# Bringing Practice into Theory: Social Workers' Experiences of Bringing Social Work into Attachment Theory

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# Abstract

Attachment theory and social work have sustained an ongoing relationship since the early work of John Bowlby in the 1940s through to the current day. This longstanding relationship provided a frame for this current study which: explored social workers' described experiences of using attachment theory as a social work practice theory and identified patterns of processing attachment theory for social work practice. This qualitative study was methodologically guided by a hermeneutic phenomenological paradigm based on the work of Max van Manen (1990). Data collection involved a review of relevant literature followed by semi-structured in-depth interviews. Data construction included the development and implementation of a "Letter of Understanding Process" in conjunction with the construction of transcripts. Data-analysis processes consistent with hermeneutic phenomenological methods were utilised. Review of the literature suggested that attachment theory, originally developed by Bowlby (1958) and Ainsworth (1963), emphasised a relational perspective inclusive of the attachment-caregiving-exploratory systems. However within the translation process of this theory and its developments over the decades into a social work practice theory, the focus shifted from one of relationships at times of high need to one where the client and their external world of events and happenings was emphasised.

Findings from the interviews found social workers' experiences of the use of attachment theory, reflected identified shifts of focus within the literature. Also found was a theory-practice processing pattern identified as the social worker "bringing practice into theory ". In light of these findings, the social worker was foregrounded as one who brings practice into the lived experience of theory. Issues of sustaining the coherence of attachment theory in practice and issues of context were explored as impacting on the lived experience of theory and practice. In response to these findings practice implications were considered resulting in the development of attachment theory informed social work practice principles. Finally based on the conclusions of this study an attachment theory informed model of reflective practice was recommended along with considerations for future research.

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## Chapter One: Introduction

Exploration of the relationship between theory and practice has been a longstanding endeavour within many disciplines including social work. Longhofer and Floersch (2004) stated that "exploring the relationship between theory and practice has long produced continuous debate, bold knowledge claims, and various forms of dogmatism and reductionism, in social and political theory, philosophy, public policy, and social work" (p. 483). In conjunction with these theoretical debates and knowledge claims, within contemporary social work education and research, practice has been increasingly emphasized as "a rich source of social work theory and knowledge that enhances or complements formal theories and proceduralized practice" (D'Cruz, Gillingham, & Melendez, 2007, p. 74).

This study explores the relationship between theory and practice, from the vantage point of the social worker. Specifically explored are social workers' practice experiences of the use of one theory, attachment theory. Since the original work of John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth beginning in the 1940s, there has been a burgeoning interest in attachment theory across a number of disciplines including social work (Howe, 1995; Howe, Brandon, Hinings & Schofield, 1999; Nash, Munford, & O'Donoghue, 2005). Attachment theory from the perspective of the social worker informed two key research questions to be addressed in this study:

1. What do social workers say about their experiences of putting attachment theory into social work practice with children and families? And,

2. Are there identifiable patterns, implicit and or explicit, being used by the interviewed social workers in their processing of attachment theory as a social work practice theory, to inform child and family oriented social work?

The process of putting one's mind to these questions immediately raises a core issue. Attachment theory is a theory that relates to each human person in relation to and with their key caregivers throughout the lifespan. Attachment theory addresses care seeking

and care provision experiences across the life span. Attachment theory sustains interest in the social workers' and the clients' experiences. As such, throughout the journey of this thesis, we, being you the reader and I the writer may take moments to ponder our own stories, our own unique connections with attachment theory and practice. Wherever we journey may we be met with empathy and care, so as we can then bring this experience of care into our practice of attachment theory with clients.

What now follows is an opportunity to form the base from which this research project was conducted through considering: the research rationale and justification including the underlying philosophy with clarifying concepts and categories being defined. A summary of the research process ensues followed by a brief chapter outline providing a guide to the thesis structure.

**Rationale and Justification**

Over the period of my own professional practice there has been a noticeable shift in emphasis where historically the social worker-client relationship was seen as being "at the heart of social work" (Collins & Collins, 1981, p. 6) and being pivotal to practice. In recent years, while the worker-client relationship remains a primary vehicle of practice, there is much variation in emphasis in attending to this aspect of the work. For example, Schofield (1998) stated that "many social workers have lost confidence in the value of their relationships with children and families and in their capacity to understand and help them" (p. 57).

This loss of confidence in valuing relationships appears to have coincided with an ever increasing interest in the use of attachment theory within social work. For example, Hess (1982) proposed that many foster care workers were not cognizant of the concept of attachment, nor its practical application. Grigsby (1994) a decade later conducted a study in Georgia. Child protection services closed case records were examined with a view to exploring if protective service workers recognized and emphasised the importance of maintaining attachment relationships. Findings from this study supported Hess (1982) in

advocating that social workers would benefit from becoming "cognizant of the principles of social-attachment theory" (Grigsby, 1994, p. 275).

Yet another decade later, a Masters in Social Work thesis study conducted by Hendemark (2004) in California USA, aimed to "investigate how much knowledge Los Angeles social workers have of attachment theory and how they used that knowledge in their practice (p. 3-4). Hendemark (2004) hypothesized current attachment theory research findings were not being practically implemented by social workers. Hendemark (2004) constructed an attachment theory based quiz like questionnaire where although 86% (sample size of 96 social workers) reported valuing and using attachment theory in their work (p. 1) an average of 49% of theory oriented questions, were answered correctly. Hendemark (2004) concluded, "this study may inform social workers of the need to become educated about current scientific findings in the attachment field so that they may be more effective in their work...it could inspire social workers to embrace the knowledge and make use of it in their work" (pp. 48-49).

The findings from these studies each highlight an assumption that theoretical knowledge equates with use, and use amidst the real time and moments of the social work-client relationship. This phenomenological study seeks to explore these assumptions through gathering Aotearoa/New Zealand data regarding the practice status of attachment theory and research developments as experienced by social workers within their social work practice with children and their families. While keeping in mind socio-cultural-contextual issues, the primary focus of this study is the microsphere of practice. This study endeavours to understand the journey of a theory, attachment theory, through the vehicle of the social worker in relationship with clients. Influencing the form and direction of this study has been an ecological – attachment theory informed underlying philosophy with sensitizing theoretical biases of the researcher. It is to an exploration of these we now turn.

**Underlying Philosophy: An Ecological-Attachment Theory Orientation**

An ecological-attachment theoretical orientation attends to both the inner world of children and their families in conjunction with multiple contexts in which family life evolves and develops across the life span. For example, Bronfenbrenner (1979) developed an ecological model, illustrating the interactive influences of social environmental contexts - systems on child development. This model identified aspects of the environment as they pertained to the immediacy with which they impacted on the developing child: the microsystem; the child with their family, neighbours, peers etc; the mesosystem described how the various settings within the microsystem interact; the exosystem described the extended family, the parent's workplace etc, and the macrosystem; the ideologies, laws and customs of a society. Bronfenbrenner (1979) stated:

> The ecology of human development involves the scientific study of the progressive, mutual accommodation between an active, growing human being and the changing properties of the immediate settings in which the developing person lives, as this process is affected by relations between these settings, and by the larger contexts in which the settings are embedded. (p. 21)

This definition includes three key assumptions: First, the child is both influenced by and influences their environment, second, development occurs through "mutual accommodation", and third, the environment/context at any one time is a culmination of the interaction between and within the systems. This study with a focus on the microsphere of relationships highlights an important interacting feature within an ecological model: an understanding of the impact of stressors and support within the microsphere of the family system:

> Whether parents can perform effectively in child-rearing roles within the family depends on the role demands, stresses and supports emanating from other settings. Parents' evaluations of their own capacity to function, as well as their view of the child, are related to such external factors as flexibility of job schedules, adequacy of

child care arrangements, the presence of friends or neighbours who can help out in large or small emergencies, the quality of health and social services and neighbourhood safety. (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 7)

The interaction between parenting capacity and children's development across and between the systems identified by Bronfenbrennner (1979) has engendered much research, including attachment theory research (Belsky, 1984; Cochran and Brassard, 1979; Garbarino and Kostelny 1992; Rutter and Giller, 1983) and social work research on family stress and social support. For example, Polansky, Gaudin, Ammons and David, (1985) found a direct link between parents who neglect and maltreat their children and 'social distancing' by these parents, often resulting in social isolation at times of personal-family distress.

In a similar study Crittenden (1985) matched groups of parents identified as "neglecting", "abusing" and "adequate"[1]. Her findings confirmed and elaborated upon those of Polansky et al. (1985). In terms of capacity to receive support, Crittenden found neglecting parents tended to avoid relationships as a form of self protection from their own despair and hopelessness whereas parents identified as 'abusing' tended to engage in coercive relationships focused exclusively on getting their own needs met. 'Adequate' parents at times of parenting stress were more likely to engage in cooperative and reciprocal relationships and were able to do this to meet their own needs and their child/children. Crittenden (1985) understood the different patterns of being able to make use of support as being manifestations of different "working models of relationships" based on childhood experiences (p. 1299).[2]

The research by Crittenden (1985) illustrates an interactive point between attachment theory and the work of Bronfenbrenner (1979). While Bronfenbrenner (1979) encouraged a contextual view of individual struggles, attachment theory challenges the tendency to script out the individual as being a co-creator of context. Attachment theory encourages a

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[1] These parents were assigned to the different parenting type groups by Crittenden as defined by their protective service status (Crittenden, 1985, p. 1302).
[2] The internal working model is a key construct of attachment theory and will be discussed in Chapter Two.

focus on the internal world of the individual in relationship with their microsphere with a specific focus on patterns of support at times of felt need.

While an ecological model helps anchor a broad view of the individual across contexts, attachment theory seeks to understand how these individuals make use of these systems for support at times of need. Within an ecological-attachment theory orientation, "sensitizing concepts" (Patton 2002, pp. 289 -290) specific to this study have further guided the exploration process. "Sensitizing concepts", in dynamic interplay with the key research questions, are evolutionary in relationship with the emerging understandings throughout the project while also facilitating the construction of new understandings, based on the research findings. Three key sensitizing concepts/experiences were identified.

**Three Key Sensitizing Concepts**

First, my professional career, spanned over two decades has been marked by a process of integrating: integrating my social work training from the mid 1980s, my psychodynamically oriented child psychotherapy training in the early 1990s with my ever growing interest and understanding of attachment theory as a theory to help make sense of what can happen to our thoughts, feelings and behaviour when experiencing high levels of stress, within key relationships. Second, as attachment theory is a theory about relationships, I have privileged relationship-based practice and third, while privileging relationship-based practice I have been influenced by the recent work emerging from the Boston Process of Change Study Group on "implicit relational knowings" (Stern, Sander, Nahum, Harrison, Lyons-Ruth, Morgan, Bruschweilerstern & Tronick, 1998, p. 904). This work has taken attachment theory into the field of inter-subjectivity. While in my own practice I have been exploring the implications of this work for reflective practice and supervision for the purposes of both the psychotherapist and the social worker, this current study focuses specifically on explorations of attachment theory specific to the social worker.

## Clarifying Concepts and Categories

*Attachment*: Bowlby (1982) defined attachment as the "disposition of the child to seek proximity to and to contact with a specific figure and to do so in certain situations notably when he [sic] is frightened, tired or ill" (p. 371). Often key attachments, to specific people, begins as a process that initially takes place between caregiver(s) and infant. Ainsworth, Bell & Stayton (1991) in their definition of attachment emphasise that attachment (s) "may be defined as an affectional tie that one person or animal forms between himself and another specific one - a tie that binds them together in space and endures over time" (p. 31). Attachment theory emphasises the significance of early relationship experience in the care relationship and explores how these early relationship experiences become prototypes for relationships that develop outside of the first significant relationships. This process is hypothesized to have a biological base, whereby attachment behaviour (that which can be observed) is understood in relationship to the person that the behaviour is directed to (Ainsworth and Bowlby, 1991 a). Each person in the attachment relationship has a different role, one as protection seeker and the other as protection provider.

This study accepts attachment theory as a relationship-informing theory, useful in understanding more of the workings of the microsphere. This study attends to a challenge within attachment theory, a challenge to the epistemological view of what is attended to, in practice. Attachment theory invites the unit of analysis to be the relationship; the relationships of clients including the relationship between social worker and client. This study also accepts that this challenge occurs in a contemporary context of practice whereby the social worker-client relationship, while active is not always the focus of social work interventions across all social work settings.

*Social Worker:* For the purposes of this research this term will specifically refer to any full member of ANZASW (Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers). While many social workers are in the process of applying for registration with the Social

Workers Registration Board, I have decided to include all ANZASW members whether registered or not.

*Client:* For the purposes of this research this will specifically refer to any person, family or group who is seeking, receiving and or being offered the support and help from a social worker.

*Child and Family Social Work Practice Setting - Practice:* Any form of social work practice where the primary client group is children with their families.

*Social Worker-Client Relationship:* Schofield (1998) stated "how the world of the client is defined and understood will inevitably have an impact on the nature of social work and on the way in which the social work relationship is defined and understood" (p. 57). Therefore in this study, the frequent linguistic partnering of social worker and client is intentional. It represents a fundamental assumption throughout this research that whilst at any one time the focus maybe on the social worker or the client, that the social worker-client relationship exists as a primary focus when considering intervention based practice, that occurs within the social worker-client relationship. In addition, while social work, and its social workers comprise diverse practice fields within social work along with differing practice frameworks (Nash et al. 2005), it is assumed here that irrespective of framework, orientation or field, the provision of social work service occurs in the context of a client-social work relationship.

*Reflective Practice:* Reflective models of social work practice endeavour to bridge the gap between social work theory and practice, through emphasizing experience as the primary subject of reflection.[3] Within the diversity of reflective practice models within the social work theory practice literature (Payne 2005; Redmond, 2004), this study had a particular interest in the process-mode dimension of reflective practice (Ruch, 2002, p. 205). Emphasised in process reflection is the implicit, relationship dynamics and the

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[3] For a succinct overview of the literature on 'reflection', see Redmond (2004, p. 8-55). See also: Boud, Keogh & Walker, 1985; Boud & Knights, 1996; Payne, 2005; Ruch, 2005 a and b; Schon, 1983; Schon, 1987.

impact of these on the social worker, the client and the relationship between them (Hughes & Pengelly, 1997; Ward & MacMahon, 1998).

**The Research Process**

This study focused on the arena of experience, draws on a hermeneutic phenomenological methodological framework to guide the exploration process. Van Manen (1990) advocated that "hermeneutic phenomenological research may be seen as a dynamic interplay among six research activities" (p. 30):

1. Turning to the nature of the lived experience;
2. Investigating experience as we live it rather than as we conceptualise it;
3. Reflecting on the essential themes which characterize the phenomenon;
4. Describing the phenomenon through the art of writing and rewriting;
5. Maintaining a strong and oriented relation to the phenomenon and
6. Balancing the research context by considering parts and wholes. (van Manen, 1990, p. 30 -32)

While the research activities are linguistically presented chronologically, the lived experience of these activities reflected the 'dynamic interplay' between these research activities. An evolving understanding of this 'dynamic interplay' developed over the course of this research study and is reflected on throughout the following chapters, especially Chapter Three and Six.

**Thesis Chapter Outline**

This first chapter has engaged in the research activity of preparation for the "turning to the nature of lived experience" (van Manen, 1990, p. 30). This research activity also informed the following chapter where the reviewed literature takes centre stage, as a way to increasingly become 'attuned' to the research question. Chapter Two presents the reviewed literature within attachment theory, and attachment theory informed social work practice literature that specifically supports exploration of the following:

1. What are the identifiable conceptual, theoretical and methodological practical factors within the body of attachment theory that when placed within the setting of social work practice, might contribute to a social workers' experience of using attachment theory in their practice? And,

2. What guidance is there within the relevant literature about the practical use of attachment theory research findings, specific to social work practice?

Chapter Two presents an exploration of these questions by providing a coherent narrative, tracking the original work of John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth, through to more current research and theoretical developments through into attachment theory and social work practice theory. The attempt here is to present some of the available literature in such a way that the reader also has space for their own reflections and experiences and is invited through the literature "to dwell in this interpretive reflective space" (van Manen, 2002, p. 8) in preparation for being introduced to the methodological processes used to implement the inquiry in chapter three and in preparation for meeting the social work participants in Chapter Four.

Chapter Three shifts the focus to the methodological research processes used to explore the key research question, beginning with a continuation of the first research activity preparing the stage for the actual gathering and exploration of the lived experience. Within Chapter Three the focus transitions into providing an audit trail of the preparations for and the implementation of the phenomenological interviews. This is followed by a discussion of the processes used to analyse the interview data with a view to identifying emergent themes. Although van Manen (1990) identified "writing and rewriting" as the fourth research activity, "writing and rewriting" is acknowledged as a primary methodological activity central to the overall work of phenomenological research. An understanding of "writing and rewriting" evolved throughout the course of this study with these evolving understandings being reflected on throughout the remainder of this thesis.

Chapter Four shifts the focus once again, this time, with the participants' data as centre stage. This chapter develops the third research activity identified by van Manen. This chapter addresses specifically through the constructed text of the interviewed participants, the first key research question: What do social workers say about their experiences of putting attachment theory into social work practice?

Chapter five shifts the focus once more, this time to a collaborative sharing of the stage with the literature, the research process and the participants' data in an effort to address the second key research question: Are there identifiable patterns, implicit and or explicit, being used by the interviewed social workers in their processing of attachment theory as a social work practice theory? An in-depth discussion of findings occurs through an exploration of two key interrelated issues: theoretical coherence and practice context. Following, by implication of these findings, is a presentation of proposed attachment theory informed social work practice principles.

Finally, Chapter Six provides an opportunity to reflect on the research study: as it developed and then unfolded; as findings emerged; as practice implications were asserted; as recommendations for practice were formulated and as future research directions were contemplated. While these reflections are provided in summary form, they represent the research journey, process, findings and conclusions made available for review in the preceding chapters. However, between and within each chapter exists the often unseen, un-texted activities identified by van Manen (1990) as the maintaining of a strong and oriented relation to the phenomenon and keeping in balance the research context with the dynamic research process. The focus now turns to the reviewed literature with a mindset of 'wondering' (van Manen, 2002): 'wondering' amidst the world of written text, as a way to create a phenomenological space of wondering, about the ensuing participants 'lived experiences' of attachment theory within social work practice.

## Chapter Two: Attachment Theory and Social Work

This chapter examines the formulation, growth and development of attachment theory in relationship with theoretical literature on attachment theory informed social work practice. This examination forms a foundation on which to explore the two key research questions of this study: What do social workers say about their experiences of putting attachment theory into social work practice with children and families? And: Are there identifiable patterns, implicit and or explicit, being used by the interviewed social workers in their processing of attachment theory as a social work practice theory, to inform child and family oriented social work? With these questions oriented towards practice, this chapter considers the identifiable conceptual and theoretical factors within the body of attachment theory and attachment theory informed social work practice theory, which, when placed within the setting of social work practice, might contribute to a social worker's experience of using attachment theory in practice.

This chapter is comprised of two key sections. The first provides an overview of attachment theory and research. Given the breadth and depth of this body of work, this review centres on the developing attachment theory constructs originally developed by John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth who drew on key ideas from ethology, systems theory and psychoanalytic theory (Ainsworth et al., 1991 a & b; Bowlby, 1969, 1973). Following presentation of this foundational theory, methodological and conceptual advances from the 1970s to the current day are reviewed providing a base from which to review attachment theory informed social work practice theory. [4]

The second section examines the literature on social work practice theory. Specific attention is given to the various ways that this literature makes use of attachment theory to inform social work practice with children and their families. Informed by the sensitizing concepts underlying this research, specific attention is focused on the use of

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[4] For broader-focused extensive reviews the reader is guided to the work of: Ainsworth and Bowlby (1991); Bretherton (1992); Grossman (1995) and Holmes (1993). In addition, the *Handbook of Attachment* (Cassidy and Shaver, Eds., 1999) provides a comprehensive review, as does the more recently published edited work of Grossman, Grossman and Waters (Eds.) (2005).

attachment theory to understand more fully the complex dynamics of the social worker-client relationship within social work practice.

## Section One: Attachment Theory and Research

### *Beginnings*

In the 1940s, John Bowlby, a British child psychiatrist, was beginning to question the epistemological foundations of psychoanalytic practice. At this time, his work with the Robertsons (Robertson & Bowlby, 1952) and social workers at the London Child Guidance Clinic focused on young children's observed experiences of loss within their families. In response to this loss, Robertson and Bowlby (1952) observed a three stage response of protest, despair and then detachment, culminating in a mood state of "mourning", understood to be directly related to the actual loss experience, in contrast to the view of the day that favoured "intra-pyschic" explanations. Bowlby (1969) advanced "mourning" as the expected response following actual loss, and "separation anxiety" as the expected response to the risk or threat of loss.

From these observations, Bowlby (1958, 1959, 1960) argued that the actual infant/toddler-mother relationship was worthy of further study, and he set about constructing a new theory to support the above propositions, drawing predominantly on theoretical influences from ethology, psychodynamic theory and control systems theory. Bowlby (1969, 1973, 1980), in collaboration with the work of Mary Ainsworth (Ainsworth & Bell, 1969a; Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters & Wall, 1978; Ainsworth & Wittig, 1969b), formulated a "grand" explanatory theory, now commonly identified as "attachment theory".

### *Basic Assumptions of Attachment Theory: The Bowlby-Ainsworth Theory*

The Bowlby-Ainsworth attachment theory formulations constellate around the ethological and systems theory informed concept of behavioural systems. Bowlby (1969, 1973, 1980) proposed that the specific behaviour he had observed in young children in

relationship with their mothers could be identified as an attachment behavioural system (herein referred to as the attachment system). The attachment system exists in part to fulfil the biological function of protection to ensure survival. Bowlby (1973) differentiated two different types of threat to survival with a fear response: one, situations of danger where one's actual safety is at risk and two, situations where feelings of insecurity are aroused in response to feelings of strangeness, fatigue, fear and/or the unavailability or unresponsiveness of the attachment figure (p. 182). In response to either type of threat, Bowlby asserted the child responded with an array of attachment behaviours, for example crying, clinging, screeching or searching.

Attachment behaviours reflected "the activation of an inferred and not directly observable attachment behaviour system" (Stevenson-Hinde, 1994, p. 62). For example, Bowlby (1969, 1973) hypothesized that over the course of the infant's first three years, attachment behaviour/s shifted from being instinctually driven to becoming an organized system, where "proximity to mother becomes a set goal" (Bowlby, 1969, p. 180) at times of perceived or actual threat. Mother, representing the caregiving system, in turn responded to the young child's proximity-seeking with a specific goal: the alleviation of the distress being experienced by her infant (Bowlby, 1969, 1973).[5]

For the attachment system, the goal is protection seeking to alleviate the threat causing the distress; for the caregiver system, the goal of protection provision functions to alleviate distress. Accordingly, the attachment and caregiving systems were understood as reciprocal but asymmetrical. An understanding of these separate but dynamically interrelated systems remains central to the logic and coherence of attachment theory (Ainsworth et al., 1969 a and b; Ainsworth et al., 1978; Pederson & Moran, 1995a, 1995b; Waters & Deane, 1985; Gao & Waters 1998).

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[5] This concept originates from the ethological base informing Bowlby's original work, and links back to the understandings of primatologists, where the infant's proximity to another human capable of providing protection functioned to enhance biological survival. Essentially, Bowlby referred to the fear-based stress response of flight to another individual for protection.

