember anything about their exchange with the exception of her coldness, nor did he remember the moment in which he left her house. His memories returned when he arrived at the airport. When he arrived at the next session, Mark told me — speaking of a magical twist of fate — that he had met a wonderful woman at the airport. He now had a new girlfriend and was planning to move to her town in three weeks to live with her. But what about his fear of being in service to the other? In Mark’s case, the loss of the attachment bond had triggered extremely disrupted responses, preventing the attachment system from functioning in harmony with other systems. My own room for movement as a therapist suddenly felt frozen.

The events I have just recounted took place two years ago. Within a few days, that cohabitation ended, and Mark returned to the next session with a deep sense of disorientation. I chose to give Mark the time he needed, in order to avoid the risk that my interventions might be perceived as intrusive. In this way, by attuning to his states in a manner that reduced his sense of

shame, we gradually moved toward helping him become less of a hostage to those self-states that compelled him to seek attachment at any cost. Over the years, our work has deepened into his anger, which has at times emerged as a substitute for his previous anxiety, without leading to a direct identification with his father or a sense of guilt for any harm he may have caused to a needy person. Although Mark is now in a new romantic relationship, which stirs up a great deal of ambivalence, he often dreams about his ex-girlfriend Amanda. He is tormented by the idea that he cannot forgive her within himself and believes that this is why she appears so frequently in his dreams. One recurring dream, with slight variations, is the following:

“I jumped into the water from a boat. Amanda was with me, but she had stayed in the boat and I was talking to her. I wanted to get back together with her, but she was so distant. She reminded me of when I was at her house and she was talking to me. At one point, I found myself in the middle of the ocean, without any foothold, the boat was gone and the mainland was not visible. I felt like I was at the mercy of something or someone. I thought, ‘I am alone, completely abandoned.’ I felt a terrible sensation of paralysis, but at the same time I had to move in order not to sink. At that moment I woke up. I felt a pain in my chest, my pulse quickened. Then I remembered the last session where I had told you that I didn't want to feel at the mercy of someone, but, I don't know, my brain is like ... it remembers this only later and it's too late.”

I replied that it wouldn't really be too late if, after the chest pain, he had been able to associate the feeling of losing control — the sense of being at the mercy — as a condition we had spoken about so often, rooted in his childhood. He froze at my words, and after a long silence, he told me with tears in his eyes that a flashback had come to his mind, a memory from his childhood. “I had never thought about it, or rather I didn't know that I had kept it.” He was around 3 or 4 years old, at the beach with his family and cousins, in the water, when at one point his cousins jokingly pushed his head underwater. He was scared in that moment but everyone else was laughing. He wanted to shout, “Why did you do that?” but he was still too scared and ashamed. After a silence, I asked him what he was ashamed of at that moment and Mark replied,

“fear.” Once again, the anger had been completely replaced by a feeling of shame — a shame not so much linked to a feeling of inadequacy, but by the fear that no one would be there to save him from the power others held over him.

Conclusion

The challenging topic of attachment disorganization has been deepened in the two temporal trajectories of the continuity of experience, *behind and beyond* its reference to infancy. Theoretical developments point to the roles of attachment and recognition as being entangled together. Indeed, they may act simultaneously, in conflict, in competition, in dissociated and in disorganized/disorganizing ways. In supporting these reflections, Mark’s case highlights the intricateness of these paradoxical states, which feed off each other, and where also rage, envy, and guilt play their parts, producing their own tones and timbres.

Couple bonds serve crucial needs for protection, but also for self-actualization and recognition, mirroring, and self-delineating functions. However, also in adulthood, when a bond is threatened, attachment can become a powerful organizing and disorganizing orchestrator. A need for protection, in fact, can be addressed to the same person who is threatening, determining a paradoxical disorganized response, where the needs to escape and get closer to the partner are simultaneously at play in dramatic ways. Furthermore, following Bowlby’s suggestion to consider the interplay between the attachment and other systems, in some cases, it may happen that the powerful activation of attachment can arrive to break and disintegrate into fragments other needs, such as those to be seen, known, and recognized. And of course, the opposite is also possible, with recognition longings which may dominate to the point that attachment needs for protection are completely ignored or dissociated. In both cases, a sense of danger for the integrity of the Self is orchestrated by fear and shame. Between them, a variety of other affective states, such as rage, guilt, hatred, disgust, and envy, become the expressions of the dramatic intertwining that can be created. Thus, rage and protest can regard the need to be protected (an attachment issue) but also the need to be seen and respected (a recognition issue); similarly, guilt

can be determined by the risks of abandonment of the other, but also by the feeling of not being enough; fear itself can relate to the threat of being abandoned, but also the threat of psychic fragmentation. Then things become more complex when these affects are mixed in ways that make it impossible to discern which came first.

In conclusion, in his writings, Bowlby often specified that his intention was not to create a theory explaining all of whole human functioning, but to do something “more specific.” In this sense, the possibility of clarifying the connections between the attachment system and other crucial motivational systems is particularly enriching for the comprehension of the patient’s experience and for the dialogue between different theories and perspectives. The connections between Beebe’s infant research findings and attachment theory and research represent an illuminating example for an ongoing dialogue not only for researchers, but also for clinicians. In fact, their clinical implications, as demonstrated in the clinical vignette of Mark, are innumerable. Although it was not possible to explore other aspects of Mark’s functioning, such as his replication of the power struggles between the need for closeness and the need to be respected in the context of his work as well as with friends, and in the sexuality sphere, the exploration of the dramatic paradoxes activated by the interlacements between the two systems of attachment and recognition offer useful way to enrich the clinical exchange.

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