The Bowlby-Ainsworth attachment theory formulations also highlighted three other behavioural systems: the exploratory system (Bowlby, 1969), the fear system (Bowlby, 1973) and the affiliation (sociable) system (Bowlby, 1969). First, the exploratory system provided the child with a quest for environmental social knowledge for survival. The attachment system was considered protective of the young child, moderating exploration when necessary. The dynamic interplay between the attachment system and the exploratory system became conceptualized as "the secure base" (Bowlby, 1973, p. 182),[6] or "a secure base from which to explore" (Ainsworth et al., 1978, p. viii). "A secure base from which to explore" (here in referred to as a/the secure-base) remains central within the attachment theory of Bowlby and Ainsworth (Bowlby, 1988).

Second, a system likely to inhibit the exploration system was identified as the fear system. Bowlby (1973) described "natural clues to potential danger" (p. 124), which signal an increased risk of danger as distinct from actual danger. These include darkness, loud noises, aloneness and sudden looming movements (Bowlby, 1973). As the attachment and fear systems are intertwined, infants and young children were observed to increase their attachment behaviour when frightened. Attachment theory proposes that when the fear system is activated the exploratory system becomes inhibited. Cassidy (1999) stated that:

> The presence or absence of the attachment figure is thought to play an important role in the activation of an infant's fear system, such that an available and accessible attachment figure makes the infant much less susceptible to fear. (p. 8)

Third, the affiliative system, while not extensively discussed by Bowlby (1969), was acknowledged as an essential aspect of human life (p. 229) and noted so as to distinguish the attachment system from broader social relationships. Bowlby (1969) clarified that attachment behaviour was activated at times of felt fear and insecurity, and that at these times seeking proximity to the secure-base was the goal. In the absence of the activated

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[6] Bowlby (1973) utilised the construct of the secure-base, drawn from the work of Harlow (1961). Ainsworth et al. (1978) present a brief history of the development of the term, dating back to the 1940s.

fear system, it was more likely that the exploratory system could be engaged and, with the caregiver system close by, social play relationships could be sought out (p. 307).

Furthermore, Bowlby (1969) proposed that alongside the young child's repeated experience of care at times of needed security and safety throughout the first few years, the infant progressed from instinctual protection-seeking to person specific goal oriented behaviour through a four phased process. Phases one and two represented preparatory stages, with attachment behaviour becoming discriminatory at phase three – around the six to seven month period – with the infant forming attachments (as distinct from social relationships) to one or a few preferred specific people, or "attachment figures". In the third phase, especially, infants were observed to cry at the attachment figure leaving their sight and instantly smile at them upon their return. A qualitative change in their response to separation and reunion in the presence of this/these people was observable at times of high need, from the baby's perspective, for protection and safety. The fourth phase, the "Formation of a Goal-corrected Partnership", signalled that the young child, around three years of age, now had the capacity to be behaviourally organized more by the attachment relationship than by instinct (Bowlby, 1969, pp. 266-128).

Bowlby (1973) proposed that during the first three years of life repeated interaction patterns at activated times of attachment with the caregiving system gradually became mentally represented as "working models of attachment figures and the self" (p. 203). Working models of the attachment relationship comprised expectations of the self and the caregiver's capacity to provide protection and care. Over time these expectations, based on day to day experience, became unconscious representations of the caregiver and self (Bowlby, 1980; Bretherton, 1985; Crowell, Treboux, & Waters, 2002). Sroufe (1988) stated: "such models concerning the availability of others, and in turn, the self as worthy or unworthy of care, provide a basic context for subsequent transactions with the environment, most particularly social relationships" (p. 18).

The construct of the "working model" endeavoured to convey two points of difference between psychoanalytic thought. First, the construct of "working" conveyed the dynamic

nature of relationships as being open systems and therefore open to change. In addition, this construct was linked with information processing theories to help convey that unconscious representations, while open to change and adaptation, often remain stable over time, throughout the life span, and across generations (Bowlby, 1980). Second, the construct of "model" endeavoured to describe the working inner hypotheses of the self in primary relationships with the formation and maintenance of these being based on actual experience/s.

From this position of protection and care the infant/child was supported to have their experience of distress while being protected by the caregiving system from being overwhelmed by this. Such protection served two functions: it enabled the infant/child to attend to and process the thoughts, feelings and actions related to the stress, which in turn supported them to be exploratory of themselves, to experience mastery and confidence that strong emotion can be contained, creating space for further exploration and learning of self, others and the world.

Bowlby proposed that when the caregiving system was less effective at providing security, the infant/toddler needed to take some of this task on themselves by becoming self protective through a mental process of "defensive exclusion" and/or "selective exclusion" (Bowlby, 1980, p 52). As a consequence, the young child would repeatedly exclude aspects of their experience with the caregiver system from awareness and therefore have less of their experience readily available for exploration.

In addition, Bretherton (1985) stated that "because the material is defensively excluded from awareness, it cannot be restructured or updated as a serviceable model should be" (p. 13). A "working model", then, can become increasingly restricted in its workings, when information is repeatedly excluded for the purpose of self-protection from unbearable pain, ensuing from repeated experiences of un-protection. The more information is excluded from attention and processing, the less adaptive the model becomes, the less open to change throughout the lifespan, making it vulnerable to being

repeated, without being "restructured or updated" (Bretherton, 1985, p. 13) across generations.

While Bowlby emphasized the construct of the attachment behavioural system in relation to the other systems mentioned above, the research of Mary Ainsworth emphasised the impact of the caregiving system on the attachment and exploratory systems. Ainsworth et al. (1978) identified patterns of care giving that were directly correlated to the style of attachment seeking behaviour. Central to this work was the methodological development and implementation of the "Strange Situation". The "Strange Situation" was developed as an observation based method, designed to focus on young children's (valid for children aged 12 – 21 months) attachment behaviour.

This methodology was in stark contrast to the methods of the time that focused on counting the frequency of behaviours, often without reference to context. The context of the child's behaviour for Ainsworth et al. (1978) was behaviour representative of the child's attachment behavioural system in relationship to their mother. Tested was Bowlby's proposition that all infants seek proximity to their attachment figures when stressed. In the "Strange Situation", two stressors were introduced to trigger the attachment behavioural system in the child: separation (maximum 3 minutes), and the introduction of a stranger. Ainsworth and her team, referred to as "the Baltimore Project Team", sought to understand whether there were individual differences among children in the ways that they showed their attachment behaviour, and therefore their need for safety and protection, to the parent (Ainsworth et al., 1969b).

Findings from the "Strange Situation" studies led the Baltimore Project Team toward seminal contributions. The methodological development of the "Strange Situation" enabled Ainsworth et al. (1978) to make further theoretical and conceptual developments within attachment theory. Key was the "ABC classification system" (also including a fourth category where patterns were not identifiable), which extended Bowlby's theory from a general theory of human behaviour to one where individual differences within the behavioural system were both characterised and classified (Ainsworth et al., 1978).

Within the ABC system, concepts of "secure" and "insecure" attachment patterns were introduced and linked to parenting patterns of secure-base provision.

For example, some children during the "Strange Situation" responded to their felt stress by inhibiting their attachment system and by not actively seeking the support of their primary attachment figure at this time. Ainsworth et al. (1978) classified these behaviours as "Type A- anxious avoidant". This attachment behavioural system – that is, the part that we can observe – represented the part that we cannot directly observe, "the internal working model". Children assessed as demonstrating "type A" attachment behaviours in relationship with their mothers were likely to show physical distancing from the caregiver at the time when "proximity seeking" was expected. They showed that while with their primary attachment figure, at times of felt stress their patterned response was likely to move from felt stress, through to self management, through to exploration of the environment.

The "Type B- secure" classification corresponded to behaviours where the child directly brought their distress to the mother, and the mother directly addressed the child in distress and sought to comfort them, following which the child then returned to exploratory play. This sequence of behaviour was inferred to represent a developing internal working model of security. The experience of security came from self expectation of being able to communicate the distress being experienced, with thoughts, feelings and contingent behaviours, based on the expectation that the attachment figure(s) would make themselves available, offering help and comfort to the child (Ainsworth et al., 1978).

For the "Type C- anxious ambivalent" child, their behaviour was characterised by a hyper-activation of their attachment needs, with limited capacity to be settled by the caregiver upon their return. This behaviour represented an internal working model based on an uncertainty of others to be reliably available at times of "felt security" need, with a view that the self is responsible for keeping the caregiver close at all times, to increase predictability that they will be close-by when genuinely needed.

Central to this work was the construct of "maternal sensitivity". The construct of sensitivity was used in a theory-specific manner, in contrast to common language, with sensitivity being the culmination of a number of related caregiving system behaviours: to attune, to interpret, and to respond within the child's time frame.

> The optimally sensitive mother is able to see things from her baby's point of view. She is alert to receive her baby's signals, interprets them accurately, responds appropriately, promptly, unless no response is the most appropriate under the circumstances....responses are temporally contingent upon the baby's signals. (Ainsworth et al., 1978, p. 142)

The child's experience of being tuned into, interpreted accurately, and responded to promptly functioned to enhance security at times of threat, which over time brought balance to attachment and exploratory behaviour (Ainsworth et al., 1978, p. 241).

Amidst much criticism and debate (Grosskurth, 1987; Kozlowska & Hanney, 2002; Thompson & Raikes, 2003), the formative years of research and development in attachment theory, spanning three decades, were followed by three further decades of attachment theory related empirical research, establishing attachment theory as an "empirically and theoretically sound domain of study" (Crittenden, 2000, p. 1). It is to this rich, complex and ever-evolving body of research that we now turn.

## *Attachment Theory from the 1970s through to the present day: Longitudinal Studies*

The initial empirical research emerged in the 1970s, conducted predominantly by Ainsworth's graduate students (Bretherton, 1991; Bretherton & Ainsworth, 1974; Lieberman, 1977; Main, 1973; Marvin 1977). In conjunction with this rich body of research was the publication of the eminent work that had begun through the collaborative work of Sroufe and Waters (1977). This work is important for a number of reasons. First, it was the beginning of a major longitudinal research project conducted at

the University of Minnesota. Second, the publication site of this original work, the *Child Development* journal, enabled landmark accessibility to professionals, including social workers. Third, this longitudinal study has repeatedly given support to a positive correlation between patterns of caregiving received and patterns of attachment (Sroufe, 1983), as first described by Ainsworth et al. (1978). Finally, Sroufe et al. (1977) advanced the concept of physical proximity seeking by broadening the understanding of the set goal of proximity seeking. Bowlby originally proposed the set goal as 'mother' and Sroufe et al. (1977) extended this to physical proximity to mother with an experience of "felt security" (p. 1186).

Since that time, other longitudinal studies have been implemented: the Bielefeld and Regensburg Longitudinal Studies, studying the differences in attachment between fathers and mothers (Grossman, Grossman & Kindler, 2005); the Hafia Longitudinal Study, looking at the impact of non-parental care in the formation of attachment and multiple attachments (Sagi-Schwartz & Aviezer, 2005); and the Berkeley Longitudinal Study, which assessed attachment in adults, developed the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI), and identified a new classification, "Type D" – "disorganized" – to add to Ainsworth's ABC system (Main, Hesse & Kaplan, 2005).

Additionally, the London Parent Child Project also looked at the differences between fathers and mothers and the attachments of their children (Steele & Steele, 2005); the Pennsylvania Infant and Family Development Project, and the NICHD Study of Early Child Care, focused on the development of attachment in the context of the family (Belsky, 2005); the Stony Brook Adult Attachment project studied secure-base behaviour and attachment representations in adult close relationships (Crowell & Waters, 2005); and the work of Stevenson-Hinde (2005) focused on the interplay between attachment and temperament.

These longitudinal studies have confirmed what Bowlby and Ainsworth hypothesized: attachment theory is a life span theory. Belsky (2005), in citing the long time assertions of the Minnesota longitudinal team (Erickson, Sroufe & Egeland, 1985; Sroufe, 1983,

1988), stated that "development is a function of early and continuing experiences, such that what happens after infancy (or any other developmental period) can mitigate the otherwise anticipated consequences of experiences of earlier life" (p. 85).

In addition, these findings have been confirmed through extensive cross-cultural research that have emerged to test/establish the universality of Ainsworth's attachment patterns, evidenced by the development of two seminal, large-scale longitudinal studies, first by Grossmann, Grossmann, Spangler, Suess, and Unzner (1985) in Northern Germany, and second by van Ijzendoorn and Kroonenberg (1988) in Western Europe. Both studies highlighted the universality of attachment across cultures, with diversity across cultures representing contextual adaptations (van Ijzendoorn & Sagi, 1999, p. 729). For example Grossman and Grossman (2000) stated that:

"The task of parents in all cultures is to care for and enculturate their children .... Enculturation means to prepare the child for socially accepted physical, economic, and psychological situations that are characteristic of the culture in which they are to survive and thrive". (p. 14)

Crittenden and Clausssen (2000) have also made significant contributions to cross-cultural studies, further developing the work and ideas of Ainsworth et al. (1978), Bronfenbrenner (1979), Belsky (1995) and Hinde (1991), inviting researchers to understand that each culture has specific sources of danger (historic and current) and specific strategies for managing this danger. For example dangers could constitute the impact of socio-political climates, living daily with war, famine, violence, or more subtle cultural dangers such as shame and alienation.

In culturally contextualising unique dangers and response strategies with attachment theory, Crittenden (2000) stated that "a strategy is only as adaptive as it is appropriate for the context in which it is applied" (p. 379). Crittenden (2000) asserted that by appreciating culture and context, it becomes less possible to uphold the Type B strategy as best suited to all contexts as Type B is a strategy designed for use in safe contexts. As such, the cross cultural research of Crittenden (2000) has led her to promote the goal of

culturally specific safety for parents, children and families over the fostering of secure attachment (p. 379).

## *Attachment Theory from the 1970s through to the present day: Methodological Advances*

The development of methodology has not been developmentally linear. Following validation of the "Strange Situation" (Solomon and George, 1999), the next major methodological breakthrough was the development of the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI) (George, Kaplan & Main, 1996; Main & Hesse, 1998, cited in Hesse, 1999). The semi-structured narrative-based interview method of the AAI provided a way to assess attachment patterns in later childhood and adulthood through narrative means, for example with the pictorial separation anxiety test (Hansburg, 1972; Klagsbrun & Bowlby, 1976; Slough & Greenberg, 1991), and with attachment-based doll story completion tasks for preschoolers (Cassidy, 1988). Other adaptations of the narrative interview have been to interview adults about their perceived relationships with their child, such as the Working Model of the Child Interview (Zeanah & Barton 1989; Zeanah & Benoit, 1995) and the "Q-sort", which assesses a parent's internal working model of their child's attachment to them (Waters and Deane, 1985).

Cassidy and Marvin (1987) have developed attachment assessments for pre-schoolers and school aged children. School aged attachment assessment measures are in the process of being developed (Solomon and George, 1999). Crittenden (1992; 2001) has also developed three attachment assessments, the CARE Index, Preschool and The School Aged Assessment of Attachment. What is interesting about Crittenden's methods is that while the CARE Index and the Preschool Assessment of Attachment use a parent-child observation method, much like the "Strange Situation", the stimulation for the attachment system is not attachment seeking behaviours, but rather the other side of the secure-base coin: exploration behaviours of the child, through play, in the parent's presence (Crittenden, 1992, 2000, 2001). Crowell, Feldman and Ginsberg (1988) combine both attachment seeking and exploration behaviours in an assessment tool that assesses attachment, inclusive of other parenting domains: parenting, playing, interaction and

teaching (Croft, O'Connor, Keaveney, Groothues, Rutter, & the English and Romanian Adoptee Study Team, 2001; Zeanah & Benoit, 1995).

## *Attachment Theory from the 1970s through to the present day: Extensions within Attachment Theory*

As a result of the longitudinal research studies, in conjunction with methodological advances, new extensions of the originally hypothesised attachment theory have been developed. Four of these developments on the original theory are presented: a fourth classification pattern, disorganised attachment; the methodological development of the Adult Attachment Interview; the study of the intergenerational transmission of attachment patterned relationships; and a life span view of attachment theory, with current research interests traversing infants in their key relationships through to the elderly and their key relationships.

The Ainsworth et al. (1978) "ABC" attachment classification system was first extended by Main and Solomon (1986), who, after close review of the Baltimore teams' "not yet classifiable" data found a fourth pattern, type D, "disorganized". Type D, disorganized attachment behaviour, was observed when the caregiver system responded with either fear and/or frightening behaviour to the proximity seeking behaviour of the child. Stress/danger for these children was triggered from both outside the attachment-caregiver systems and within the attachment-caregiver systems. These children were in an irresolvable position. That is, to proximity seek, and seek help from their caregiver who was also the source of danger, be it perceived or actual. Crittenden (1997, 2000) observed similar behaviours; however, she classified these patterns as being organised adaptations to fear as described in her Dynamic Maturational Model. It is not yet clear which model will be shown to be valid and reliable, and exploring these models is a task for researchers over the coming years.

Children who were classified as having a disorganized pattern of attachment were over-represented in the groups of children who had suffered abuse and neglect, and these same children were over-represented in the groups of children presenting with an array of

personal, interpersonal and social difficulties, often diagnosed as "attachment disorders". Reviews of attachment disorders are available (O'Connor, 2002; Smyke, Dumitrescu & Zeanah, 2002; Zeanah, 1996; Zeanah, Boris & Lieberman, 2000; Zeanah, Smyke & Dumitrescu, 2002). The research by van Ijzendoorn et al. (1999) confirmed that infant disorganisation could develop in the absence of maltreatment, in circumstances where the parent repeatedly showed "frightening behaviour" to the child. "Frightening behaviour" in parents was further examined by Lyons-Ruth and Spielman (2004), who identified that children of parents who were either hostile and or helpless in response to secure-base seeking also showed patterns of "disorganised" secure-base seeking.

The second key area of theoretical development emerged as a direct consequence of the methodological development of the AAI described above. Mary Main and her team identified a high correlation between a parent's representation (that is how they thought about and remembered their early attachment experiences) and the classification of their children as assessed by the "Strange Situation" (Hesse, 1996). An important finding of this body of work was that past events were less of an indicator of adult attachment status than how these events were represented in memory. van Ijzendoorn (1995) conducted a meta-analysis of 14 replicating studies, confirming the strong correlation between infant and adult and parent attachment classifications.

This work prompted further explorations of how patterns of attachment are "transmitted" from parent to child, based on mental representations about the parent's "internal working model". Three new constructs emerged over this time: "coherence" (Main, 1991), "reflective functioning" (Fonagy, Steele, & Steele, 1991), and "mind-mindedness" (Meins, Fernyhough, Fradley & Turkey, 2001).[7] Coherence was a construct that described a way of remembering one's early experiences of being parented, characterised by being able to simultaneously reflect on positive and negative aspects of memory with examples and be able to communicate this in a way a listener could make

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[7] Note to reader. Mary Main and Elizabeth Meins both made seminal contributions, each distinct in their contributions however given many similarities their work is sometimes commonly identified as belonging to the other.

sense of . Main (1991) identified this process as "metacognitive monitoring" (p. 135), to describe the capacity to think and to reflect on one's thinking.

An extension of the construct of "coherence" was further developed by Fonagy et al. (1991) through a new construct, "reflective functioning", which emphasised relational reflection. While Main's AAI had focused on inviting the participant to revisit their attachment experiences from the vantage point of the adult child reflecting on their childhood experiences of being parented, the work of Fonagy et al. (1991) invited participants to reflect on their child's attachment behaviour. A high capacity for reflective functioning was seen in caregivers who amidst their reflections conveyed that they could reflect on their child's behaviour in relationship to themselves and then respond to the child based on these reflections. Low reflective functioning capacity was observed where the reflections were minimal and where the caregiver was not able to bear considering their child's attachment needs.

Meins et al. (2001) developed the construct of "mind-mindedness" as a way to further develop new ways to work with the original ideas around "sensitivity". "Mind-mindedness" (Meins et al., 2001), related specifically to the capacity of the caregiver to: be able to think about and wonder about the child's mind; what their behaviour might be communicating about their current mind state; while also retaining an awareness of their own mind. This work is connected to the original theory, especially Bowlby's original construct of selective and defensive exclusion, which initially functioned as a self protective screen to process in or out, what of an experience would be available to be thought about. Selective and defensive exclusion functions to self protect from experiencing emotions and thoughts that are perceived as overwhelming and unbearable. What is available in-mind, (Meins et al., 2001), influences what is available for reflection, and the degree of relational capacity that can be sustained while reflecting. This in turn impacts on the caregiver's capacity to provide sensitive responding: to attune, to interpret, and to respond within the child's time frame (Ainsworth et al., 1978).

Based on an understanding of this theory, it is not possible to assume that what the child shows, what the child brings to the caregiver at times of stress, is what the parent can attune to. It is also not possible to assume, given the child's developing working model that what they bring to the caregiver at times of felt stress is representative of the child's felt stress. For example, the work on disorganized relationships has increased understanding that at the attunement step some caregivers are triggered into their own attachment behavioural system and, therefore, at the time their child needs them, they too need someone. That is, the child's need of them triggers their need of someone. To respond sensitively, from this position, takes a high degree of capacity for reflective functioning, to be able to differentiate the adult's need from the child's need and in this moment to give priority to the child's attachment system needs.

These new constructs, connected with the original theory, have created a path for research to explore further issues concerning the intergenerational transmission of attachment patterns, the third key area of theoretical development to be discussed. Of central interest has become the issue of "continuity and change" in attachment classification over the life span (Slade, Grienberger, Bernach, Levy & Locker, 2001). Sroufe, Egeland, Carlson, and Collins (2005) stated that "increasingly our interest is not simply in the question of whether early attachment predicts some outcome, or even how strongly it predicts it, but in the complex developmental processes in which attachment experiences work with and through other experiences in the course of development" (p. 59). While there is currently general agreement about a bias towards continuity of strategy over time, there has been a shift in emphasis from determinism to probabilities (Crittenden, 1997).

While much research has emphasised the seeking of correlations, of patterns of continuity across generations, focus has begun to turn to issues of change. For example, what does the attachment theory literature tell us about parents who were abused themselves as children, some of whom go on to abuse their own children, and some of whom do not? How does the theory address this? Within the AAI, adults who had been abused, and who were rated as "unresolved" in regard to their historical attachment figures, were much

more likely to abuse their own children than those who had been abused as children and who had narratives that were rated as "earned secure". "Earned security", one of the characteristic state of mind sets formulated by Main and Goldwyn (1998), refers to adults who suffered maltreatment as children, and as adults were classified as "autonomous" on the AAI. Van Ijzendoorn (1992) stated that "a coherent perspective on a harsh upbringing (i.e. earned security) protects adults from replaying the parenting mistakes of the past, whereas an incoherent mental framework (i.e. insecurity) puts one at risk" (p. 23).

The team at Stony Brook, throughout their twenty-year longitudinal study, focused on issues of stability of classification from infancy to adulthood through researching two adult transitions: marriage and becoming parents. They were curious to understand the factors that help adults recover from difficult childhoods and the negative effects of such childhoods on adult functioning (Crowell & Waters, 2005). Of this work, Sroufe, Carlson, Levy, and Egeland (1999) stated that:

> Early experience does not cause later pathology in a linear way; yet, it has special significance due to the complex, systematic, transactional nature of development. Prior history is part of current context, playing a role in selection, engagement, and interpretation of subsequent experience and in the use of available environmental supports. Finally, except in very extreme cases, early anxious attachment is not a direct cause of psychopathology but is an initiator of pathways probabilistically associated with later pathology. (p. 1)

This brings us to the fourth key area of new development: Bowlby (1969) hypothesised that the attachment system was integral and at times active across the life cycle. He hypothesised that the first parent-infant attachment relationship in conjunction with the working model formed based on this relationship, collectively guides attachment related behaviour, thoughts and emotions in relationships outside of the primary attachment relationship. What was originally a specific working model, relevant to a specific relationship, over time seems to become generalised to other relationships.

This begs the question: what might happen to the working model when two adults, each with their own, now generalised, working models, become partners? The findings of van Ijzendoorn and Bakermans-Kranenburg (1996) were supported by Crowell, Treboux and Waters (2002), who found that "55% of couples were matched on representational security status of their partner – that is, both are secure or insecure" (p. 236). Research is ongoing concerning the influence of the "new attachment" on the generalised model based on first attachment relationships. For example, Rotter (1982) hypothesised that over time the two generalised representations are replaced and updated with a new specific representation. In contrast, Crowell et al. (2005) hypothesised that "over time the specific representation would be integrated into, or become more similar to, the generalised representation" (p. 236).

The Stony Brook study findings give support that generalised representations of attachment are stable across time and, if they do change, this is often due to new observable key relationships and/or challenging life events. Furthermore, given the social work practice focus of this research study, Crowell et al. (2005) found that "movement toward security is associated with positive feelings and coherent cognitions about the attachment elements of the current relationship, as well as exposure to alternatives and opportunities represented by education and living away from the family of origin" (p. 240).

This very important finding has been extended by the work of Mikulincer and Shaver (2003), who asserted that attachment relationships in adulthood need to be longstanding where:

> groups, institutions and abstract or symbolic figures (e.g. God) can become targets of proximity seeking in times of need. There are also context-tailored attachment figures, who are sources of support only in specific milieus: teachers and supervisors in academic settings; therapists in therapeutic settings. (Mikulincer et al., 2003, p. 58)

To this list could be added social workers in social work settings.

Akin to the work of Mikulincer et al. (2003), "The Convoy Model" of social relations (Antonucci, Akiyama & Takahashi, 2004) has arisen from ecologically focused research across two countries, Japan and the United States, where they found striking similarities in the nature and number of attachment relationships and close relationships across the life span. This work is timely and in step with one of the recent seminal attachment theory researchers, van Ijzendoorn, who asserts that "cross-cultural studies on attachment have made us sensitive to the importance of wider social networks in which children grow and develop. We need a radical change from a dyadic perspective to an attachment network approach" (van Ijzendoorn et al., 1999, p. 730).

"The Convoy Model" conceptualises the secure-base as three interrelated circles of relationships: the inner circle of attachment relationships, and the middle and outer circles of close social supports that are not classified as attachment relationships. The Convoy Model bridges attachment relationships with close social relationships through retaining a focus on the significance of secure-base provision across the lifespan. This model contributes much, as it is in-keeping with the empirical research of the past 30 years and has maintained a key theoretical component of the Bowlby-Ainsworth theory, that of the secure-base.

It is this widening of the brief of relevance that has seen key contributions from Bronfenbrenner (1979) and Belsky (1981), through the construction of an ecological perspective on attachment theory research and the field of human development generally, where they viewed the infant-mother dyad as being part of a set of ever-increasing wider relational and socio-contextual systems. Belsky (1981) and the Pennsylvania team have researched their way out from the infant-mother dyad and temperament debates to the microsphere of relationships within the family, such as infant–father attachment (Belsky, Gilstrap & Rovine, 1984; Lamb, 1978; Parke & Tinsley, 1987), siblings (Stewart & Marvin, 1984; Teti & Ablard, 1989), including the impact of other contextual factors, such as stress, interpersonal, and socio-economic issues (Donley, 1993).

These advancing ecological understandings have assisted to further contextualise the construct of sensitivity as the predictor of security, or as a contributor to security. In

subsequent research, the relationship between patterns of attachment behaviour in 12-21 month olds, and maternal sensitivity, has been confirmed by a number of studies (Bates et al., 1985; Isabella, 1993; National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) Early Child Care Research Network, 1997). Equally, the predictive link between maternal sensitivity and attachment classification has also been contested (de Wolff & van Ijzendoorn, 1997; Goldsmith & Alansky, 1987). Problematic for these studies is that "maternal sensitivity" is infrequently defined, making meaningful comparisons difficult. However, even if debate continues, the ecological view protects a single construct such as maternal sensitivity from becoming a single issue disconnected from the contexts in which it has been constructed.

Another important contribution of the Pennsylvania Team (Belsky, 2005) has been an emphasis on the adaptive qualities of attachment patterns related to context, supporting the work of Hinde (1982), who stated that there is no best mothering (or attachment) style, for different styles are better in different circumstances" (p. 71). This emphasis has been shared by Crittenden (1997) as her cross-cultural and the life span research has advocated for a view of attachment patterns as representative of adaptations to context: interactional, familial, cultural and social.

Crittenden (2000) has challenged the "normative/optimal" view that secure attachment is best for all people in all situations. That is, across cultures Type A (for example in the East Germany) may be the normative/typical, or it may be Type C (for example in Italy).[8] Type B is but one normative/optimal pattern. However, what of the Type D, disorganized pattern? While across cultures this can manifest in culturally specific ways, children and caregivers functioning amidst disorganized attachment-caregiving relationships have repeatedly been shown to present with high mental health needs and have frequently been shown to be caught in cycles of violence, abuse and/or neglect (Clausssen & Crittenden, 2000).

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[8] For fascinating reading of cross cultural studies and normative patterns within countries such as East Germany, Sweden, Finland, Egypt, Italy and Russia, see Crittenden and Claussen (2000).

Inclusive in the above research has been debate about the transportability to larger systems of what began as a dyadic theory. For example, within the family systems literature there has been much debate as to whether or not a theory based on family dyadic relationships could be integrated into a family systems framework. Within these debates three identifiable positions have been explored: first that integration possibilities are theoretically limited (Cowan, 1997; Hart, 1985; Minuchin, 1985), second that the triangle rather than the dyad is the primary emotional building block (Bowen, 1978; Donley, 1993), and third that attachments within the family system represent a further area of interest for research (Byng-Hall, 1995 and 1997; Crittenden, 1999; Main, 1996; Marvin & Stewart, 1990; Sameroff & Emde, 1989).

An alternative model, the "network model" of living systems, which reflects a postmodernist position, has been proposed as a way to resolve the debates between attachment and family systems theories (Capra, 1997). Within this model, dyadic, triadic and family relationships are each recognised as distinct structures with their own level of complexity, which are interconnected via multiple contexts. Each structure is both whole in itself and part of a larger system of increasing complexity. Due to the multiple ways that each structure is connected with the other, it is possible to aim for an approximate representation of the whole rather than one that is absolute (Capra, 1997). Working from within this model, focusing on the complex structure of a dyadic relationship is neither privileged nor neglected.

As the research into attachment theory has become more ecologically focused, with more questioning of relevance across systems, there remains much from a social work perspective to consider. Before turning to the social work literature, a brief summary is provided to contain this overview and highlight key aspects specific to the exploration of the research questions of this project. Bearing in mind Bowlby's claim that "the true test of a theory is its applicability to alleviating the distress of our clients" (Sable, 1992, p. 281), it is necessary to ask whether the theory of the attachment behavioural system in conjunction with the caregiver system can be applied to social work relationships. Can social work client relationships, often formed amidst stress and distress, activate the attachment-caregiver systems in the client and the social worker? Recent studies have

sought to examine the activation of the attachment system in adulthood (Mikulincer et al., 2000; Mikulincer, Gillath & Shaver, 2002). What was found was that under stress all participants "underwent preconscious activation of the attachment system…. that threat contexts activated mental representations of attachment figures but no one else" (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003, p. 89).

Is it possible to infer, then, that at times a social worker and a client may both be in activated attachment behavioural states? If this is possible, the client and the social worker will each bring their "preconscious representations" to the social worker-client relationship. However, within the social worker-client relationship, each has a different role. The client is in their attachment seeking role; seeking care, protection, "felt security" as a precursor to engaging in exploration-problem solving. There is no assumption that the attachment seeking is directed toward the social worker, however the social worker, while in their activated attachment system, is in a service provision, caregiver role. The work of Ainsworth et al. (1978), and more lately Schofield and Beek (2006), highlights that to provide the conditions for "felt security", at best we need first to be able to tune in to the other, to have good enough capacity for reflective functioning and mind-mindedness, so as to attend mentally to our own attachment needs while responding to those of another.

To engage the exploratory system, the external goals of social work interventions require that the attachment behavioural system has been met with an experience of "felt security", which in turn implies that the caregiver system is resourced enough to provide the conditions for an experience of "felt security". Integral to exploration, resulting from "felt security", is the containment of affect, of strong emotion. The caregiver system at best provides acknowledgement and containment to the other who is proximity seeking. This containment enables the proximity seeker an experience of affect regulation. Linking proximity seeking with felt emotion enabled attachment theory to become conceptualised as a theory of "affect regulation" (Fonagy, 2001, p. 14).

Attachment theory infers that the capacity to experience and to be able to reflect on this experience requires that affects are not overwhelming. Therefore, it would seem that this

could be the first goal of any attachment theory informed social work intervention: To provide the conditions for the containment of affect, safety and "felt security" as a precursor to inviting the client to become exploratory, concerning their circumstances. While a seemingly straight forward proposed goal, the unique internal contexts, in relationship with external needs and concerns, active in social work with children and families provides a challenge. Bowlby (1979) stated that "many of the most intense emotions arise during the formation, the maintenance, the disruption, and the renewal of attachment relationships" (p. 130). Trowell and Rustin (1991) extend this brief, proposing anxiety is often "phenomenologically high" (p. 236) in workers who are in close contact with children and their families. They describe the powerful effect that these emotions can have on the worker, stating that the "capacity to think, reflect, or make links is lost" (p. 236). The social worker then is in a position of offering containment, "felt security" and safety, while they too at best would be experiencing containment, "felt security" and safety.

These phenomenological expressions sit juxtaposed to a contextual shift across social work settings, from case work to case management. Nash and Munford (2001) assert that "risk assessment and case management are part of the new vocabulary of social work" (p. 28). This risk management, task oriented practice places emphasis on presenting issues and on technical-rational approaches, which are based on an assumption that complex problems can be simplified through a problem solving process. There is also an assumption that by managing high levels of anxiety through the assessment and management of risk, anxiety is also, by implication, made manageable. Drawing on the findings above, it could be stated that this shift in social work practice is consistent with a helping process advocating exploration before the provision of safety, containment of affect and "felt security".

Given this general shift in focus, it is necessary to ask whether the proposed endeavour of 'exploration before the provision of safety, containment of affect and "felt security"' has become evident in the social work theory literature specific to children and families. What place does attachment theory have within social work practice theoretical

literature? What aspects of attachment theory are emphasised? Where attachment theory is identified as a key informing theory, what practice guidance is made available for practitioners regarding the use of attachment theory for specific use in social work with children and their families? What specific attention is given regarding the use of attachment theory to understand more the complex dynamics of clients, social workers and the social worker-client relationship? It is to these questions that we now turn.

## Section Two: Attachment theory within Social Work Practice Theoretical Literature

In addressing the questions posed above, the overarching purpose remains focused on the task of preparation for "turning to the nature of the lived experience" (van Manen, 1990) of social workers, who have the task of enlivening the theory in their practice. Schofield (1998), in highlighting the complex process of theory use within practice settings, proposed that "it is necessary to use theoretical frameworks that make sense of the distinctive social work processes involved when social workers attempt to understand need and offer help to families" (p. 67).

How, then, is attachment theory used to inform child and family social work practice? The emergent questions regarding this body of literature will be addressed through an examination of four key areas:

1. Attachment theory in relationship with other social work practice theories;
2. Attachment theory to inform specific practice settings;
3. Attachment theory as an identified theoretical framework to inform social work practice with children and their families; and
4. Attachment theory as a guide to social work practice.

### *Attachment Theory in Relationship with Other Social Work Practice Theories*

Within the literature surveyed it was not common to find attachment theory described in relationship to other theories. However, McMillen (1992) identified attachment theory as

being compatible with psychosocial theories, self psychology, cognitive approaches and family therapy, but did not differentiate the use of these theories within different social work practice settings. Schofield (1998) integrated attachment theory within a psychosocial framework specifically for child and family social work. Sable (1995) identified the compatibility of attachment theory with a bio-psychosocial perspective of systems thinking for clinical social work practice.

More commonly, attachment theory was presented not as a whole theory for use but through application of aspects of the theory. For example, the work of Bowlby and Parkes (1970) on the four normative stages of grieving have been used specifically in social work practice with adults (Conway, 1988; Sable, 1989; Wolinsky, 1986), with children (Haran, 1988; Warmbrod, 1986), and to understand differing responses to marital separation (Counts and Sacks, 1985). Schofield and Brown (1999) show theoretical and practice links on the use of the secure-base phenomenon in social work with adolescents in foster care (Schofield, 2002; Schofield & Beek, 2005). In addition, Shemmings (2004) presents a number of informative attachment assessment measurement constructs to provide social workers with a view to the research methods used. The research tools are clearly presented, advocating for "maintaining a strong relationship" (p. 312) between social work and attachment theory; however, the measures are not presented for specific use within a social work setting.

## *Attachment Theory to Inform Specific Practice Settings*

More common again than the application of aspects of attachment theory to social work practice was the identification of attachment theory to fields of social work practice. For example, historically attachment theory has been linked with psychoanalytic casework and psychiatric social work (Lehmann & Coady, 2001). As social work fields of practice have grown, attachment theory is now most often listed as being specifically relevant for the social work practice fields of child welfare, child protection, foster care and adoption services (Crittenden, 1988; Hodges & Steele, 2000; Howe et al., 1999; Hughes, 1997; Schofield, 2002; Schofield, 2003; Schofield 2005).

*Attachment Theory as an Identified Theory to Inform Social Work Practice with Children and their Families*

These practice fields above are all oriented towards social work with children and their families. This direction within the literature provides a focus for a closer view of the social work theory for practice literature specific to work with children and their families. Amidst the plethora of available work to review, during this review process the high variability of the use of attachment theory became evident. With the focus of this research being on current experience, recent publications (1999 to 2006) were viewed to reflect the literature that the research participants were more likely to have read.

Of this literature, the high variability of use remained prominent, with four distinct characteristic positions being inferred:

1.  the exclusion of any specific reference to attachment theory;
2.  uncertain inclusion of attachment theory in practice;
3.  attachment theory listed as relevant among other theories and integrated into practice theory; and
4.  attachment theory identified as the primary practice framework for social work with children and their families.

The first position, the *exclusion of any specific reference to attachment theory* was noted in the following child and family social work texts: Maguire, 2002; Mattaini, Lowery & Meyer, 2002 and Pardeck, 2002. Second, a position of *uncertain inclusion in practice* was exemplified by Payne (2005), who stated that:

> attachment theory may be important for work with children, where it is well supported by research in child development but its applications to adults, is less well evidenced. Moreover, its social work application produces only a sketchy set of ideas, although it gives a good basis for confident explanation of childhood problems. (p. 85)

The third position saw attachment theory *listed as relevant and integrated into practice theory*. For example, Lehmann et al. (2001) presented social work theory as comprising two main meta-theories for practice: ecological systems theory and individual/family development theory. They then identified a number of "mid-level" theories, of which attachment theory was positioned under the umbrella of psychodynamic theories. Within this edited text Stalker (2001) contributed a chapter specific to attachment theory, applying attachment theory to the social work phases of helping: engagement, data collection/assessment, intervention, and termination.

Inclusive in the brief discussion on engagement, the secure-base is referred to. Stalker (2001) then provides a view of the social worker-client relationship as an attachment relationship from the client's perspective (see also Farber, Lippert and Nevas, 1995). Theoretically, to hold this view implies much about the social worker-client relationship and the role and function of the social worker. Although Stalker (2001) did not follow this through to the level of practice, it stands out as an important emergent contribution.

In a New Zealand based text, Nash et al. (2005) provide a "strengths based", ecologically informed "integrated framework for practice situating the practitioner and client in a working relationship at a central point where theory and action meet" (p. 15). Integral to this framework, Nash et al. (2005) stated that "we have included a part on attachment based current practice research, because we believe that working through issues of grief, abandonment and lack of attachment remains central to the social work task" (p. 26).

As a consequence, within this text we see not a chapter, but rather a whole section comprising three chapters (Atwool, 2005; Evans & Connolly, 2005; Watson 2005) focused on addressing "Attachment: Reworking Relationships" (Nash et al., 2005). Within this text, each chapter concludes with reflective questions as an invitation to the reader to further assist in the theory-to-practice integration.

This work functions as a bridge between the third and the fourth inferred positions, where attachment theory was identified as the primary practice framework for social work

(Howe et al., 1999; Howe, 2005; Schofield & Beek, 2006). Exemplifying the goals of these texts, Howe et al. (1999) stated the aim of their work was "to see whether we could translate and adapt the exciting ideas that were being generated in developmental attachment theory to the world of child and family social work" (p. vii).

This brief review highlights the degree of variability of use of attachment theory, from exclusion to primary theoretical orientation. From the perspective of the social worker, it is possible to infer, then, that much of the literature takes a position of theoretical uncertainty about the use of attachment theory. It is interesting to wonder how this might have occurred. How has attachment theory become so polarised in terms of its use? What is it about attachment theory that means some theorists see irrelevance where others see core relevance? Is the same theory being seen? How is it being understood? These questions will not be addressed here, but will be returned to in the fourth and fifth chapters, where the issue of the use of the "understood theory" in contrast to "the theory" is viewed through the contributions of the social worker as a key focus of this research.

What is proffered here is a review of attachment theory informed practice oriented guidance provided for social workers. If we take for granted that where attachment theory is excluded from direct identified use, those sources will not provide the social worker with any direct guidance on the use of attachment theory in practice, we need to consider what can be found in the sources considered here that do include attachment theory? (Atwool, 2005; Evans et al., 2005; Howe et al., 1999; Howe, 2005; Schofield et al., 2006; Watson, 2005). Included in exploring this specific question was another text, Fahlberg (1991). Although this work did not fall within the publishing time frame stipulated above, it is a text commonly used by New Zealand/Aotearoa social workers and is a social work text primarily informed by attachment theory.

## *Attachment Theory as a Guide to Social Work Practice*

The review criteria of "guidance" is being used here to refer specifically to the interplay between the attachment, caregiving and exploratory systems as they might become

manifest in social work oriented "helper-helpee" relationships at a time of assumed high stress, where the "vehicle of social work practice is the professional helping relationship" (Bisman & Hardcastle, 1999, p. 54). In addition, Howe (1995) asserted that:

> Once social workers have formed any kind of relationship with their clients, representational models, defenses and attachment experiences are bound to crop up. Feelings of anger, dependency, anxiety, avoidance and ambivalence will constantly colour the relationship. The nature and origins of these feelings, (both in the client and in the social worker) have to be understood, if the character of the relationship is to make sense. (p. 222)

Therefore, combining the attachment theory cornerstones and the social worker-client relationship as a cornerstone of social work practice, the sources above will be reviewed specifically in regard to what guidance they provide the social worker about:

1. The clients' key relationships;
2. The social workers' key relationships; and
3. The social worker-client relationship.

*The Clients' Key Relationships*

A primary strength of the sources reviewed was their focus on the use of attachment theory to understand about clients in their key relationships. The areas of the attachment behaviour and classification patterns, along with the construct of the "internal working model" were frequently presented (Atwool, 2005; Evans et al., 2005; Fahlberg, 1991; Howe, 2005; Howe et al., 1999; Schofield et al., 2006; Watson, 2005). For example, Howe et al. (1999) state:

> the concept of the internal working model is therefore of central importance in child and family work practices that use attachment and relationship based theories. It helps to understand how individuals characteristically behave when their feelings are running high, how they view and relate to others under stress. (p. 29-30)

Schofield et al. (2006), with their focus on the practice setting of foster care and adoption, also provide a rich account of the attachment classifications across the life span. Over five chapters, drawing on the work of Ainsworth et al. (1978), the "dimensions of care-giving" (p. 35) are extrapolated and linked to the caregiving environment being one that children can rely on as a secure-base to support their explorations.

The work of Fahlberg (1991) focuses also on social work with children in foster care, where social work practice is understood as "Direct Work", akin to case work. Interesting in this presentation of attachment theory is that Fahlberg (1991) makes central the interaction between the attachment behavioural system and the caregiving system, through her presentation of "the arousal-relaxation cycle" (p. 33). This work places emphasis on observation, on the provision of much case material from direct work, and on the provision of behaviour based lists of what to look out for when considering children's attachment behaviours.

Essentially, across the sources viewed, attachment theory was presented with a strong orientation towards supporting the social worker to consider more deeply the client's world of relationships. Evans et al. (2005) stated that "by definition, attachment theory is relational – it concerns the nature of relationships between people" (p. 239). Evans et al. (2005) then proceeded to state that "attachment focused practice requires that a worker pay attention to all attachment relationships and assess the nature of those relationships" (p. 244).

Furthermore, the construct of "relationship-focused practice" was actively valued. For example, in Nash et al. (2005), attachment theory and relationships were given centre place. Watson (2005) stated that "attachment theory is valuable for social workers because of the absolute importance of interpersonal relationships in human lives" (p. 219). Across the three chapters provided in Nash et al. (2005) the emphasis remained on understanding attachment theory to the ends of understanding others more fully and facilitating change (Atwool, 2005; Evans et al., 2005; Watson, 2005). In addition, the

very helpful reflection questions across these three chapters invite reflection on using attachment theory to consider the needs of others.

This emphasis on clients' relationships, however, was not balanced in considering the use of the theory to the social worker, nor to the social worker-client relationship. This pattern of using a relational theory about human relationships related primarily to understanding the clients' relationships, highlighted by the predominant current use of the term "relationship-focused practice" as descriptive of the clients' relationships rather than of the social worker-client relationship.

*The Social Workers' Key Relationships*

Within the sources viewed, the focus, both explicit and implicit, when turned to the social worker was centred predominantly on their task. For example, Howe et al. (1999) asserted that the key practice goal was to "introduce 'discontinuities' into these intergenerational transmissions of problem family relationships: to break the cycle" (p. 293). One way that social workers were informed to conduct this task was often through guidance about the qualitative nature of their responses to clients. For example, "clients say and do things. Therapists react contingently and with sensitivity" (Howe, 2005, p. 268). Schofield et al. (2006) stated that "practitioners will be guided by the same principle of providing a secure-base for children that underpins the attachment care-giving dimensions" (p. 317) relevant to foster parents.

Implied across these sources is that the social worker is not influenced by the client's attachment behavioural system as it connects with the caregiving, help offering social worker. It is an assumption that the social worker, in knowing what the optimal response might be, will in real time, in the presence of a real relationship, be able to "react contingently and with sensitivity". It seems there is a tendency within the reviewed attachment theory informed social work practice theory to under-acknowledge the impact of the social worker's inner context on their capacity to provide social work services. That is to background the potentially impacting dimensions of the social workers: own attachment story; their current response/s to stress, and their current capacity to be in a

caregiving role when stressed with the task of alleviating "distress". While Sroufe et al. (1999) stated: "prior history is part of current context" (p. 1), the social workers prior attachment-caregiving history remains under-acknowledged as a factor impacting on the capacity to practice social work.

Under-acknowledgement of the social worker's attachment- caregiving context, in conjunction with the assumption that known theory leads to practice application, seems to implicitly promote a practice premise of "exploration before the provision of "felt security". By focusing on the task of exploration amidst the application of a theory to others, the social worker is disconnected from the multiple contexts that are in interplay during a social worker-client interaction, including the inner context of themselves with the potential for this to become "part of current context" (Sroufe et al., 1999, p. 1). In addition, the social worker who meets a client who is threatening, and/or a social worker who experiences threat themselves, based on their own response to the work situation, can be expected to be actively functioning within their attachment behavioural system while in a caregiver role.

Throughout the sources, where the self of the social worker begins to feature more is in references encouraging social workers to make use of reflective practice. Reflective supervision is advocated as a way to "remain present and available to both children and their parents" (Howe et al., 1999, p. 4). Howe et al. (1999) advocate that in gathering information for assessment, social workers make use of reflective supervision to make sense of their feelings in relationship to the client, but this is not fore-grounded, nor is this process highlighted as useful data, and therefore it is not followed through in how this data might be used in the real time of the social worker-client relationship.

Fahlberg (1991) throughout her text provides snippets that bring the social worker into view: "Moving a child may tap into unresolved separations or losses in the worker's past. It is important that caseworkers be aware of how their own feelings may either make a move more difficult or easier" (p. 160). Fahlberg (1991) elaborates:

The pain a child or birth parent is experiencing may tap into unresolved separation or loss experiences of an adult working with the case. If the adult tries to avoid facing her own pain she may stop being effective to children and parents she is trying to help. (p. 169)

What is noted about both the contributions of Howe et al. (1999) and Fahlberg (1991), these contributions while not fore-grounded in their texts, remain significant in the context of this review and can become fore-grounded. However, to foreground these matters also requires another step, a step that guides the social worker to bring this self knowledge into the social work-client relationship in a way that increases their capacity for "sensitivity", for "mind- mindedness", and for "reflective functioning" as a way to contribute to the attachment needs of "felt security" as a precursor to exploration supported problem solving.

Schofield et al. (2006) do take the issue of reflective practice a step further, stating that "social workers need to be able to be reflective about their own thoughts and feelings" (p. 318). What is exciting about the Schofield et al. (2006) text is that there is a shift from a back-grounding of the social worker towards a foregrounding of this through two chapters, "Keeping attachment in mind – the role of the child's social worker" (pp. 317-368) and "Keeping attachment in mind – the role of the family placement worker" (pp. 369 – 393). In close examination of these chapters, attachment theory is used effectively and in usefully practical ways to understand more deeply the experiences of the child in care, along with very useful assessment guides for use in the selection of potential foster parents. This material is rich in detail and presents imperative information for practitioners to function as increasingly "sensitive social workers".

However, this thesis advocates that, in addition to a strong orientation towards understanding the client, this could be balanced with an equally strong orientation towards understanding the social worker. Pappel (1996), in advocating self knowledge as an integral aspect of best practice for the social worker, asserted that:

Social work learners...perceive the human situation....in their practice and recognise that their perceptions are filtered through their own thinking and knowing processes, through their emotions and feeling processes and through the way they themselves integrate and regulate their own doing and behaving. Knowing the self is more than knowing how one feels. It is knowing how one thinks and acts. (p. 19)

It is asserted that all social workers are "social work learners". Drawing on an attachment theory informed framework, self knowledge then becomes very specific: it becomes knowledge of the social worker's self in relationship to their significant family members. It becomes relational self knowledge about the social worker's internal working model, how the social worker functions in the presence of intense affect and stress, and how they relate to others when in a helper/caregiving role. It becomes self knowledge about defensive exclusion strategies, when they are used, and with whom. Knowledge of self becomes inclusive of knowing how one feels, thinks and acts when stressed and when needing to be in a help providing role at this time.

There may be some use also in coming to know oneself in this specific way as part of the journey of effecting change in others (Moon, 1999; Ruch, 2000; Ward & MacMahon, 1998). This would make explicit that what we seek to understand in clients and their relationships, as social workers we seek also to understand in ourselves within our own relationships. It is from this position of proposing that attachment theory can be utilised to balance the needs of the client alongside the needs of the social worker to be a help provider that we now turn our focus to the social worker-client relationship.

*The Social Worker-Client Relationship*

Much has been written about the social worker-client relationship being a means to acknowledge and contain anxiety – an expected response to distress and uncertainty (Howe 1998; Trowell & Bower, 1995; Salzberger-Wittenberger, 1976; Woodhouse & Pengelly, 1991). In conjunction with these acknowledgements, social workers have also been encouraged to "manage anxiety...by the acquisition of theory to enhance skill-based practice expertise" (Miehls & Moffat, 2000, p. 339). D'Cruz et al. (2007) elaborate on

this issue: "Practitioners were encouraged to develop objectivity in relation to their own values, needs biases and be able to distance themselves from the experience of dealing with clients" (p. 80). What happens, however, to the uncertainty, the anxiety, the distress? Does the act of non attention function to somehow erase the anxiety and uncertainty?

It is also not clear from the literature whether the social worker-client relationship is viewed as an "attachment relationship". While in the psychotherapy literature, the psychotherapy relationship has been viewed as being analogous to the parental caregiving system (Bowlby, 1980; George et al., 1999; Slade, 1999), the social work literature is less specific. Is it possible to adopt this view of the psychotherapy literature with respect to the social worker-client relationship?

Given the helper-helpee dynamic common in social work relationships at times when the helpee is suffering stress/distress, it is possible that the social worker-client relationship could be functionally perceived as synonymous with attachment relationships (Farber et al., 1995). Perceived in this way, more questions are raised. When would the social worker-client relationship be perceived as a reciprocal adult-adult attachment relationship and when would it be more suited to being analogous to the parent-child attachment relationship?

The sources above demonstrate how difficult it is to actually sustain a grasp on the construct of relationship. For example, this is illustrated by reviewing Fahlberg (1991). It is proposed here that Vera Fahlberg, who began her text with the presentation of the attachment behavioural system with the caregiver system in her endeavour to make the complex business (as described in the first section) of assessing attachments accessible to social work practitioners for the benefit of children and families, does not bring this essential understanding of the theory forward into her lists of "what to look for".

When viewed closely, Fahlberg (1991) presents the social worker with a confidence in what to look for in the child and in the parent. For example, lists are provided of what to look for: "Does the child....?" "Does the parent....?" (Fahlberg, 1991, p. 41). However,

these lists are not contextualised into her initial arousal-relaxation model and therefore are not presented relationally. What is of interest, on page 46 of this text, is that Fahlberg does present an understanding, through text, that observations of attachment need to be sequenced within the relationship that is being assessed; however, this chart is neither highlighted nor given emphasis throughout her work. Fahlberg's work highlights an epistemological challenge to sustain a relational view, even when privileging a systems theory based theory. This issue will be returned to in Chapter Five, when the social workers experiences will be added as key contributors to reflect further on this issue.

Moreover what was noticed within these texts was an implicit orientation of what was actually meant by the construct of "relationship-focused practice". Howe et al. (1999) at the outset of their work state:

> Social work has to be a relationship-based practice in the sense that the relationships are the most important influence on children's development and that the quality of relationships is heavily affected by how the main participants perceive and react to the world in which they find themselves. (p. 4)

However, an inferred phenomenological gap remains between the known attachment theory and the use of this theory. It seems possible to connect this observation with the findings of Main (1991) who foregrounded a way to access and make sense of internal representational processes, within attachment relationships, across generations. Internal representations of events or experience, in contrast to any externally verifiable narrative were found to be better indicators of predicting continuity and or change of intergenerational patterns of attachment. That is, Main (1991) found that what was remembered was less of an indicator of behaviour than how this knowledge had become internalised into a working model of an attachment-caregiving system. By implication, could it then be possible within a theory-practice relationship, to propose that the way attachment theory becomes internally represented (influenced in turn by the social workers attachment-caregiver-exploratory system experiences) and how this then becomes an internal representation of the theory is a greater indicator of what a social

worker will bring of the theory to practice, than any external verifiable documented theory?

Therefore, when theoretical literature on attachment theory informed social work practice is viewed alongside the cornerstone elements of attachment theory identified here, a complex picture of rich theory alongside the humanity of social workers who each come to practice with an attachment-caregiver-exploratory story, emerges. A complex story resides within social work practice and attachment theory informed social work practice theory, where a shared appreciation of the relationship is valued and upheld and where paradoxically they each share a struggle to sustain the focus on relationship.

Inferred here is that the attachment theory informed social work practice theory reflects a phenomenological gap between the rhetoric of valuing the social worker-client relationship and the reality of making this foreground information in contrast to background information. Central to this inference is that although attachment theory is a theory about relationships, the relational aspect of the social worker-client relationship is presented as vague background, while the clients' relationships are privileged. It is proposed here that until the social worker theoretically shares the foreground with the client, a sustained emphasis on the social worker-client relationship will remain a struggle.

## Conclusion

This chapter has provided a review of literature regarding attachment theory and attachment theory informed social work practice theory. Attachment theory and its developments across the decades that have focussed on increasing understanding of the attachment-caregiving-exploratory systems, has been presented as one way to bring attachment theory into social work practice. Bringing attachment theory into social work practice theory in this way creates a path that supports a sustained focus on the social worker-client relationship as a key vehicle for what becomes experienced by social workers and clients as social work practice.

In addition, the reviewed social work practice theory literature was identified as backgrounding the social worker and foregrounding the client, while implicitly focusing on relationship-based social work as client focused work. The relationship between attachment theory and shifting emphases within social work practice concerning the role and focus of the social worker-client relationship presents challenges to social workers working with children and families who meet in themselves and in the families they journey alongside "phenomenologically high" (Trowell et al.,1991, p. 236) anxiety. This anxiety remains present and influencing as an existing context within the social-worker client relationship.

An ongoing challenge within the literature remains the welcoming of current social work modalities such as management oriented practices that are intended to improve social work practice outcomes with a sustained capacity to hold "in-mind" the vehicle of these modalities, the social worker-client relationship. Highlighted within this review is the social worker-client relationship, within child and family oriented social work and irrespective of modality of practice, often meets and traverses within a context of stress and distress. With these findings and reflections "in-mind", our attention now turns to the methodological processes utilised within this study to examine social workers' experiences of putting attachment theory into social work practice with children and families.

# Chapter Three: The Research Philosophy, Methodology and Method

This chapter describes the philosophical and methodological framework underpinning this study. To begin, this chapter explores more fully the working relationship that was formed between the "sensitising concepts" (Patton, 2002, pp. 289-290), identified in chapter one, with the ever-evolving research methodology and design. The rationale and justification of the research design is then discussed in light of its philosophical underpinnings. Data construction processes and analysis methods are described, and this is followed by a presentation of identified limitations and delimitations of this study. Finally, methodological and epistemological dilemmas are discussed throughout this chapter, highlighting the 'messy' process of the lived experience of research.

## The Researcher-Research Question Relationship: Philosophical Underpinnings

It is often suggested that research strategies need to be compatible with the focus of the enquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and at best compatible across ontological, epistemological and design domains (Mason, 1996). The focus of this enquiry was the exploration of the two key research questions: What do social workers say about their experiences of putting attachment theory into social work practice with children and families? And: Are there identifiable patterns, implicit and or explicit, being used by the interviewed social workers in their processing of attachment theory as a social work practice theory, to inform child and family oriented social work?

As such, this research study intended to be social worker focused, perception and experience focused, and researcher-participant relationship focused. I was seeking to ask social workers about their social work practice experiences in regard to a relational theory: attachment theory. A research framework compatible with this type of enquiry, in conjunction with the sensitising concepts of this study, included a qualitative, phenomenological perspective (Moran, 2000). Phenomenology as described by Stern (2004) is the study of "things as they appear to consciousness, as they seem when they

are in mind. This includes: perceptions, sensations, feelings, memories, dreams, phantasies, expectations, ideas – whatever occupies the mental stage" (p. 8).

Qualitative, phenomenological oriented research has also been identified as being compatible with social work practice (Gilgun, 1994; Goldstein, 1990). However, while being compatible with social work practice, this qualitative oriented study needed to find a working place of relevance amidst a current milieu inclusive of evidence-outcome focused research (Hough, 1996; Taylor, 2006). With a growing emphasis on outcome-focused research, along with attachment theory research trends directed towards ecological contextual studies, what current place was there for qualitative experiential perceptual based knowledge? In this postmodern milieu of multiple perspectives, what use could there be in gathering more perspectives when no one of these can be privileged? What use would experience based findings, which tend to invite reflection on uncertainty and complexity within practice, have in a socio-political climate seeking simplicity, order and procedure oriented practice?

While these questions were not fully answered, a place to stand amidst them was found through the work of Nash (2002) and Olsson (2007). First, Nash (2002) challenged the division between qualitative and quantitative research, asserting that sociological research would benefit from the development of research models advocating the integration of "numbers and narratives" (pp. 409-410). Accepting this view created space for experience and evidence to be viewed relationally, rather than being seen as oppositional constructs. This position was supported by Olsson (2007), who stated that Evidence Based Practice "is not simply the application of an effective intervention but a process that includes a combination of research evidence, client preferences and actions, and clinical/professional expertise" (Olsson, 2007, p. 278). Therefore, this research emphasised the practice and process aspects of Evidence Based Practice.

Nevertheless, with a sense of methodological direction, methodological questions within this orientation remained. Was my enquiry seeking to descriptively represent (Husserl,

1917) or represent for the purpose of extrapolating some meaning, as in interpretive phenomenology/hermeneutics as proposed by Martin Heidegger (1962)? My research intention was to ascertain if there were identified patterns being used by a small sample of social workers in their processing of attachment theory as a social work practice theory. The initial research intention was to endeavour to describe the phenomenological experiences of translating theory into relationship focused practice.

Within this intention to describe the interrelationships between text and language, understanding and interpretation required further addressing. Was the act of describing the experiences of another a form of interpretation? Ricoeur's theory of interpretation argued that "interpretation is the hinge between language and lived experience" (Ricoeur, 1974, p. 66). I was also aware of the wisdom of Stern (2004), who stated that "something is gained and something is lost when experience is put into words" (p. 144). Stern (2004) also explored the relationships between meaning, experience and narrative, where he identified a "problematic relationship between a lived experience (a present moment) and it's later linguistic (re) construction" (p. 144). In these ways, then, the descriptive act is inevitably, to some extent, interpretation.

These reflections came to highlight the fact that the underlying philosophy was but a guide. Identifying sensitising concepts and informing philosophy brought a sense of containment to thinking about design construction; however it provided no definitives, no absolutes in terms of direction, and no neatly tied package of what to do next. Armed with an understanding that I was in qualitative phenomenological territory, with an ongoing interest in relationship-based research practice, a new issue arose, that of inter-subjectivity. With inter-subjectivity comes an awareness of knowledge identified as implicit. What are questions actually about? What aspects of the participants' response do we attend to, assign meaning to? What about the impact of the researcher-participant relationship: how much of this is attended to, grappled with, studied closely? How do we include that which is implicit as useable valid data?

There has been a burgeoning interest in implicit knowledge over the past decade (Lyons-Ruth, 1999, 2000; Lyons-Ruth et al.1998; Schacter, 1994, 1996). Stern (2004) differentiates clearly between implicit and explicit knowledge. "Implicit knowledge is non-symbolic, non-verbal, procedural and unconscious in the sense of not being reflectively conscious. Explicit knowledge is symbolic, verbalizable, declarative, capable of being narrated and reflectively conscious" (Stern, 2004, p. 113).

In the domain of relationship-based practice, one finds connections between seeking the phenomenological and grappling with how the issues of inter-subjectivity manifest explicitly and implicitly amidst interactions. This exploration is also guided by the constructs within attachment theory of the internal working model and the processes of defensive inclusion/exclusion as explored in the previous chapter. It could be stated, then, that what becomes implicit is something like a personal truth: often not thought about ways of interacting with the self and others in relationship. These processes, largely implicit within interactions are often not directly attended to as knowledge, with Stern (2006) estimating that 80 to 90 percent of our knowledge of the social and emotional world becomes "implicit relational knowings" (Stern et al.,1998).

This research inquiry, then, set out to create space for social workers to describe their experiences with the understanding that 80 to 90 percent of these could exist in the implicit realm and therefore be difficult to narrate. In this respect, the research question that asks what social workers say about their experiences of putting attachment theory into their social work practice brings to the fore an aspect of social work practice that is often not in direct view of the client or the social worker themselves. The task here was to become curious about an implicit aspect of practice, a largely implicit process of theoretical use in practice moments.

It was at this juncture that my sensitizing concepts and philosophical underpinnings, in conjunction with the quest to seek experience, culminated in an experience of becoming a 'lost researcher'. I had a burgeoning sense of entering an arena where any perceived space seemed to quickly become shadowed by an ever-increasing number of dilemmas. It

was in this dark space that the work of Max van Manen (1990) offered light and became central to guiding the research design, a design that would: reflect the methodological foundations of this study; attend to the issues of methodological rigor; and provide a structure to address the two key research questions.

## Research Design

While the phenomenological philosophers did not prescribe method as an integral aspect of their methodological frameworks, van Manen (1990) presented research activities that were epistemologically and methodologically congruent with this study. Van Manen (1990) advocated that "hermeneutic phenomenological research may be seen as a dynamic interplay among six research activities":

1. Turning to the nature of the lived experience;
2. Investigating experience as we live it rather than as we conceptualise it;
3. Reflecting on the essential themes which characterize the phenomenon;
4. Describing the phenomenon through the art of writing and rewriting;
5. Maintaining a strong and oriented relation to the phenomenon; and
6. Balancing the research context by considering parts and wholes. (pp. 30-32)

While these activities are presented chronologically, the "dynamic interplay" in practice between these six key research activities became actualized within this current study. At any one time in this study it became possible to identify the guidance that these activities offered to the study, with the activities shifting between foreground and background, depending on the aspect of the research process that was being attended to. For example, "turning to the nature of the lived experience" has already featured in this study through identifying "sensitizing concepts" (Patton, 2002, pp. 289-290), the key philosophical underpinnings, alongside the rationale and justification of the research design as described above and in Chapter One. Included also was reviewing the available and accessible literature on attachment theory and on attachment theory informed social work practice. This research activity was considered a centering research activity throughout

the research project, kept active through keeping connected at all times with the key research questions.

"Turning to the lived experiences" of the social workers in this study was also sustained through active interplay with "describing the phenomenon through the art of writing and rewriting". Encouraged by my supervisors from the outset of the study to "begin writing", I had a lived experience moment that writing was a partner in phenomenological research and that the act of writing, endeavouring to make one's evolving understandings and reflections shareable, constituted an important aspect of method. I came to view the act of writing as an integral component of the entire research process, in contrast to being a research study that I would at some stage write up.

Therefore, even before having data to "(re) construct" (Stern, 2004, p. 144), the dynamic relationship between the research process and the (re) construction of data became clearer. The research process was identifiable in the "dynamic interplay between the research activities" (van Manen, 1990, p. 30) – what became understood in this study as a dynamic process-data relationship. In response to this understanding, the research design was developed around three areas: the research process attended to through reflexive practices; research rigor specific to qualitative study; and data generation through the semi-structured interview.

*Reflexivity*

Van Manen (2002) advocated attending to the research process amidst the data goals of research by describing the researcher as "traversing the space of the text" (van Manen, 2002, p. 7). Structured support for this research endeavour came from the work of Lather (1986, pp. 450-452), who advocated for "systematized reflexivity". Within this project, "systematized reflexivity" was understood to imply the development of a disciplined regular process writing space, in contrast to an ad hoc activity undertaken at one's leisure. In this study a reflexive approach was a contingent way to stay in connection with the philosophical underpinnings of this work and to "maintain a strong and oriented relation

to the phenomenon": the social workers' experiences. This was important given that this qualitative phenomenologically oriented study was the work of a sole researcher. Ruch (2000) observed:

> Self-reflexive approaches to learning allow individuals to identify not only their impact on the situation in hand but also its impact on them. The crisis of representation within the qualitative research paradigm has highlighted the importance of personal influences being identified and owned. Personal experiences, standpoints and knowledge are deemed to be, within the reflexive/ narrative/ autobiographical approach, important aspects of the research process. (p. 103)

Within the qualitative research literature, the process of reflexivity attends to researcher bias and influence in terms of data generation and interpretation (Buckner, 2005, p. 59). In this study, reflexivity was included as a method from the outset: from outlining the philosophical underpinnings, through to design development, implementation, interpretation and the writing of the thesis. This method included the researchers own reflective based practice model adapted for a research based setting where three key reflexive practices were utilised:[9] reflexive journaling, mentoring and supervision.

Reflexive journaling (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 327) is one way "to enhance the credibility of the findings by accounting for researcher values, beliefs, knowledge and biases" (Cutliffe, 2003, p. 137). This method is also congruent with the phenomenological-hermeneutical stance of the need to bring pre-understandings and fore-structures to consciousness (Koch, 1996, pp. 241-243). The reflexive journaling process was strongly supported by regular monthly mentoring sessions with a highly regarded senior colleague who was both social work and psychotherapy trained. These

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[9] Bairbre Redmond (2004, pp. 8-27) provides a succinct literature review of the process of reflection and some of the historical influences on developing reflective practice.

sessions were invaluable to my own personal journey as a researcher. This was a time to actively reflect and re-search the self, myself, and ponder the evolving pathways and decisions that were being made as a consequence of this re-searching process.[10]

In addition, my Massey University supervisors were central to my increasing trust to stay active and in relationship with the research process. They provided me with a secure-base in which I could create space to explore. Their professional research expertise, combined with their unceasing generosity to me as a research student, created a constancy of support and guidance. I came to internalize these key figures (my mentor and supervisors) as secure figures and could access them for help and support, at will, at a psychological level.

What occurred as a result of these relationships was the development of a phenomenological space within me as a researcher. The three-fold reflexive arenas – journaling, mentoring sessions and research supervision – became pivotal in influencing the way I experienced the research process. I came to appreciate the richness of the journey and came to treasure the process that I was involved in – that I was privileged to explore from the position of the helm, with a strong reflexive team as my rudder. A journal entry attests to this bending into the process:

> So I get it now, there are no short cuts to understanding what I need to come to understand, this occurs in a time frame unique to me. I have come to realise that this research project may have nothing to do in the end with the research question and the most treasured discoveries may be deeply personal to me and never shared in the thesis document. I trust that even if this became so, "nau to rourou, naaku to rourou, ka ora ai te iwi" [your food basket, my food basket, together feed the tribe. Maori Proverb] There will in the end be something to share. (Foley, 2006)

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[10] Reflective practice models and models of reflexive practice were used by the researcher and were not a requirement of participation for participants.

Van Manen (2002) stated that "the main heuristic challenge of phenomenological inquiry is the writing-entering and traversing the space of the text, of darkness, where one dwells alone" (p. 7). As the research process unfolded, I identified "traversing the space of text" to include the literature, the participants' data and the methodological research process each and collectively constituting text. What had been conceived at the outset of the study, to collect data sourced through interviews, shifted into a much more complex, dynamic process; involving the use of myself as a researcher, in relationship with the emerging texts while sustaining research rigor so as to "maintain a strong and oriented relation to the phenomenon". Scott (2002) stated that:

> Good qualitative research is thus more likely to be achieved by writing the researcher into the research than by trying to 'sanitize' it by writing them out of the text. The researcher's inevitable use of self does not constitute a licence for less rigour, but a case for even greater rigour. (p. 929)

## *Designing with Research Rigor*

Structuring research rigor within the design of this study was paramount in assuring that "warrantable assertions" could be made, which could be directly linked to the research question/problem, methodology, methods, and data collected (Forbes, King, Kushner, Letourneau, Myrick & Profetto-Grath, 1999, pp. 373-379) and where, furthermore, the findings could stand as:

1. Confirmable; whereby *confirmability* refers to the matching of findings with the recommendations along with conclusions being directly and coherently linked to findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and

2. Transferable; whereby *transferability* refers to the researcher's responsibility to provide clear, coherent and as rich data as possible for a reader, regarding the decision trail from beginning to end of the project, akin to "auditing, leaving a trail" (Padgett, 1989, p. 101).

Guidance for research rigor in this study came predominantly from the work of Padgett (1998, p. 94) and Lather (1986, pp. 450-452), each of whom advocated strategies to

enhance the rigor of qualitative research. To begin, the design needed to structure in a strategy for "peer debriefing and support" (Padgett, 1989, p. 98). The reflexivity processes described above were considered as a way to meet this strategy for rigor. These processes were guided by Lather (1986, pp. 450-452), who advocated for "systematized reflexivity". Reflexivity processes, discussed earlier, were perceived as a discipline and were therefore structured regularly into the project.

Padgett (1989) advocated "prolonged engagement...as a way to ameliorate the effects of reactivity and respondent bias" (p. 94). Initially, I wondered how I could incorporate this strategy for rigor into the project, given that I was intending such minimal contact with the interview based participants; however I came to appreciate that "prolonged engagement" could also be perceived anew. It extended my viewing to traverse across data sources: the literature with fifty decades of work to call upon; the reflexivity process that included the expertise of my supervisors and research mentor; along with the journeys of the participants themselves. Prolonged involvement began to look more substantial.

In addition , I came to recognise another site of "prolonged engagement", which included many others who, although did not form the official sample group for this project, nonetheless had been part of the journey and continued to be part of my ongoing practice journey that ran parallel to this study. It is here that I viewed the self of the researcher and the issue of inter-subjectivity as relevant. For this project, then, self included the multiple interactions and movements towards greater understanding that occurred within my relationships with colleagues and supervisees. Although these others were not part of the sample, I consider that they were carried into the research phenomenon through the reflexive strategies involving the self of the researcher.

Padgett (1998, p. 96) and Lather (1986, pp. 450-452) also advocated for theoretical, methodological, observer and data triangulation, with Janesick (1994) in addition proposing interdisciplinary triangulation (Padgett, 1989, p. 97). The key research benefit of triangulation within qualitative inquiry was understood to be that "each method

implies a different line of action towards reality and hence each will reveal different aspects of it" (Denzin, 1989, p. 235). Initially I felt it impossible that such a small piece of sole researcher work could conjure up anything remotely reflective of triangulation. The project had begun with the simple idea that data triangulation would be accomplished through combining the researching of the research question in the literature with the interviewing of participants. This inchoate understanding grew more complex throughout the project.

For example, if the purpose of triangulation is increased validity (Redfern & Norman, 1994) in this study triangulation endeavours occurred through an expanding view of van Manen's (1990) "writing and re-writing" to include: writing and re-writing, reading and re-reading, listening and re listening and talking and re-talking, with a willingness to be influenced, changed and lost in the presence of new understandings. The reflexive and research rigor design as described above provided plentiful opportunities to engage in an ongoing validating process across texts and key research relationships within this study.

### *Social Worker Participation Criteria for the Semi-Structured Interview*

Given the specificity of the first key research question – what do social workers say about their experiences of putting attachment theory into social work practice with children and families? A form of non-probability sampling, "purposive sampling", was utilised to guide sample selection for participation. The working criteria for participants included each of the following:

a) being currently employed as a Social Worker;

b) being currently a full member of the Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers (ANZASW);

c) having more than three years post graduate experience in a setting/s working with children and their families;

d) having an interest in attachment theory; and

e) endeavouring to bring attachment theory into their day to day practice.

In terms of estimated sample size, Hart (2005) recommended that a sample size of 15 is optimal when using purposive sampling; however he also advised that there is "never any assurance that subjects will be representative of their category" (p. 345). Padgett (1998) concurs that a small number sample size is appropriate for this type of research. Rather than maximizing participant numbers, the aim is "to become saturated with information about a specific topic" (p. 52). Initially I had hoped to become saturated with information through accessing first-hand social work interactions in real time, in a social work setting – to view the theory-practice process within a live working relationship. However, given that I was not employed as a social worker in a social work setting, the access and ethical logistics of such a method seemed prohibitive for the scope and timeframe of this project. Instead, the goal within this study became to engage eight to ten participants who would be invited to engage in both the focus groups and the individual interviews.

Focus groups, advantageous for exploratory research where there is little yet understood about a topic, had been initially integrated into the design (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005). However, the focus group plan did not proceed due to an acknowledged disadvantage of focus groups, distinct from the issue of group dynamics and their influence on data provision; that is, the logistics of getting a group gathered in the same place and time.[11] The focus shifted to the use of in-depth interviews. What followed was a complex, confusing and at times exhausting reflexive process that centred on how best I could structure the in-depth interviews to provide the rich data I was seeking while maintaining a focus on lived experience and an appreciation for the implicit.

Taylor and Bogdan (1984) define in-depth interviews as "repeated face-to-face encounters between the researcher and informants directed toward understanding informants' perspectives on their lives, experiences or situations as expressed in their own words"(p. 77). Van Manen (1990) posed a second function, that of developing a collaborative relationship of conversation, to mobilize the participants to shift from

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[11] Although I did have the opportunity to conduct five interviews within one setting outside of the Wellington region, constraints around extending the time and travel around this were prohibitive.

narrative to meanings of their narrative. In this study, I was aware that I was also bringing my own interview practice experience into the research. I wondered about similarities and differences in the experience of the research, and/or social work interview, with their different contexts and goals. If I had waited to fully resolve these ruminations, I would not yet have conducted any interviews. In here were two important research lessons: action can occur with rigor even amidst incompletely answered questions; and acting with an awareness of incompleteness can sharpen one's attunement to issues of process and data.

## The Unfolding Research Method

At some point in a research study there is a place where one crosses from thinking about to actually doing. Within this study, entering into the world of actuality was marked by the seeking of Massey University Human Ethics approval. This was followed by a busy time in the study, where the research design met the potential research participants. It was a time of dynamic responsiveness, with design features being adapted and shaped to reflect the actual community of participants within their settings.

### *Massey University Human Ethics Committee Approval*

Seeking Massey University Human Ethics Approval through the Massey University Human Ethics Committee (MUHEC) marked the beginning of needing to actively articulate what this study was about and how I was to conduct this work. To manage my personal time-frames, I needed to conduct this task earlier than I would have wished. Essentially, I wondered if I was ready. Engaging in the application process was an important exercise in coming to know more fully what it was that I was actually intending to do. The MUHEC application sought information concerning the research topic and the methodology for contacting participants, as well as the details of the intended ways that the interviews would be conducted and recorded, how the information would be stored, and provisions for the care and safety at all times of participants within the study. This process quickened my groundedness in the actual doing of research while pondering the philosophical implications of the doing.

I came to appreciate the uncertainty that accompanied taking the risk to proceed and that in any research project involving human subjects, open systems, the timing of what happens is often not in the hands of the researcher, but occurs across a myriad of quarters, each with their own defined timetables and compliance requirements. I also came to realize that my perception of the function of Ethics Approval had changed. Originally I saw it as ensuring that I practiced ethically, kept the rules around confidentiality and participant protection: that I learn, essentially, about being an ethical researcher. However, throughout the process, I recognized that having Ethics Approval functioned as part of the secure-base for the project. This enabled me to explore and proceed safely, knowing that the ethical issues, as much as possible, had been structured into the research process. As long as I remained committed to these issues of rigor, I was free to re-search with space to be uncertain, lost and curious about the research questions, and how to meaningfully address these.

### *Advertising the Study and Inviting Participant Enquiries*

Once Ethical Approval was received (Appendix A), advertising in the Social Work Notice Board, inviting potential participants to make enquiries, occurred (Appendix B). As a result, enquiries about participation came from throughout New Zealand. Each potential participant was forwarded an Information Sheet (Appendix C) explaining the research aims and procedures, as well as issues of confidentiality for participants and their clients, and providing confirmation of MUHEC approval. Also, information related to the issue of reciprocity in research was provided. Participants of this study would be given the abstract to my thesis, along with information about how to access this: a spiral bound copy would be provided for the participants to read. In addition, a note of thanks, including a short summary of the project findings, would be posted out to participants at the conclusion of the project. At the close of the research project, participants would also be provided with a free of charge, one day local workshop, focusing on the findings of this research and the ensuing social work practice implications.

Along with responding and providing further information to potential participants for their consideration, this was a time of unexpected decisions. There were three local interested social workers, up to seven interested social workers located in another New Zealand region, and a potential key informant who was based in yet another region of New Zealand. I was faced with a decision on whether to wait for more local respondents to come forward, or to trade off the personal cost of travel for increased certainty of time frames for the interview process. In addition, another issue arose that I had thought I had screened out in my original plan and in the Information Sheet. However, the regionally located group of social workers understandably wished for their interviews to be conducted during their work time, within their work settings, by implication requiring me to engage in an employer access process. In a reflexive journal entry I recorded:

> At this stage of the process, I can see that I have an option to stick with my original plan and not be influenced by participants' wishes, or I could hand the research process over to the phenomenological space that now has become relational, between myself as the researcher and the potential participants. In essence then the research process can now be actively shaped not just by philosophy, theory and myself as a researcher, it can be shaped also by participants. (Foley 2006)

### *Accessing Social Work Participants*

After approximately 15 enquiries, eight social workers agreed to participate. It was at this juncture that I decided, based on increased time-fame certainty, to conduct the interviews across three regions within New Zealand. Given the geographical spread of the participants, it was at this specific juncture that the decision not to proceed with the focus groups was made in consultation with my supervisors. Of the eight social worker participants, gaining further participation consent from their employers was an issue for five. Of the remaining three, their interviews were to be conducted in their own time.

Access to the group of five workers was conducted through a process of engaging directly with their practice managers, providing very detailed and specific information

about the project, the information sought and the protection of client and organisation identification to be active at all times. As this was my work, I endeavoured to make the load for the service managers as light as possible by providing detailed letters and being as active as I could to ensure an open process. In this situation, the Service Managers were not only very supportive of their staff's participation; they confirmed in writing access permission and provided me with a room for a day within their organisation to interview staff. This process was at all times made visible and transparent by my supervisors.

### *Informed Consent, Privacy and Confidentiality*

Within the Information Sheet (Appendix C), an explanation of the research aims and procedures, what would be required of participants, confidentiality issues within the study including their agreement not to use any of their clients' real names, and the research benefits to them as participants, was provided. Also provided were contact details of the Massey University research supervisors, and the MUHEC approval number. When the research method changed to exclude the use of focus groups, a second information sheet was sent to potential participants (Appendix D). Participation was based on written consent (Appendix E), with the option for the participants to withdraw at any stage.

To protect participant privacy and confidentiality, a number of measures were implemented: only I had access to participant details; names and contact details of participants are not identifiable in the thesis. Only my supervisors and the transcriber had access to the documented interview data (Appendix F). Third party access to the interview data within this document and any subsequent reports or publications will be limited to non-identifying data through the use of pseudonyms, with no employee details on generic nationality origins, such as Pakeha, European and Asian, being given. All audio-recordings and transcripts were stored securely in a locked filing cabinet, with computer files password-protected. Data and materials related to this study will be stored

for a period of five years. Each participant was offered options regarding the storage and return of their personal material (Appendix G) and to date these have been adhered to.

## *Preparing for the Interviews*

Prior to conducting the first interviews, I was still grappling with the phenomenological aspect of the interviews, the issues of implicit knowing, how to access this safely and how to manage issues of inter-subjectivity in a research based interview. Although van Manen (1990, pp. 66-68) provides a useful guide to hermeneutical phenomenological interviewing, he cautions that "it is imperative to stay close to experience as lived. As we ask what an experience is like, it may be helpful to be very concrete. Ask the person to think of a specific instance, situation, person or event" (van Manen, 1990, p. 67).

I had the challenge of staying close to lived experience while providing some boundaries around the participants' clients who were not consenting parties to this research. In response to this dilemma, I wrote a vignette to form part of the interview that could function as a typical New Zealand social work scenario, to which participants could respond theoretically (Appendix H). My intention was as much as possible to create an opportunity to explore the processes of the theory-practice-theory dance without getting into any specific client material. Even though there were caveats regarding pseudonyms, I was aware as a practitioner that this does take some thinking through and can be somewhat distracting when trying to think about a piece a work and change names simultaneously.

I tried to structure the interview questions so as to not create space for real clients, but to create space for the social worker's reflective capacities on social worker-client work. I also hoped that this structure would help tighten up the data analysis process through the creation of the same core information from which each participant could uniquely respond. As this was a significant change from the original interview guide, the expertise of my supervisors was sought to ascertain if I needed to revisit the MUHEC. It was deemed not necessary, with the change being within the bounds of what had been ethically approved: It did not increase risk in any way to participants.

As a way of staying connected with the research question through the research interview, I thought it would be useful to experience the intended questions from the position of the interviewee. I invited a friend to interview me, using the interview question schedule that I proposed to use. This process served a number of research functions. First, it provided an experience of pre-interview "bracketing" (Koch, 1995, p. 830) and it also helped clarify my own thoughts in respect to how I would answer the questions that I had formulated.

Although not anticipated, this process of experiencing the interview as interviewee also provided me with an emotional experience. It confirmed that these questions could potentially raise feeling-based experiences that participants may be surprised about and may not have been prepared to experience in this one-off researcher-participant relationship. For me, as the intending interviewer, it was this experience that I was grateful I had had, as it increased my awareness of my need to be attuned to the participants' inner worlds and be ready to adapt the interview based on this attunement, guided by the participants' comfort level cues. In addition, to keep some sense of order amidst the busyness of the interview time, I constructed a one page participant profile sheet (Appendix J) for each person as a checklist for me and as a way to remind me of the ethical process that had been approved and that I needed to adhere to. This checklist for each participant was useful throughout the remainder of the research study.

*Turning to the Nature of the Lived Experience: The Interviews*

Eight semi-structured interviews were conducted. All participants self selected for participation, based on their self assessment alongside the set participation criteria. Of the eight social workers interviewed, all were women, five of whom were Pakeha/New Zealanders, two of whom identified as European, and one who identified as Asian. Six of the participants held social work positions within New Zealand Government funded child and family organisations, one worked within a District Health Board engaged in hospital social work, and one worked within a private practice setting. The interviews were on average sixty minutes long, with one interview being one and a half hours long.

Prior to their interview, all participants had received the Updated Information Sheet (Appendix D) and had discussed, where required, issues of confidentiality and consent for themselves as social workers, their organisations and their clients. Each person received via electronic mail the Interview Questions Sheet (Appendix H), along with a copy of the Participant Consent Form (Appendix E) to be signed at the interview. This process enabled the interview participants time to consider the questions and consent forms prior to the interview and to seek any further clarification where required.

The actual interviews, being relationship-focused and participant-led, became loose reflections of the interview guide, while each retained the key focus of seeking a conversation that focused on the phenomenological as much as possible. From my experience as a practitioner, it was not knowable at the outset what exactly the exploration of the phenomenon would entail for each particular person, with the consent to participate often being quite different from the experience of participating. Given the personal and professional nature of the sought "lived experiences", I was aware that I needed to carefully retain an awareness of this ambiguity.

I was also aware that while I was seeking the social workers' lived experiences via their practice reflections, this research was not ethnographic in nature. Therefore the research activity of "investigating experiences as we live it rather than as we conceptualise it" (van Manen, 1990, p. 30) required my own reflection, given the research question inviting reflection on experience. Upon reflection, what was before me, within me and between the participants and myself during the interview was indeed experience and worthy of my regard as material, as data. Each interview was indeed a unique and rich experience: an opportunity to wonder about the 'what was said' in conjunction with experiencing 'what was said'.

The dynamic nature of this qualitative research study, supported within an ethically approved base, enabled researcher responsiveness to the participants. For example, during the second interview I became aware of how much I had gained from the

experience of being in the interview. I became aware of a representational gap between a transcript and phenomenological experience. What had taken place in the past sixty minutes was much more than could be documented in a script. I needed to find a way to provide a reflective space back to the interviewee, based not only on their script, but on what I had understood about what they were conveying to me – to find a way to represent something of the lived experience of the interview from my experience as the researcher. As a result of this awareness, shared with the participant, an alternative plan was devised in the moment of the interview: to provide participants with an option of a transcript, and/or a "letter of understanding" that would include details from the transcript as well as that which had been understood to have been conveyed throughout the interview.[12]

## Data Construction, Analysis and Representation

In this section the data construction, analysis and representation process is described. First, the constructing of the transcripts and the letters of understanding is presented, followed by the data analysis process informed by the work of van Manen (1990) and Colaizzi (1978) to directly address the second key research question: Are there identifiable patterns, implicit and or explicit, being used by the interviewed social workers in their processing of attachment theory as a social work practice theory, to inform child and family oriented social work? Described next are the steps taken to ensure ongoing rigor throughout the analysis process. Finally, a return to van Manen's (1990) research activity of writing and re-writing is revisited, specific to the research task of representing the data in an auditable and meaningful way to the two key research questions.

### *Constructing Transcripts and Letters of Understandings*

The audio taped interviews were transcribed as verbatim where possible.[13] Transcription of the interviews was conducted by me and a contracted transcriber, with the financial

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[12] NB: This change was discussed in supervision and was deemed to fit within within the existing Massey University Human Ethics Approval contract.

[13] While all attempts were made to construct transcripts as verbatim as possible, at times this was challenging due to the varying quality of each recording. For example, external noise being picked up by

support of a Massey Graduate Research Fund. The person who assisted with the transcription signed a consent form regarding ethical procedures (Appendix F). To ensure a high proportion of match in the transcription process, I transcribed the first audio file independently and then matched the transcripts. While there was a high proportion of match in the transcripts, with each subsequent transcript, I would re-listen to the audio file and match the transcript with the audio file and make any alterations where necessary.

Experiencing each interview as a researcher and then viewing the interview in transcript form highlighted that an interview and a transcript of the same interview can assume quite different qualities. In an interview, the focus is on the person, their story, on oneself as a receiver of this story, and on building a relationship centred on the interview experience. However, awareness can traverse very broad terrain, from a rumbly tummy to noticing that the interviewee looks worried or somewhat stressed. Language is used freely and without concern for linguistic accuracy. When the transcript, the word-for-word document, is put alongside the remembered experience, one wonders how we may have understood each other. Even when the first language of both speakers is shared, the grammatical errors, the omitted words, and the linguistic shortcuts that are made and implicitly understood become obvious.

The construct of the letter of understanding process (herein referred to as the LOUP) was an endeavour to address this dilemma within a phenomenological qualitative framework where the sustaining and containing of experience remains central. While moments of creativity appear to come from nowhere, the LOUP was an evolutionary one, made track-able through the reflexive journal script. For example, months prior to the interviews I had noted in the journaling process the work of Caelli (2001), who developed a process "deriving narrative from transcripts" (p. 278). This exciting concept was linked in my reflexive processes with research reciprocity, and guided by Munford and Sanders (2000): "Qualitative research requires a lot from research participants and researchers

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the recorder which made the interview voices difficult to hear and or unintentional kicking of the table that the recorder was sitting on meant at times this sound was picked up over the interview.

need to think about how they positively acknowledge the contribution of research participants" (p. 846). Through the reflexive processing, reciprocity was perceived as a way of giving back, not of giving back what has been given, for example, a straight transcript of what had been said, but a giving back of what had been understood.

These reflexive journaling musings, when met in the real time of the experience of the interviews, highlighted the inter-subjective influence of creativity reflecting the contributions of others, that when allowed to be in implicit conversation and present in the lived experience of the moment, created space for a fresh response. It was from this time that I realised that I could hold onto my view that this was a piece of sole researcher based research, or I could move to a new place of perception that was more congruent with my philosophical underpinnings regarding the construct of inter-subjectivity and the implications of this for the self of the researcher. While I was still physically a sole researcher, my psychological connection with a much wider research-based community grew. I noticed that my research team had grown substantially throughout the process and that while I was in active dialogue with my supervisors and mentor, I was also in relationship with authors through their texts.

The LOUP involved a process that bridged data generation and data analysis. Construction of data from the interviews included analysis, even when this was in the form of clarifying what had been understood. With each interview, a letter of what had been understood in the interview was written for each participant. The LOUP was an effort to convey back to participants something of the lost and gained experience of putting experience into language, in contrast to being asked to verify unprocessed transcripts. These letters were forwarded to the participant for review and correction where deemed necessary by the participant (see Appendix J for an example).

While I had received ethical approval for the consent process and had adhered to this process, in my experience as a practitioner it was not knowable at the outset what exactly the exploration of the 'phenomenon' would mean to a particular person, with the 'consent' to participate often being quite different from the experience of participating in

this study. As a researcher, the participants' consent for use of their understood interview material created a solid base that each participant had been understood with care, before their unique interviews became lost in the search for themes and patterns of experience.

The receiving of consent for use was hoped for to ensure that there would be enough rich data for analysis. In turn, the giving of consent was an act of professional and personal generosity. Seven participants signed the Authority for Release of Tape Transcripts Form (Appendix K), giving consent for their interview material to be used directly throughout the study. In addition, one of these participants required the development of a secondary consent process to provide the necessary conditions that enabled enough "felt security" and identity protection (Appendix L). The eighth participant gave written consent to use her interview material in a general way, without any specific reference to her interview. Based on the generosity of the social workers in this study, there was indeed much rich data in which to look for patterns of attachment theory use amidst their social work practice.

### *Searching for Themes*

While the interviews focused on an invitation to describe experiences of translating attachment theory into social work practice, the key purpose of the data analysis was to ascertain if there were identifiable patterns within the experiences described. Congruent within phenomenological based research, van Manen (1990) advocated that data analysis be guided predominantly by the research activity of "reflecting on the essential themes which characterize the phenomenon" (p. 30). Of this process he asserted that "phenomenological research consists of reflectively bringing into nearness that which tends to be obscure, that which tends to evade the intelligibility of our natural attitude of everyday life" (van Manen, 1990, p. 32). While the focus would remain on seeking patterns within the data, the procedural steps advocated by Colaizzi (1978, p. 48-71) provided a structured way to proceed through:

1. Reading all of the participants' descriptions (p. 59);

2. Extracting significant statements pertaining directly to the research questions (p. 59);

3. Creating "formulated meanings" (p. 59). In this study the seeking of understanding preceded the seeking of meaning and this step was adapted to fit this emphasis in this study;

4. Collating the "formulated meanings" into clusters of themes, checking back to the original descriptions for validation and noting discrepancies (p. 59);

5. Writing an "exhaustive description" of key features of the phenomenon (p. 61);

6. Identifying fundamental structures of the phenomenon (p. 61); and then

7. Returning to the selected participants and checking the formulations for validation.

The work of Colaizzi (1978) was used in a cyclical manner, in contrast to a linear list of tasks. For example, within the design, the validation process had already occurred through the LOUP consent process. In addition, the focus of this analysis was to find patterns within the structures of the descriptions before seeking patterns of meaning. Through the reflexive journaling process, I came to develop an appreciation for analysis that was descriptive based. Initially I struggled with this form of analysis, seeing it as a lesser form of analysis in contrast to the search for meanings. However, I was strongly guided by my practice based understanding and experience that when learning a new clinical task I do better when I can look repeatedly and with each new look challenge myself to see more of what was there to be seen all along. I became faced with a rich source of material that was evolving from an analysis process biased towards description rather than meaning-making.

Colaizzi (1978) advised that the researcher have a "tolerance for ambiguity" (p. 61), and I would add a tolerance for chaos, uncertainty and a wondering if anything meaningful could emerge from such rich and diverse material. During this time of chaos, the research process involved sitting alongside the audio recordings of the actual interviews. This process was akin to listening over and over to a piece of music, originally heard at a

concert, where the orchestra at work creating the music remains a rich experience amidst its now auditory presentation.

In this study there was a constant tension between the researcher's experience of the interview, and the transcripts, letters of understandings and the audio files, each representing the social workers' descriptions of their experiences. Moreover, there was a constant tension between sustaining the uniqueness of the participants' contributions while losing this in search for what was in common across the interviews.

### *Integration of Rigor into the Data Analysis Process*

Sustaining research rigor throughout the analysis process remained paramount in assuring that "warrantable assertions" could be made (Forbes et al. 1999, pp. 373-379). Following the digitally recorded interviews, transcripts and letters of understandings were constructed and then returned to participants for their review and editing. This process was to adhere to the rigorous strategies of "member checking" (Padgett, 1989, p. 100) or "face validity" (Lather, 1986, pp. 450-452). "Systematized reflexivity" (Lather, 1986, pp. 450-452) continued throughout this time, through journaling, supervision and the research mentoring sessions. Prolonged engagement (Padgett, 1989, p. 94) during this process involved the construction of transcripts, the letters of understanding and then reflecting on the essential themes within the data (Colaizzi, 1978; van Manen, 1990). Data analysis of the eight and a half hours of digitally recorded interviews occurred over a ten month period. Finally, analytical triangulation included a process of both narrowing the rich data into emergent themes while sustaining regular contact with the audio recordings, the transcripts, and the letters of understanding.

### *Writing and Rewriting; Representing the Data and the Analysis Process through the Findings*

Within qualitative research there is a working tension between the researcher's and the research participants' voices. Reflexive processing was integral: from design through to analysis through to the representation of the findings. Reflexivity, combined with making

visible the process through "writing and rewriting", provided ever developing process material in which to view alongside the interview material. This in turn provided repeated opportunities to fine-tune the balance between privileging participants' voices, while also privileging the researcher's voice.

van Manen (1990) wrote that "phenomenological projects and their methods often have a transformative effect on the researcher...indeed, phenomenological research is often itself a form of deep learning, leading to a transformation of consciousness, heightened perspective-ness, increased thoughtfulness and tact, and so on" (p. 163). My experience as a researcher affirms these assertions. A phenomenological research framework provided the space and the structure to stay in connection with a small group of social workers' experiences for much longer than would be ordinarily expected. To write and rewrite this experience, as a way of finding what was there all along but not initially attended to as data, is illustrated in the following chapter.

### *Delimitations and Limitations*

Delimitations within this study revolve around the context-specific exploratory nature of the project. This was not a project in which generalizations applicable to all social workers could be made. However this project could provide experience based knowledge that would further support a process of foregrounding the experience of the social worker within the theory- practice cycle.

Limitations are many, with ongoing thought and questioning about what actually is a semi-structured interview, when does an interview become a conversation, and when does a conversation become a dynamic inter-subjective interaction. There are ongoing questions in regard to seeking experience based narratives that are implicit through the use of an explicit interview based methodology. This methodological compromise, along with the seeking to ask about an implicit relational experience in the absence of the actual relationship at the time, creates space for reconstructed experience, rather than in the moment lived experience. However, while I consider this a methodological limitation, the

quality of data gathered remains valid and worthy of focused description. Methodological limitations are part of the humbling experience of research, where it seems always on the cards that at any moment one will realise the data gathered relates to a different question than the one originally posed.

## Conclusion

This chapter articulated and defined the base from which the research enquiry was conducted. The goal was to create not only a base for the research, but a philosophically and methodologically secure-base from which openness to exploration combined with the capacity to remain connected to key philosophical and methodological frameworks, could ensue. This chapter established a track-able 'audit trail', leading to the creation of a phenomenological space: a phenomenological space for the experiences of the eight women who generously consented to be interviewed. It is to the experiences described within the space of the semi-structured interviews that the following chapter turns.

## Chapter Four: Social Workers' Described Experiences of Putting Attachment Theory into their Social Work Practice

If chapter two was an opportunity for the literature to take centre stage, chapter three for the researcher's methodological process to be centre stage then this chapter provides an opportunity for the interviewed social workers' data to be centre stage. This chapter concentrates on representing the phenomenological text that was generated from the interviews conducted with seven of the eight social workers who participated in this study.[14] This chapter aims to provide material on the social workers' contributions, to be used for reflection and discussion in the following chapter.

Guided by the two key research questions this chapter begins by describing what social workers said about their experiences of putting attachment theory into social work practice with children and families, through the provision of interview summaries. These summaries function to provide a sense of the person's interview before their contribution becomes lost amidst the endeavour to find emergent themes representing collectively the descriptions of experience. The second section focuses on the in-common experiences that were identified when the interviews were re-searched in relationship to one another. This section correlates to the second research question: the search for identifiable patterns of experience. Amidst this focus, material that was deemed contributing but not identified as being in-common is also highlighted.

To introduce the participants to this work, first a broad profile is presented, followed by summaries of each interview.[15] A fuller summary of each interview is provided in Appendix M, with details of the summarising process outlined in the previous chapter. Participants' names have been changed and replaced with a pseudonym and as much as

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[14] One of the respondents gave consent to use the findings from her interview in a general way, but not in a specific way. Given this request, I have held her interview in mind but have made no further specific reference to her contribution in this chapter or throughout the document.

[15] Participants' summaries are presented in no particular order, with the order being more directed by the completion of the transcription and consent process.

possible, identifying information has also been removed from the respondent profiles and interview summaries.

## Participant Profiles

| Name | Gender | Ethnicity | Qualifications | Years of Practice | Practice Fields | Current Practice Field |
|------|--------|-----------|----------------|-------------------|-----------------|------------------------|
| Ruth | Female | Pakeha/New Zealander | M.Sc. (Social Work) | 20 + | Foster Care | Foster Care, Consultation Training. |
| CJ | Female | Pakeha/New Zealander | ? | 10+ | Care and protection | Care and protection |
| Grace | Female | European | ? | ? | Voluntary sector | Care and protection |
| Anne | Female | Pakeha/New Zealander | BSW | 7+ | Care and protection, permanency | Adoptions |
| Dorothy | Female | Pakeha/New Zealander | BSW/MSW | ? | Care and Protection Community work Child and Family Therapy Work Legislation and Policy | Care and Protection Foster Care |
| Maggie | Female | Pakeha/New Zealander | Dip Social Work | 15 | ? | Health |
| Belinda | Female | European/New Zealander | BSW equivalent | 25 | ? | Foster Care Care and protection |

Table 4.1: Participant Profiles

*A question mark has been used to denote not enough information to state specific detail.*

**Interview Summaries**

*Key Informant Interview – Ruth: Consultant Social Worker*

This interview was identified as a key interview due to the extensive knowledge and practice base of this social worker in the field of attachment theory informed social work practice. For Ruth, attachment theory was introduced as the primary informing practice theory at the beginning of her social work training. Of her training experiences, Ruth strongly emphasised the usefulness of experiential-based learning and participating in consultation, as a way to integrate and implement new understandings. For example, in her training Ruth was fully guided through two social work assessment and intervention plans with two different families. New understandings developed during this consultation process, then impacted on her 'decision making' and her 'thinking' regarding her work with other families. Ruth also highlighted the work of Vera Fahlberg and the Robinson's as being influential within her training and throughout her career.[16]

Ruth described three key factors regarding bridging attachment theory and practice that she thought were central: learning attachment theory experientially; drawing on attachment theory as a guide for practice in contrast to a rule book; and the need for social workers to be able to make use of a consultation process. In addition, three practice issues of concern were presented: the matter of identification of an issue being equated with intervention; attachment theory not being evidenced in practice as an informing theory, where it would be most likely to be expected, such as in care and protection issues with toddlers; and the said use of attachment theory in social work practice coexisting alongside social worker practice where in her experience it was not always easy to share with her colleagues a sustained attachment theory informed social work conversation for the purpose informed decision making.

Central to Ruth's interview, was her perception that the use of attachment theory, especially in the arena of foster care remains misunderstood. She said:

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[16] Vera Fahlberg and the work of the Robinson's is referenced in Chapter Two.

*In New Zealand Social Work practice, quite often children were identified as having attachment issues, but then that was kind of like the end of it...that stability and long-term placement would create the answer and that's where I felt attachment theory just isn't understood...just because a child is in a placement for a long time, doesn't mean to say they revise their inner working model to include in the possibilities of secure attachment. They can stay actually disorganised attached for quite long periods of time...change in the environment doesn't change the child's inner working model.*

### CJ: Care and Protection/Permanency Planning Social Worker

In contrast to Ruth, CJ's introduction to attachment theory began at a different point in her practice career. CJ was in the midst of her practice, and had been for ten or more years. Similar to Ruth, however, CJ was struck with an experience of attachment theory when she encountered the work of Vera Fahlberg (1991) and David Howe et al (1999):

*I noticed just how important it is...it is so relevant in our relationships whether they are professional or personal, social it just goes right across you know...I'll be standing there, not even at work, I'll be in a social situation in some conversation and I'll be going oh yeah that's that...It really fascinates me.*

The resulting impact on her practice, like that of Ruth's, was described as an identified change in the way that she thought about her work:

*The way I practice has changed and it's changed because I understand what attachment means...it has enabled me to do better assessments, I can pick up that something is wrong in the attachment and I will now refer to a psychologist for attachment disorders.*

Since including attachment theory as an informing practice theory in her work, CJ described three key changes in her perception of her social work practice role. She now:

prioritises the building of relationships with child/adolescent clients; provides a secure-base at times for them; and finds practical social work specific settings to enact the theory. For example, she said:

*If my children have to go from A to B, and if the caregiver can't do it, I will do it. I will not have them picked up by strangers all the time. [I find] being in the car...it's great for relationship building and they get to trust you.*

CJ also described the impact at times that her job had on her personally. For example, in a situation where she needed to move a preschool child from one care placement to another:

*I didn't want to do it but I had to do it and how was I going to do that in a way that was safe for her?, she was still feeling insecure [so how was I going] to move this child that offered her predictability, reliability and security... you become so overwhelmed yourself and upset about something you have to do and you know you have to do it but you know it's going to be really upsetting that you, you want to protect the child, you don't tell the child too much which is actually the wrong thing to do.*

### Grace: Care and Protection/Permanency Planning Social Worker

For Grace, her first introduction to attachment theory was as a parent:

*Before I did social work training I was involved in a lot of things....stuff that my son had been involved in, so from that stage I started to have an awareness of attachment theory and the impact that a good attachment could have.*

Then Grace described her experience at a lecture that she attended during her volunteer training:

[We] *had a lecture from a psychiatrist and she went through all the different developmental stages and all the attachment (styles)... like WOW...because all the stuff that I had absorbed on a more informal basis...it fitted in a structure and it was just so fascinating...it's in every part of us... it's part of all the other theories because it so much impacts on people's ability to form and sustain relationships.*

Key theoretical influences included Harlow (1961), Vera Fahlberg (1991) and Howe et al. (1999). She described her experiences of reading Vera Fahlberg's book as *"absolutely amazing and I didn't read it cover to cover at all... it was just one of them I kept referring to...she gives you a list of things to put in a report... she just puts it so well".* Of David Howe's book she said that *"...you could read it and understand it, you didn't have to think about, you didn't have to work out what he was telling you".*

Grace's key social work practice challenge was using this information to inform assessments. Grace described her experience of aiming to assess attachment relationships and make informed decisions as mandated by her employer, to be difficult, as she had been using an informal attachment assessment process:

*It's hard to gauge what you should be looking for and what you should do with it...you are finding the stuff out but what do you do with it once you've got it...I suppose you're always looking...in terms of the emotional and developmental needs of the child and for their relationship experiences...you're looking for a relationship that is going to hold up.*

### Anne: Adoptions Social Worker

Anne, a practicing social worker for over 8 years, identified Vera Fahlberg (1991) and Nancy Thomas (2005). In relation to these influences, when invited to describe what it was about the attachment theory that made the most sense to her, this is what she said:

*[Its] in terms of what happens to children that don't get secure attachments and have them disrupted...you can see the children's behaviour and link it back into their attachment cycle and knowing that this is what happened when they were a baby.*

As with the previous interviews, Anne began her explorations of the theory-practice dance through the door of practice. To questions about the link between attachment theory and social work assessments, she immediately responded that *"one case in particular cropped up"*. She then described five interconnected ways that she had engaged in that were integral to her experience of putting attachment theory into her practice: identifying her own personal theories of relationships that guided her practice; her ongoing increased understanding of her own attachment relationships; her developing capacity to recognise attachment behaviours in children; incorporating attachment theory informed assessments into her practice; and implementing practical ways of bringing the theory into day- to-day practice. For example, in the field of infant adoption:

*... if their birth parents had given them a toy right from the beginning making sure that carries through to the final destination and blankets and sheets and clothing and all that sort of stuff to ensure that it continues...[as well as the infant's] routine.*

Throughout her interview, Anne described her experience of practice based on two contrasting social work roles: one as a care and protection social worker, the other as an adoptions social worker:

*It's a lot different from when I worked with care and protection...especially in investigation...you had a specific role...you needed to go in there and you needed to ensure the child's safe and quite often you're not forming relationships with the parents or you try but because of the situation they don't, the relationships hardly ever work...whereas when you've got volunteer clients, they come to you for a service.*

Regarding her current role, she emphasised being able to take time: *You could be hours...because their story [is] quite complicated and detailed and there is a trust that is built up between the social worker and clients and so the relationships comes from that and forms from that.* Anne then continued:

> *I don't think care and protection social workers have enough time or perhaps enough knowledge about looking at how the parents have been brought up and looking at their relationships and their experiences of being parented, how they've moved on from that. Because you're looking at the child you're kind of making judgments without having a full story about where they come from as well... it is all reactive and it's all brought about by an incident where the child has been abused...I think sometimes we're a little bit too quick to remove when we don't need to and perhaps because of our own sort of fear of the what if, the risk we are all on tippy-toes going oh well we better remove her in case it happens again and if it all turns to crap we're going to be in the firing line...you cover your back as much as possible...Social workers fear that...social workers feel that pressure all the time.*

### Dorothy: Care and Protection/Permanency Planning Social Worker

Dorothy, currently a care and protection social worker described that her process of coming to link attachment theory with social work practice occurred over time:

> *I knew about attachments and I knew about John Bowlby and all that stuff but I didn't actually correlate it to the behaviour that was seen with the teenagers...it was like 'oh my god' there is a whole body of knowledge out there about why this is happening...it's really about their attachments.*

Key theoretical influences on Dorothy included the attachment cycles of Vera Fahlberg (1991), the Ministry of Social Development clipping service[17] and the work of Bruce Perry (1997) [18].

For Dorothy too, the theory came to life through practice examples. Dorothy described a critical aspect of her putting the theory into her practice, was through having taken time to conduct further study: *"I took the time out to just look at this stuff that I realised really... is about...belonging...Don't do anything until you've found a family, find somewhere safe to put that child"*. An integral aspect of 'taking time' was having spent some time as a social worker in a therapy oriented organisation. She said, *"I'm not a therapist but I actually wanted to have some sense of how that was for kids... and then I wanted to come back to this work"*. In addition, the focus of attending to the dynamics of relationships as part of the intervention, while an aspect of her work in the therapy-oriented organisation, is not an integrated aspect of her current social work practice.

Regarding her current social work practice, the issue of attachment theory informed assessments was a primary concern. This concern included her own practice and extended to her colleagues and organisation. She specifically made reference to a risk assessment tool that she was expected to use by her organisation:

*I'm not qualified to do attachment assessments...I would just do observation...we've got no tools around that. It is really dangerous...we're out there and you don't know what you're looking for when you're looking at a lot of those bits on that risk assessment system...You can't actually sign off anything unless you've done it...this is really dangerous.* [19]

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[17] *The Ministry of Social Development,* a New Zealand Government organisation, provides a website relevant to social workers and regularly updated with current research, publications and media releases. See: www.msd.govt.nz.

[18] For easy access to many of the publications of Bruce Perry, who has linked attachment theory with neuro-science: www.ChildTrauma.org.

[19] Recent amendments within the Children, Young Persons and their Families (CYP&F Act) 1989, advocate for a Differential Response Model (DRM) to Notifications. The risk assessment tool referred to here by these social workers, is part of a developing DRM in Aotearoa/NZ. For an interesting article on this developing response effectiveness see: Waldegrave and Coy (2005).

Dorothy expressed interest in further research using attachment theory within the care and protection field, to help develop clearer practice guidelines for the assessment of suspected emotional neglect.

### Maggie: Hospital Social Worker

First, as featured in many of the other interviews, Maggie reflected that it is difficult as a practitioner to think about formal theories while in the midst of practice, and she showed, as did the other social workers interviewed, that her theoretical reflections began with a process of using practice examples. When beginning to think about attachment theory she said, *"I just have a few cases at the moment, actually one I've just seen which is going through my mind"*.

For Maggie, the key aspects of attachment theory that made sense to her were described as being:

> *For the child and the primary caregiver be it the parent or the foster parent to have the relationship where both of them feel, more for the child I suppose, [where] they feel safe and wanted and loved and protected...[the]...thing that stands out for me is having a pivotal person in the child's life and there is another bit that really stands out is that you have to have these people within a few years of life...a pivotal person be it an auntie, a school teacher...*

Maggie also expressed an understanding of long-term outcomes: *"I am always working towards getting people to think of the long term effects...okay she might be presenting now because that was the crisis point in her life but it was the years down the track that worried me"*. In addition, she emphasised that attachment theory reinforced the importance of children and adults having access to relationships that were helpful and nurturing throughout their lifespan.

Maggie also talked about the practice context of stress:

*Sometimes I talk to them about how they would handle stress before in previous situations and try to get an idea of how they are going to be in an ante-natal situation...how they might deal with the stress of having a baby in the unit...stress can interrupt it [the developing attachment relationship] because it's an abnormal medical situation that they've gone into.*

In Maggie's current social work context she said:

*The hard part about this job...is that you don't have that long-term relationship with people. It is very here and now...when you meet people in a crisis state...some people are receptive and some aren't of trying to talk. There are a plethora of issues that come up but I'm always mindful of people who like a lot of information at first and some people like it in dribs and drabs and some who just don't want to know anything. They don't want to talk to a social worker.*

### Belinda: Care and Protection/Permanency Planning Social Worker

Following nearly two decades of social work training and practice, attachment theory was introduced to Belinda about seven years ago by one of her supervisors whose practice drew on the attachment theory research and practice of Professor Karl Brisch (2002). Attachment theory helped Belinda make sense of:

*The early stuff, the very, very early stuff rather than waiting until things go wrong actually at the very early start trying to prevent them in the first place and contradicting the expectation that people just get it right anyway and I think it's going hand in hand with education about it so it is not labelling people as inadequate or whatever it's more along the lines of the early style and guidance and education through that... so that's what I really like about it.*

Of her current social work job she said, *"...I get really complex cases... multiple placement changes, years of care protection...now find a permanent place for them...[then] it gets even more complicated...".* Belinda described the pressure to find placements: *"you're under pressure...I think part of the interviewing is not very detailed. I think we are not very selective out of the sheer desperation in terms of getting caregivers".* As a consequence:

> *You get information once the placement breaks down because you get this phone call and you've got a child that is sexually acting out and then all of a sudden the caregiver rings up and [says] I can't because I was actually sexually abused at that age...*

Belinda also understood the pressure on social workers to find placements as being: *"about the lack of resources, even though the Act refers to the child and that they should be able to form a significant attachment"*[20]. For Belinda, regarding assessment, she acknowledged that while there was an organisational tool, she did not use any structured assessment tools. She described that her decision making was:

> *Quite often on gut feeling.... once you know the children and you meet the caregiver...then somehow, I don't know what it is, it's like your guts says it's ok...it is looking at their ability to emotionally hold and contain [difficult situations], it's about being able to work in with other people...with other professionals....*

This concludes the introduction of the social work respondents of this study. In addition, inclusive in the interviews was an opportunity for these social workers to reflect on the following vignette, followed by an invitation to respond to the following question: "How would you use attachment theory to help make sense of this situation?" A fuller summary of the responses to the vignette can also be viewed in Appendix M: Interview Summaries. In addition, there are not any comments from Grace as her interview finished before we had an opportunity to explore the vignette.

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[20] Children,Young Persons, and Their Families Act 1989, section 13 (h).

*Responses to the Vignette*

For your reference, the vignette is provided here as follows[21]:

> *.....When I am with this foster mum, Melanie, I feel like I want to tell her to go easy on Karen (aged 8). Karen has been in this foster family for over 12 months and it's really the best we have on offer right now for her. I feel really bad though that Karen is not getting what she needs emotionally. She's being cared for like a boarder but there is no warmth in Melanie. Melanie won't have a bar of the emotional stuff and just wants to talk about reimbursements, if her payments have gone through or not and how I am getting on with organising her to get a new washing machine and stove. Today Karen had stolen some stuff from school and she was in her room when I arrived for stealing and then lying about stealing! Melanie had said that Karen had to stop being naughty and drawing negative attention to herself. Melanie was angry that Karen was reflecting badly on her own family. Melanie wanted all of my time and didn't think I should see Karen, unless I was intending "to give her a good talking to". Melanie was concerned that Karen didn't seem to be making any progress and that she was actually making life hard for herself. Melanie said that the best she can do for Karen is to show her that "we don't do things like that in our family and she will have to choose what she wants, our family rules or out". I can't change the placement. Melanie is not abusive...I don't know what I can do to help make it any different...I don't see the point...all she does is go over the same stuff over and over again, she never puts into practice what we have talked about because she says that she forgot, was too busy etc. What's the point, I am not using my skills as a social worker?*

While the responses to the vignette were varied, seven different ways of approaching this scenario from an attachment theory informed base were identified. First noted, were generalised ways of describing the situation: Maggie said, "*she [Melanie] has no relationship with her [Karen]*"; Anne reflected that "*Melanie hasn't formed any attachment to this child*" and CJ said that "*there is no attachment there at all*". Secondly, was to consider acting before further exploration of the caregiver-child relationship: "*I'd just take her out. I personally think that this social worker should remove Karen from the house because she is not having any of her needs met*" (Maggie).

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[21] This vignette is not based on any one real family or social worker conversation. It is intended to be representative of a social work conversation, rather than reflective of any specific family/social worker.

Thirdly, were endeavours to engage the caregiver through creating space for reflection on the situation. For example CJ said:

*I would...talk about her responses to the child and I would make a decision about whether I would leave that child there or not based on her responses and whether I thought she was prepared to make changes...and if she wasn't, that child would be out of there.*

Anne wondered:

*I think it would be interesting to see what Melanie's background (was?)...look at how her parents handled different situations...like, if she's been brought up with the fact that her parents sent her to her room every time she did something without talking to her or giving her a hug or whatever...then she can start thinking that's how I felt as a child when my parents did that to me and moving that into how Karen may be feeling when she does that to Karen...*

Belinda reflected:

*It's actually sometimes wondering out aloud what they actually may feel...and then start to educate...okay if this is what she is doing she may be doing it because of...this is where she has come from so if she behaves that way it probably usually would have happened...she wants you to react as dysfunctionally as her parents did...It's like, don't get yourself in a corner, don't let them manipulate into that.*

CJ also stated:

*I would start by talking about how attachment occurs normally and do that little flow chart of babies' needs and what happens if babies' needs aren't met. Then I would talk about current history. Before I went out there I would find out exactly how many placements she had had, over what duration, how long...why she came*

*in, whatever that was...I'd talk about the change of placement, how her emotional needs have not been met, about every time you change how the rules change, expectations change, the way you interact in relationships...I'd leave a little bit of literature. Depending on how long that literature was I might join in one or two sessions.*

Fourthly, were wonderings about the child where Maggie said: *"the caregiver is not responding to her as a caring warm person and that is going to impact on Karen as she gets older, forming her own relationships".* CJ reflected:

*The child is acting out...although the child is seeking contact proximity from the foster mother, like she's being rejected...the caregiver is being avoidant...the child is trying anything, this stuff's not happening so now she is moving into meaningless behaviour, anything to get attention....*

Fifthly, the respondents expressed their feelings about the situation. For example, Maggie said, *"I think it's terrible...heartbreaking"* and Dorothy emotionally expressed the professional dilemma: *"I know this kid shouldn't be here...I think where else is she going to go and what's going to happen to her...You have the theory, you know what's ideal...there is a gap between what you know should be in place and what's possible..."*

Lastly, this included reflections that wove through the possibilities of experience from the perspective of the child, the foster mother and the social worker: For example Ruth stated: *"Well everybody's stuck, the girl's stuck, the social worker's stuck, the foster mother's stuck...I would also be looking very much not just at the little girl but at the relationships".* Ruth continued to explore this scenario as follows:

*The social worker is identifying with the child...(but)...what is it about this child that pulls out this really punishing witchlike side of the foster mother...How much is the foster mum and how much has this child actually got a problem? ...Melanie... is trying to teach this little girl to be good...probably the little girl isn't actually able*

*to learn about consequences and understand about it...she is struggling...I have a*
*mandate from Melanie to talk to Karen... I saw that as a way in really...Karen is*
*making life not only hard for herself but hard for Melanie...I'm not sure that Karen*
*is able to choose...is she behaving...impulsively or unconsciously... For example*
*stealing...this is a sign something is going wrong, here's a child in distress in some*
*way...so I am immediately starting to think what's going on in this relationship...*

This concludes the summary of the interviews and our brief glimpse into the key experiences and ideas described throughout the interviews, including responses to the vignette, by each social worker. The focus now shifts to a revisiting of the interviews, with an eye and ear tuned to re-searching in-common experiences existing in each social worker's unique experience of putting attachment theory into social work practice. Revisiting the interviews occurred through accessing what had become constructed narratives for view: the transcripts; the letters of understanding and the interview summaries, including sustaining mindfulness to the material from the eighth interview. In addition I had my own experience of each interview as well as ready access to the audio files.

### Section Two: Viewing the Interviews in Relationship to Each Other: Re-Searching for In-Common Experiences

Having now provided a sense of the person's interview, the focus turns to the in-common experiences that were identified when the interviews were re-searched in relationship to one another. This moment in the research process felt daunting. In the presence of such rich, unique and diverse interview experiences, I became lost among the interviews while searching for common elements between them. However, while being lost in the social workers' contributions, looking for in-common experiences, six key themes emerged:

1. The 'wow' of meeting attachment theory for the first time;
2. From theory into practice to practice into theory;
3. Bringing practice into theory: Social Workers' descriptions of social work practice, informed by their understood attachment theory;

4. Bringing practice into theory: The practice gap between recognition of attachment concerns and specific social work interventions;

5. The phenomenological practice gap between recognition of attachment concerns and specific social work interventions: Attachment theory informed social work assessments;

6. The phenomenological practice gap between recognition of attachment concerns and specific social work interventions: The social work role and social work client relationships.

### Theme One: The 'Wow' of Meeting Attachment Theory for the First Time

*Like WOW...all the stuff that I had absorbed on a more informal basis...it fitted in a structure and it was just so fascinating...it's in every part of us. (Grace)*

The first theme is summarised as "wow" (Grace). Many of the respondents described a 'wow' experience when they first heard about attachment theory, a moment of it all making sense, of a connection with themselves and their work with people. Dorothy said, *"I knew straight away...it was just amazing",* Grace said, *"like wow... it was just so fascinating...it's in every part of us..."* and CJ said, *"it permeates right through...it is so relevant in our relationships".* The descriptions of these moments in time were expressive in tone and language, full and easily recalled and relived, with the 'wonder' at times carrying on into their thought processes, outside of their work settings. CJ said, *"...and I'll be standing there, not even at work, I'll be in a social situation in some conversation and I'll be going oh yeah".*

What was especially interesting about the 'wow' descriptions, was the confidence in universality of the theory that they were coming into contact with, of a 'knowing' that this theory somehow made sense of some of their own experiences. For example, CJ, continuing her statement from above, said, *"...it is so relevant in our relationships, whether they are professional or personal, social... it just goes right across you know...because it is the core essence of the realities of the way you develop".* For Grace

she said that "*it's part of all the other theories because it so much impacts on people's ability to form and sustain relationships*".

For Dorothy it was the clarity surrounding her understandings of some of the children that she had worked alongside in foster care:

> *I can think of the kids...one boy, you know we would move him with his rubbish bag, moving the kids all the time from placement because they would disrupt and the caregivers would get sick of them and throw them out because they've smashed the walls...they'd pinch their car and all that testing stuff about not belonging anywhere...it was like 'Oh my god' there is a whole body of knowledge out there about why this is happening...it's really about their attachments...I knew then what I'd been seeing in my work...I had a model to put around it...I knew what the disruptive behaviour was; I knew straight away...*

There was no uncertainty or caution, only exuberant expressions of knowing. This moment of 'wow' extended to the social workers identifying attachment theory informed theoretical influences that had been significant to them. Identified was the work of Harlow (1961), Perry (1997), Thomas (2005), Brisch (2002) and Nessie Bayley[22] with the work of Vera Fahlberg (1991) and Howe et al. (1999) repeatedly mentioned. For example, Ruth stated: "*The thing that changed my life was hearing Vera Fahlberg's work...and the thing that it gave me was those attachment cycles...that for me was just revolutionary*". Grace, in referring to the Fahlberg work, said that she found it "*absolutely amazing and I didn't read it cover to cover at all... it was just one of them I kept referring to...she gives you a list of things to put in a report...she just puts it so well*".

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[22] Nessie Bayley is a British Social Worker with expertise in attachment theory informed "Direct Work" who has regularly contributed to the work of the BAAF (British Association of Adoption and Fostering). See for example Batty, D., & Bayley, N. (Eds). (1984). *In touch with Children.* London: British Association of Adoption and Fostering.

CJ stated: *"That David Howe book...it took me a while to read. I had to put it down and then read a little bit more and even Vera Fahlberg as well but those two books have been awesome...awesome in terms of understanding attachment theory and trying to put it into practice in my work where I can"*. Grace, referring to the work of David Howe et al. (1999), said:

> *You could read it and understand it, you didn't have to think about it, you didn't have to work out what he was telling you and the same with Vera Fahlberg...I think that being readable is quite important as well because, however good the piece of work might be, if it's in a language that is not user friendly I won't be able to read it and think how I could apply that to this and that...*

Next, in the interview, the social workers were invited to elaborate more specifically on some of the aspects of attachment theory that had particularly made sense to them and been useful for practice. The moment of knowing, which had been so profound, shifted to uncertainty, to a struggle to articulate specificity. There was much embarrassment and expressed surprise and difficulty about not being able to think, not being able to come up with something. Anne responded:

> *I think probably I've just been quite busy as a practitioner. Like when we were doing my competency assessment... they ask what theories you use and I'm kind of like well on a day to day basis it's not, you don't use theories. You talk to people and you form relationships with your clients and you have to do things on time, like you've got deadlines and you've got reports to write...*

CJ said, *"it's hard to put into words..."* However, the social workers' discomfort eased quickly, they found their words again and the interviews continued on.

What sense might be made about this change from loss of language to finding language again? A key observation at this particular juncture in the interview began the sense-making process: while the interview questions were structured towards putting theory

into practice, when viewed closely, the respondents restructured the 'theory into practice' framework into a 'practice into theory' framework. Reflections began centred in practice, rather than theory. For example, many of the social workers began their explorations in a similar way: CJ began her theoretical explorations with *"I am thinking of one child..."*, Dorothy with *"I can think of the kids..."* and Belinda, *"I get really complex cases..."*. Anne found her thoughts by saying, *"one case in particular cropped up..."* This structural shift, from 'theory into practice', to 'practice into theory', which enabled the social workers in this study to find their words, becomes the focus of the second key theme.

### *Theme Two: From Theory into Practice to Practice into Theory*

> *I just have a few cases at the moment, actually one I've just seen which is going through my mind...* (Maggie)

This theme explores the linguistic structure of the common premises that were positioned between the loss of thought and the capacity to explore the aspects of attachment theory that had become meaningful. Close analysis of these statements highlighted three shared structural features of each premise. First, was the use of *I*: "I am...", "I can...", "I get...", "I just..." The social workers found their words by returning to their own experiences, even though they had initially been directed towards the theory. Therefore, *theory* and *I* were shown to be connected in relationship to one another, as these social workers, who were initially lost while processing *theory*, found *I*. Secondly, following the presentation of *I* (referred to from here-on-in as the self of the social worker) was the presentation of *client*: "[I am thinking of]...*one child...the kids...really complex cases...one case in particular"*. Therefore, these social workers seemed to be describing their theory-practice relationship as a process of bringing themselves (*I*), together with their practice (*clients*), into *theory*.

What is interesting here is that most of the social workers in this study had a "wow" response to the literature. They found themselves in relationship with others within the

theory. However, most did not go on to describe an active supported experience to help bring and sustain their "I" with clients into further understandings of attachment theory while staying connected with their initial "wow" experiences. In contrast, Ruth's training and relationship with attachment theory occurred within an experientially based training programme. In her interview she emphasised the centrality of supported experiential learning in regard to attachment theory. She stated:

> *[My trainers were] very much saying that you had to [learn] it experientially, that the workers needed to get in touch with their own, perhaps unresolved issues, round loss and attachment if they were actually going to take on and do the work.*

Ruth's statement, emphasising the foregrounding of the social worker as a way to bring theory into "lived experience" is congruent with the social workers' reflections beginning with practice, including the "I" of the social worker.

Thirdly, these findings informed a change of focus in how the interviews were being thought about in the process of being understood. The commonly referred to social work task, of putting theory into practice, now needed to be reconsidered as a process of reflecting: the self of the social worker bringing practice into theory. It had been assumed that social workers would take a piece of theory and show how this became practice and analysis would track the path of theory into practice. However, these social workers' descriptions focused on practice examples of attachment theory. The research understanding process of how the interview material was perceived needed to adapt so as to reflect the integrity of this emerging data. Consequently, to understand would now require tracking the paths of the social workers' practice descriptions into theory and to focus on the theory as it resided in practice as described by these social workers. Attachment theory residing in social work practice is now explored as the third key theme.

*Theme Three: Bringing Practice into Theory; Social Workers' Descriptions of Social Work Practice, Informed by Understood Attachment Theory*

Throughout the interviews, language, commonly linked with the attachment theory, was utilised: *attachment issues, concerns,* or *problems, attachment disorders, reactive attachment disorder, disorganised attachment* and *disrupted attachment.* These constructs were used throughout the interviews, predominantly as descriptions of client issues. The sometimes confusing nature of these terms was highlighted by Anne in her interview. While describing a piece of work, Anne said: *"I know disorganised, I'm just trying to figure the difference between disruptive and disorganised. Tell me what's disorganised again?"*

In addition, when attachment theory constructs were used by the social workers in their reflections on social work practice, there was a repeated tendency for the original theoretical constructs to be used in language that reflected common social usage, in contrast to theory specific use. For example, throughout the vignette, there were repeated references that the foster mother and child *"had no relationship"*, that the caregiver *"hasn't formed any attachment to this child"* and that *"there is no attachment there at all"*.

These statements, while using the language of attachment theory, were not using this language in a way that reflected theory specific use of the attachment theory constructs. For example, within an attachment theory framework it would be very rare to have a child with no attachment at all, especially if they have been parented by someone. Attachment theory instead, would be curious about the quality of this attachment relationship. Therefore, given the confusing nature of the constructs and the social workers' tendency to use these constructs in common ways, it was further understood that what was being viewed was the social workers' demonstrated understanding of attachment theory in their practices.

Throughout this study, the social workers presented a plethora of views reflecting their understandings of attachment theory as informing their practice. For example:

*The biggest part that makes sense is in terms of what happens to children that don't get secure attachments and have them disrupted...you can see the children's behaviour and link it back into their attachment cycle, and knowing that this is what happened when they were a baby and now...the outcomes afterwards. (Anne)*

*For the child and the primary caregiver, be it the parent or the foster parent, to have the relationship where both of them feel safe and wanted and loved and protected...*(the)*...thing that stands out for me is having a pivotal person in the child's life and...that you have to have these people within a few years of life... (Maggie)*

*The early stuff, the very, very early stuff rather than waiting until things go wrong.... (Belinda)*

Attachment theory was also used to directly inform social work practice tasks:

*If I want to know them then I really need to know what's going on in their world. I have to build a relationship with them...and I am aware that they do use me as a secure-base so I try and be interested and reliable but you have to give the time to do that because if you try and rush it, it is actually really unsafe for them...it's about providing a secure-base for clients, being interested, consistent and reliable. (CJ)*

Anne described practical tasks during an adoption process such as, "*...the passing on of blankets... If they had a toy, if their birth parents had given them a toy right from the beginning making sure that carries through to the final destination.*"

Attachment theory was also used as a way for the social worker to understand themselves and their own relationships. Ruth described a story from her own childhood, highlighting her ongoing journey of attachment theory and Anne said: "*I have learnt a lot about how I*

*and my attachments have been over the years...Why I have attached to people, why I have got into relationships that I have done...what happened between my Mum and Dad, and trying to understand that..."*

As shown in the statement below, Dorothy was being informed by attachment theory as a way to enquire and make sense of repeated observations across practices:

> *I wonder about how many of our kids get maltreated in foster care. We don't track that... it's not that the foster parents are bad people, it's something to do with the dynamics that goes on and I'm not quite sure what it is. It's like something that is happening because these kids don't quite belong...maybe it is to do with how the child behaves but I can't think, always every week we are taking kids out of placements because they've been hit, because they've been sexually maltreated. We don't take them out when they're neglected. We don't take them out when we know they're not nurtured and loved, unless we've got somewhere else to put them...*

For Ruth, her understanding of attachment theory was constructed as an entire framework that guided her practice:

> *It gives you a way when things aren't working to ask questions about what is going on here and that's the strength of theory for me...it is not that it gives you answers necessarily, but it gives you a framework for asking more questions when things aren't right or aren't working.*

If there was a pattern to be ascertained across such variability and unique understandings, it would be a pattern of emphasis: an emphasis on the client. This appears to indicate a shift in emphasis within the social worker. Describing their first experiences of meeting attachment theory, social workers said *"wow"*, *"it's in every part of us..."*, *"it permeates right through...it is so relevant in our relationships"*[23]. This beginning place seems reflective of attachment theory that addresses the inner, relational and the social aspects

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[23] My emphasis added

of key relationships. However, when translated by these social workers as a practice theory, attachment theory no longer was about what was *"in...us"*, nor about *"our relationships"*, but was primarily being used to inform the social worker about clients and their relationships. Further, these social workers specifically placed high emphasis on the client's social world of happenings/events/key people, with some reference to the relational world and much less emphasis on the client's inner world.

This identified pattern of understood-theory did not represent the understandings provided by Ruth, who stated:

> *...quite often children were identified as having attachment issues but then that was kind of like the end of it...that stability and long-term placement would create the answer and that's where I felt attachment theory just isn't understood...just because a child is in a placement for a long time, doesn't mean to say they revise their inner working model to include in the possibilities of secure attachment.*

Ruth's statement represented a client focus, which attended to the child's inner world through the inner working model, the relational world through the caregiver-child relationships, and the social world in the context of care - in this circumstance, 'long-term placement'.

Integral within this client oriented practice, was an observed disconnection, where 'I', 'relationship' and 'client' (I/relationship/client) were predominantly viewed as disconnected from each other. This is in contrast to the I/relationship/client connection first noted within the descriptions of first meeting attachment theory and then noted whereby the self of the social worker brought themselves and clients into theory. This shift from connection to disconnection (with the exception of Ruth's responses) was most marked in the responses to the vignette, which provided an opportunity for the social workers to show attachment theory understandings amidst their social work practice reflections.

For example, first noted in the responses to the vignette, the relationship between the child and the caregiver was often described in common usage attachment language, emphasising the perception of there being *"no relationship"* between the caregiver and the child. Furthermore while the social behaviours and the actions of the caregiver and the child could be recognised, these were not considered from a relational perspective. In attachment theory terms, the external behavioural context was predominantly considered, but not in connection to the relational and inner (such as the internal working models) contexts that impact on, and inform an understanding of these interactions.

However the social workers also provided examples emphasizing a relational view of this complex situation through viewing the relationships as they impacts on each other. For example, Belinda reflected that she might say something like *"...she wants you to react as dysfunctionally as her parents did"* to the caregiver. She begins thinking relationally, thinking about the impact of one's mind and behaviour on another. However while this relational reflection begins with the promise of sustaining a shared view of the caregiver and child, the focus shifts to a view from the caregiver's position: *"...don't get yourself in a corner, don't let them manipulate you into that"* (Belinda). In addition, the inner world of both partners in the relationship is not considered, which, if considered, would begin to help make sense of why the caregiver finds herself in a corner.

Dorothy highlighted another issue of bringing social work practice into one's understanding of attachment theory. For example, she said in her response to the vignette:

> *I know this kid shouldn't be here...I think where else is she going to go and what's going to happen to her...You have the theory, you know what's ideal...there is a gap between what you know should be in place and what's possible...*

Dorothy makes it clear that there is a gap between her understandings and use of the attachment theory within her social work role and these understandings reaching the client. Amidst the responses to the vignette and the other interview material, was a practice gap between the recognition of 'attachment issues' and the intervention

possibilities available to the social worker. This gap in practice is now explored as a fourth key theme.

### Theme Four: Bringing Practice into Theory; The Practice Gap between Recognition of Attachment Concerns and Specific Social Work Interventions

Social workers described a practice gap between the recognition of attachment issues and what to do as a social worker, with what had been recognised. For example, CJ said, "*I can recognise it, but I certainly can't treat it...my job is to recognize it... to get the right support to work with that... I'm certainly no therapist...*". Dorothy said, in response to being able to recognise 'attachment concerns', "*I'm not a therapist...*". Belinda also described the 'recognition-intervention gap', with the addition of her personal experience of this as a social worker:

> *It gets even more complicated in terms of permanency work...you get the case when a caregiver has decided to take orders...the little of what you are doing has actually been supporting them through the process in terms of care and working out a financial package...and it is really difficult because sometimes they have been left to drift for a long time...where children have been with those caregivers for years and years and you actually worry because it doesn't seem to be right, it's by default and you're doomed if you do and you're doomed if you don't; for a lot of those kids it is the only place they know and the physical care is taken care of quite well but there is other stuff there that is not...the caregivers...none of them are actually open to any form of intervention or service because they feel so threatened, they have been left on their own...the children are in a limbo place and now it's your job to actually make the right decisions and you're left with something that is actually no good...and...it is about the lack of resources  even though the Act refers to the child should be now to be able to form a significant attachment.*

This example emphasises the paradoxical position that many of the social workers described. Social workers are often trained to think ecologically, but legislated to think about the predominant rights of one person, the child, while being organisationally

instructed to provide time-limited service. Belinda powerfully highlights that the self of the social worker, while acknowledged for enacting the legislation and organisational mandate, carries within them the emotion related to being engaged with a described irresolvable phenomenological practice gap.

Belinda was not alone in her expressions of *"doomed if you do doomed if you don't"*, with Dorothy reflecting:

> *I think that is one of the reasons we lose a lot of social workers, they can't do that anymore, they're not going to keep doing that harm anymore... you can't work like that forever and a day...you're not going to keep doing it...if you're really seeing what you're doing.*

These social workers highlighted that, while there may be a practice gap between recognition and intervention possibilities, this gap was not a void; it was a space where the phenomenological experiences of their social work resided. Through describing their personal experiences of professional decision making, a phenomenological recognition-intervention practice gap was recognised. For example, personal experience in professional decision making was repeatedly described in reference to attachment theory informed social work assessments, and this now forms the focus of the fifth theme.

### Theme Five: The Phenomenological Practice Gap between Recognition of Attachment Concerns and Specific Social Work Intervention; Attachment Theory Informed Social Work Assessments

Many of the social workers interviewed, stated that their organisation's practice policies included the assessment of attachment relationships as a guide to social work decision making. The social workers' descriptions of their experiences of attachment theory informed assessments, illustrated an implicit differentiation in practice, between the capacity to recognise attachment and the capacity to assess attachments for the purpose of intervention. For example, much reference was made to a 'risk assessment tool' being utilised by care and protection oriented social workers. Dorothy said that:

*There is a framework in the risk assessment tool used, where you have to judge the mother's attachment, you have to judge the attachment and I always write...I have done 2 observations or 1 observation and 1 home visit. I'm not qualified to do attachment assessments...I would just do observation...we've got no tools around that. It is really dangerous...we're out there and you don't know what you're looking for when you're looking at a lot of those bits on that risk assessment system...You can't actually sign off anything unless you've done it...this is really dangerous...*

Grace stated:

*It's hard to gauge what you should be looking for and what you should do with it...you are finding the stuff out but what do you do with it once you've got it...I suppose you're always looking...in terms of the emotional and developmental needs of the child and for their relationship experiences...you're looking for a relationship that is going to hold up.*

For Belinda, she described:

*Getting to know the children, in terms of getting to know what the needs are, not only their behavioural problems, but actually looking at how they relate to the world, how they relate to their caregivers, looking at the caregivers, how they relate to the children and then looking at prospective permanent caregivers, and it's looking at how to match the caregiver with the children and vice versa.*

In further exploration with Belinda about this assessment process, she continued as follows:

*Maree: Were you using any structured assessment tools or maps to help you?*
*Belinda: No I didn't get them.*

*Maree: So you were going on your theory and your experience.*

*Belinda: And actually quite often on gut feeling....Once you knew the children or once you know the children and you meet the caregiver and then somehow I don't know what it is it's like your guts says it's ok.*

Another attachment theory informed assessment description was provided by Grace:

*Maree: So has there been an attachment assessment of her and the children?*

*Grace: There was an assessment done...but in terms of the actual attachment, no.*

*Maree: So we don't know what kind of attachment relationship they have... whether it is disorganized etc...?*

*Grace: No we don't have that detail...it's very poor in some respects because the children have been moved about... Mum hadn't had full-time care of the children for some years and she's placed them on an informal basis with people before we were involved so the children really don't quite know where they are, or why they are where they are, although they know some of the stuff that happened...Some of it's character-based, some of it they saw, some of it they heard, but they don't really know why they're not back with mum.*

Anne, speaking of the assessment process within her adoption oriented organisation said:

*The assessment process does have an attachment section in it and in that section we talk about their relationships with their parents and the relationships with their siblings, how they were brought up, what were the issues that come up for them, what were some of the good things, bad things, what would they do differently with their own child to the way that they were parented. We look at their relationships with other children, like friends' children...so we look at their attachments with their families and explore any issues.*

The above examples, while diverse, share a common feature; an undifferentiated use of attachment theory informed assessments specific to social work. While the social work

task and the assigned importance of clients' attachments was clear, the pathway between these remained unclear. For example, Belinda described attachment theory informed practice decisions, being formed *"quite often on gut feeling"*. Dorothy said, *"we're out there and you don't know what you're looking for when you're looking at a lot of those bits on that risk assessment system..."*, and Grace reflected, *"it's hard to gauge what you should be looking for and what you should do with it"*.

Ruth provided a recent example of social work decision making, highlighting a gap between recognising attachment issues and recognising the use of attachment theory as a practice theory to inform social work decision making:

> *I think my most horrible story is of a foster mother ringing me up saying could I just call round... So I went round and when I go in the French doors at the end of their lounge I notice a new toddler I've not seen before by the door and he froze and dropped his bottle. I walked in...I'm busy having a bit of a chat with this foster mother, but I can't help but notice this little boy and he stood there absolutely frozen. I eventually turned to him and said "you don't need to bother about me, I am nothing to do with you and you don't need to worry about me". He sidled up around the wall in behind the foster mother and after about another 5 minutes she said actually you've done what I needed you to do, I shall ring you and explain what this has all been about. You can go now. So I went...I noticed her picking up this little one, he buried his head in her breast and wouldn't look up until he heard the gate click. When he heard the gate click he looked up, saw I was going. Apparently, after I had gone he was busy playing, chatting, absolutely fine and what she wanted to establish was that if a stranger came, he would be frightened and scared that he would be kidnapped again, and having established that, of course we then tried to get the social workers to leave him because they were moving him on Monday to his 6th or 7th placement in as many months aged 18 months old. She said he is just beginning to form attachments to me, he doesn't want to go to anybody but me and they want to move him. They moved him.*

While in this scenario we are left with the agony of the key players mentioned and the observing social worker, we do not know this story from the position of the key social worker. However, from an attachment theory perspective and based on the emerging findings of this study, this example of practice indicates how disconnected theory can become from practice, where the theory, while referred to in name, is not recognisable in practice.

These descriptions of the assessment process have functioned to highlight attachment theory informed assessments as often being conducted within a complex web of role, relationship, legislative and managerial conditions. These external contextual issues, in conjunction with the social workers' internal understood attachment theory, created a fuller picture of the social workers' experience of bringing practice into theory amidst a phenomenological recognition-intervention practice gap. Described contextual practice issues and their impact on the social workers phenomenological experience of the practice gaps between recognition, assessing and intervention, constitutes the sixth theme.

***Theme Six: The Phenomenological Practice Gap between Recognition of Attachment Concerns and Specific Social Work Interventions; The Social Work Role and Social Worker-Client Relationships***

The primary impacting contextual issue described by the social workers in this study, was their social work role in conjunction with the nature of the client's participation. For example, Anne highlighted social work role contextual issues when she spoke about her current social work position:

> *It's a lot different from when I worked with care and protection...especially in investigation...you had a specific role...you needed to go in there and you needed to ensure the child's safety and quite often you're not forming relationships with the parents or you try but because of the situation they don't, the relationships hardly ever work...whereas when you've got volunteer clients, they come to you for a service.*

Maggie described her experience in the following way: She said that: *the hard part about this job… is that you don't have that long term relationship with people. It is very here and now.* With the work context often being short term crisis oriented work, this worker observed that *"when you meet people in a crisis state…some people are receptive [to the offer of support] and some aren't".*

Anne and Maggie described a process where the social worker joins the social work-client relationship in a specific role, with an emphasis on the client's world. This emphasis in turn impacts on the social worker's perception of their own task, no longer primarily guided by practice theory, but by the prescribed social work role and the client's availability to engage. While a primary practice context remains the social work-client relationship, the focus turns to what tasks are possible to enact within this relationship. We begin to see not only a perceived disconnection between the inner, relational and social world of the client, but also a disconnection between practice theory, the social work-client relationship and practice settings.

Furthermore the descriptions of Anne and Maggie, which were representative of many of the other interviews, offer implicit perspectives regarding the use of the social workers' understood attachment practice theory. For example, implied above is a query regarding the practical usefulness of attachment theory in task-oriented practice, such as in the care and protection investigation fields and crisis work, where people were either not 'receptive' to the help offered, or when they did not volunteer themselves into a client role.

These perspectives, when considered with the emerging findings across the key themes, begin to highlight a consequence of an attachment theory informed client-oriented practice theory, which has lost connectedness to a primary contextual setting in which this orientation is practiced. That is, the contextual setting of the social worker-client relationship. A relationship by nature of the social work task in conjunction with family stress, for example in care and protection social worker–client relationships, which often

begin and are sustained amidst stress and pressure for both the social worker and the client. Another social work context, such as hospital social work, brings different stresses where the social worker has but a very narrow window of opportunity to engage in social work practice with a client who may or may not have sought social work support.

These reflective understandings coexist with the expressions of understood attachment theory within the moments of 'wow', where for example Grace said, *"it so much impacts on people's ability to form and sustain relationships"*. However, viewed within these interviews, by the time that these understandings have become practice theory, the social worker's ability to form and sustain relationships seems to have become understood primarily as a function of their role in conjunction with clients' responses to this role. The self of the social worker and their *"ability to form and sustain relationships"*, once central to the processing of attachment theory, became scripted out of the process.

It is not surprising then, given these considerations, that there was a noticeable absence in many of the social work practice descriptions that provided reflections on the social work-client relationship beyond role differentiation as described above. The social workers predominantly described: the client and their external world and the social worker in their role/task. The self of the client and the self of the social worker were predominantly un-texted, undocumented aspects in their work. As a consequence, a sustained relational view, such as a social worker-client relationship, was not demonstrated throughout the majority of the interviews.

This finding however was surprising given that attachment theory, a relational theory developed to make sense of helpee-helper relationships at times of felt stress, a hallmark of crisis, short term work with people not actively seeking client status, was not perceived as being useful at these times. There appears then, within these interviews, a potential space between rhetoric and practice whereby attachment theory, while having much to offer social work practice, remains in the process of being understood as a social work practice theory that has the potential to inform the very social work contexts where

current uncertainty about its use prevails. This finding will be further discussed in the next chapter.

## Conclusion

Centre stage for this chapter has been held by the interviewed social workers' data. With summaries of the interviews provided, the interviews were then viewed in relationship with each other: researching for in-common experiences. Six key themes emerged illustrating a social work practice and attachment theory dance, narrated from the perspective of social workers' experiences. This specific theory-practice dance, described by these social workers, seemed to begin with an awakening experience of self. Further, it was this awakening of self that the social worker brought into their social work practice, through its many dimensions, contexts, roles and relationships.

During the process of 'bringing practice into theory' where theory, in turn became translated as a practice theory losses and gains were observed. Losses included: the acknowledged self of the social worker; the social worker-client relationship; and the social workers capacity to sustain theoretical coherence within their social work settings. Gained was the phenomenology of the social worker, who brought their practice into a lived experience of theory and practice, highlighting further that the identified losses required re-finding and foregrounding. In the following chapter, a reflective discussion will ensue, acknowledging these losses with an endeavour to make sense of their backgrounding from practice combined with an endeavour to reflect on ways that might facilitate a re-finding, foregrounding process within social practice theory and practice.

Before engaging in a discussion of these findings, to bring this chapter to a close, it is appropriate to explore some of the written statements from participants regarding their experience of being interviewed. Anne, in response to viewing her letter of understanding, replied by saying:

*I have read the information you sent me and was taken back with what I told you and how I worded things. This is not a bad thing, but rarely does one get to read what one has said. This has helped with my understanding of what goes through my head when I am working with clients and the need to keep reflecting on my practice.*

Grace responded with the following:

*Participation in your quest for knowledge in a very small way, gave an opportunity to step back and think about my own practice as well as the practice/theory links. I found it useful to actually 'walk through' the 'how' and 'why' and 'wherefores' of specific practice experiences. Although the basis of practice is rooted in theory, it is helpful to unpick it sometimes....However, I was unsettled to note how shockingly narrow my vocabulary has become. I was unaware of how frequently I used the term 'stuff' to encompass many things! That came as a bit of a jolt. I now feel myself stopping before I use that word and being more specific as to what I am talking about.*

As Anne, Grace and the other social workers had an opportunity to reflect on their own personal Letters of Understanding, what had emerged from the reflection process across the interviews now presented as a central understanding for the pending discussion. The task ahead is to now enter into reflective discussion regarding what has been understood across the interviews and the shared in-common experiences.

## Chapter Five: An Exploration of Bringing Practice into Theory

John Bowlby stated "the true test of a theory is its applicability to alleviating the distress of our clients" (Sable, 1992, p. 281). In this study, a plethora of positions were found within the reviewed social work practice theory concerning attachment theory as having current 'applicability' to alleviating client distress within social work. Where 'applicability' was cited, attachment theory as a social work practice theory reflected current epistemological trends emphasizing a foregrounding of applying practice theory to clients within risk-averse, client management oriented practice, with relational aspects of social work backgrounded. Amidst these practice theory trends this hermeneutic phenomenological qualitative study attended to the experiences of the social worker as a key informant to the complex processes activated when theory becomes practice theory and practice theory 'lived practice experiences'.

Specifically, this research enquiry has focused on addressing two key research questions. The first key research question: What do social workers say about their experiences of putting attachment theory into social work practice with children and families?, was addressed through the use of semi-structured interviews with social workers currently engaged in child and family oriented social work practice. The social workers in this study were self identified advocates of the value of attachment theory in social work practice. Based on the rich material within each of the interviews it became possible to address the second research question: Are there identifiable patterns, implicit and or explicit, being used by the interviewed social workers in their processing of attachment theory as a social work practice theory, to inform child and family oriented social work?

This chapter now enters into discussion on the findings outlined in the previous chapter. This discussion begins with 'bringing practice into theory' through providing a summary of what the social workers said regarding their experiences of transitioning attachment theory into a practice theory. The reviewed literature is then re-examined in light of these findings, highlighting many parallel processes between the social workers' experiences

and the reviewed literature. Finally, marking a return to the social worker, attachment theory informed practice implications are considered.

**Bringing Practice into Theory: A Summary**

The social workers in this study first described their experience of the theory-practice dance beginning with an experience within themselves, summarised as a moment of "wow". Described were powerful experiences of recognising attachment theory as being useful for themselves, for understanding others and relationships. CJ said, *"it is so relevant in our relationships whether they are professional or personal, social…"* and Grace said, *"... it so much impacts on people's ability to form and sustain relationships".*

This 'wow' moment repeatedly occurred in connection to some very specific literature. While a number of literary influences were identified (Batty & Bayley, 1984; Brisch, 2002; Harlow, 1961; Perry, 1997; Thomas, 2005), Fahlberg (1991) and Howe et al. (1999) were repeatedly mentioned and described as *"life changing"* and *"revolutionary".* Grace, describing the work of David Howe et al. (1999) said *"...you could read it and understand it, you didn't have to think about it, you didn't have to work out what he was telling you and the same with Vera Fahlberg".* CJ referring to Fahlberg (1991) and Howe et al. (1999) said, *"those two books have been awesome...awesome in terms of understanding attachment theory and trying to put it into practice in my work where I can".* Described were full moments of experience where the social worker while in theory was also in deep connection with themselves and clients.

Following 'wow' was another shared in-common experience. As the social workers tried to verbalize their experiences described above through 'putting theory into practice', they became temporarily 'lost for words'. Anne said, *"I think probably I've just been quite busy as a practitioner"* and CJ said, *"it's hard to put into words..."* While these social workers endeavoured to 'put theory into practice' there was a pattern to these endeavours, identifiable through in-common statements such as: *"I am thinking of one child"* (CJ); *"I can think of the kids"* (Dorothy); *"I get really complex cases"* (Belinda); and Anne said *"one case in particular cropped up".* In-common was a thinking process reflective of

'bringing practice into theory'. The 'bringing practice into theory' finding prompted a shift in the analysis focus from viewing 'theory into practice', to viewing attachment theory residing in the social worker as expressed through their practice descriptions and reflections.

This new lens, informed the remainder of the analysis process. Further analysis of attachment theory within practice descriptions highlighted a plethora of different ways that attachment theory was identified as being relevant to them as social workers, with a common pattern identified within the diversity. This pattern, can best be described as a shift in relevance, a shift from experiencing attachment theory as *"wow"*, *"it's in every part of us"*, *"it permeates right through...it is so relevant in our relationships"*, to practice descriptions focused on the world of the client.

In addition, the emphasis of relevance shifting to the client was not demonstrated to be interrelated with ongoing understandings related to the social worker. While initial understandings reflected attachment theory as *"relevant in our relationships"*, *"impacting on people's ability to form and sustain relationship*s", somewhere between this moment and the use of attachment theory as a social work practice theory, the social worker's self had been lost. That is, by the time these understandings became practice theory, the social workers' ability to form and sustain relationships, was now primarily understood as a function of their role and or social work tasks in conjunction with clients' responses to this role/task. As a consequence, the social workers were left with a theory for use that did not reflect their original understandings of attachment theory. These social workers descriptions reflected a loss of theoretical and practice coherence between attachment theory and their efforts to practice attachment theory informed social work.

Consequently, the social workers' assessment and intervention possibilities were limited by the nature of their "understood attachment theory" for practice. That is, attachment theory residing within the social worker where theoretical and practice relational relevance seemed directed by both the social workers' internal world and the external social work contexts of practice; including contemporary social work practice

orientations. A significant shift of emphasis within contemporary social work practice has been to background the social worker-client relationship (Ruch, 2000).

Social workers in this study reflected this shift in practice through their descriptions of assessment and intervention that focussed on the clients attachments. For example, descriptions such as "*I can recognize it but I certainly can't treat it*", demonstrated a recognition-intervention gap. The social worker while present through "I", and present to the clients story, had as their primary response one that directed them away from the social worker-client relationship, through the intervention of referral, as described by CJ and Dorothy. Belinda highlighted through her comment regarding assessment and intervention: "*you're doomed if you do and you're doomed if you don't*", further illustrating the recognition-practice gap as a phenomenological practice gap.

The phenomenological practice gap that these social workers described was primarily attributed to their social work roles, whether clients were social work help seeking or help receptive, alongside limited training to conduct at times the organisationally mandated social work tasks such as attachment theory informed assessments. For example, Dorothy said that "*I'm not qualified to do attachment assessments... we're out there and you don't know what you're looking for*". Grace said: "*It's hard to gauge what you should be looking for and what you should do with it...you are finding the stuff out but what do you do with it once you've got it*". Belinda acknowledged that sometimes assessment is based on "*gut feeling*".

Described directly above are personal experiences in professional decision making where these personal realities within a practice context seem to coexist with a shift in perception (within the literature and the social worker) concerning a narrowing of relevance of attachment theory, to the social worker-client relationship, when viewed as a practice theory. Is it possible to infer that these descriptions reflect a complex interplay of issues: While the social worker-client relationship is not foregrounded it remains a primary vehicle of service; while social workers are being mandated to conduct assessments of clients' attachments they are not being oriented to make use of the material within the

social workers-client relationship to support these assessments; while the social worker-relationship, historically understood to contain some of the anxiety inherent in social work relationships is foregrounded, anxiety remains, at large, for the social worker and the client.

Observed across the interviews was a paradox. Attachment theory a relational theory, when manifested as a practice theory, became a theory of other, relevant to the client's external world with little demonstrated evidence that attachment theory sustained relevance for the social worker in relationship with the client. Moreover, attachment theory as described above has potential practice relevance to: the self of the social worker; the client; the social worker-client relationship; and the social work context in which they meet. However descriptions of practice within this study commonly reflected a predominant focus of relevance to the client context. Furthermore in the absence of a relational view, these descriptions also reflected a loss of theoretical coherence.

Accordingly, challenges within sustaining attachment theory relevance across social work contexts and with sustaining the coherence of attachment theory across contexts, now becomes the focus of this discussion, supported by a revisiting of the reviewed literature. The reviewed literature, initially functional in preparing for the "turning to the nature of the lived experience" (van Manen, 1990) is now reviewed again, this time in response to the nature of the lived experience described.

**Bringing Practice into Theory: Theoretical and Practice Coherence Challenges**

To begin, within the Bowlby-Ainsworth attachment theory, the dynamic interplay between the attachment behavioural system and the caregiving system became conceptualized as the secure-base (Bowlby, 1973, p. 182). The function of the secure-base, was to provide safety/physical proximity to the infant/young child's proximity seeking attachment-behaviour when exploration proved threatening, such as in times of 'high need' or 'emergency' (Waters and Cummings, 2000). In addition, Sroufe and

Waters (1977) advanced the concept of physical proximity seeking by describing the set goal of proximity seeking as "felt security" (p. 1186).

From this position of "felt security" the infant/child was supported to have their experience of distress, while being protected, by the caregiver, without being overwhelmed by felt distress. This protection served two functions; it enabled the infant/child to attend to and process the thoughts, feelings and actions related to felt stress, which in turn supported them to be exploratory of themselves, others and the world. As attachment theory developed into a life span theory, proximity seeking toward the secure-base in response to a contextual trigger of perceived danger /stress was studied observing adult behaviour (Mikulincer et al, 2000; Mikulincer, Gillath & Shaver, 2002). These observations found, when under stress, all adult participants "underwent preconscious activation of the attachment system... [and]... that threat contexts activated mental representations of attachment figures but no one else" (Mikulincer and Shaver, 2003, p. 89).

However, Waters and Cummings (2000) noted that the secure-base construct had become "increasingly removed from centre stage in current theory and research, displaced by cognitive constructs such as working models and psychometric constructs such as anxiety and avoidance" (p. 165). Findings from the reviewed literature reflected the observations of Waters and Cummings (2000) where for example: issues of continuity and change; the intergenerational transmission of attachment patterns; and an emphasis on identifying attachment patterns and internal working models while being foreground were often not explicitly linked back into relationship with the secure-base concept. Noted exceptions to this generalized pattern included: 'The Convoy Model' that bridges attachment relationships with close social relationships through retaining a focus on the significance of secure-base provision across the lifespan; and the work of Schofield (2002) and Schofield et al. (2006).

Within the attachment theory informed social work practice literature:

1.    Attachment theory was strongly linked to specific social work practice issues, such as foster- care, adoption, child welfare, abuse and neglect;

2.    Attachment theory was strongly linked to being relevant for understanding the client and weakly linked to being relevant to the social worker and or the social work client relationship;

3.    Attachment theory was theoretically disconnected from the attachment-caregiving-exploration systems (Bowlby 1969, 1973) and as a consequence was theoretically disconnected from the social work contextual issues of stress and pressure;

4.    As a consequence of the client emphasis in conjunction with a theoretical disconnection from the attachment-caregiving and exploratory systems, attachment theory was not demonstrated as being useful in understanding the workings of the social worker-client relationship;

5.    The literature repeatedly showed the predominant current use of the term 'relationship focused practice' to be descriptive of the clients' relationships, and not the social worker-client relationship (Atwool, 2005; Evans et al., 2005; Fahlberg, 1991; Howe, 2005; Howe et al., 1999; Schofield et al., 2006; Watson, 2005); and

6.    The secure-base phenomenon, while referenced as a social work task was theoretically disconnected from the attachment-caregiving-exploration systems (Bowlby 1969, 1973, 1982). The key exception to this trend was the standout work of Schofield et al. (1999), Schofield et al. (2005) and Schofield et al. (2006) who have actively re-centred the secure-base as a coherent theoretical and practice construct within social work practice theory.

The impact of these coherence challenges were traceable through into practice where the social workers in this study demonstrated how challenging it was to sustain a coherent view of attachment theory. For example, while initial understandings of attachment theory began as a theory with personal relevance to the social worker and relevance to the client, when attachment theory was transitioned into an attachment theory informed practice theory, relevance was primarily described as informing the social worker about clients; emphasising the client's social world of happenings /events/ relationships.

In addition attachment theory, a theory developed specifically to understand our relational patterns when under felt pressure/stress/fear was not connected to the clients' or the social workers' experiences of pressure and the ensuing difficulty to do exploratory work when stressed; a hallmark of social work practice. The narrowing of relevance of attachment theory to the world of the client and their world of happenings and events, creates loss: Loss of the richness of attachment theory, which is available for use in practice, relevant to the social worker, the client and the social worker-client relationship. Linked with the loss of sustained coherence, the social workers in this study repeatedly described the impact of context on their capacity to bring their practice into theoretical connection with attachment theory.

**Bringing Practice into Theory: Contextual Influences**

The challenge to maintain attachment theory coherence within practice and within the social worker-client relationship was further challenged given the narrowed view of contextual relevance of attachment theory to social work practice. The primary context where the social workers' understood attachment theory could best be utilized was: the client and their world, and in practice settings characterized by 'having time' and lower stress; exemplified in Anne's narrative above, in her descriptions of working with volunteer clients, in the Adoptions field.

In contrast, short term, crisis oriented social work, such as hospital social work was perceived as a context in which it was much more difficult to link attachment theory in practice, especially given the short time that the social worker had to engage clients and provide a service. For social workers in the care and protection field, the struggle to sustain theoretical and practice coherence in practice descriptions was especially noted. For example, in this setting where stress/distress is often commonly high, the social workers identified the stress-distress as being within their experiences yet these experiences were not theoretically or practically connected with attachment theory.

Amidst these understandings of the contextual use of attachment theory, it becomes possible to ponder the shared impact of the challenges of coherence and context on the social workers experience of bringing their practice into attachment theory. However if attachment theory was briefly revisited from the view of context, it may be possible that this view in turn may give support to sustaining coherence within this current exploratory discussion. For example, within the original and recent attachment theory formulations it is possible to identify a number of specific contexts that attachment theory emphasises within parent/caregiver-child relationships, and attachment relationships across the life span:

a)    the attachment, caregiver and exploratory systems;

b)    contextual triggers of stress/pressure;

c)    the inner world context of the attachment seeker and the caregiver;

d)    the external world context of the attachment seeker and the caregiver;

e)    the relational context between the attachment seeker and the caregiver.

Viewed this way, it becomes possible, supported by the work of Mikulincer et al. (2002) regarding the activation of the attachment system in adulthood attachment behaviour, to bring a key social work practice context, the social –worker client relationship, into attachment theory via the context of the helper-helpee relationship. Focusing on context in this way foregrounds the social worker-client relationship. In turn, sustaining coherence as practice is brought into theory is potentially supported. For example, attending to attachment theory contexts (inner, relational and social) and the relationships between them, the social worker potentially remains experientially and theoretically close to the links of stress, care seeking and care provision.

Amidst acknowledging contemporary social work theory-practice orientations, what is of interest is that social work as a profession has the historical capacity to contain inner, relational and social contexts in practice as evidenced through the longstanding relationship with psychosocial theory (Piuva, 2007, p. 261). However, from the early psychodynamic influences, through to social casework, alongside the politicization of

social work (Yelloly and Henkel, 1995, p. 9), a tension has existed between structural and individual perspectives (Piuva, 2007, p. 263). Is it possible that the differing perspectives of contextual relevance above between the original attachment theory and social workers practice theory in 2007 in this study in some way reflects this ongoing tension?

To explore this question three arenas influencing the theory-practice dance will be examined. First, the influence of ecological models on social work practice. Second, the influence of the self of the social worker and the client is explored from an attachment theory perspective. Proposed here is that self becomes viewed as an inner context of practice, to be viewed in relationship with the third arena to be discussed; the more commonly acknowledged contexts of social work organisational settings, practice principles and mandates.

First, ecological models of practice emphasise that both behaviour and development are best understood in the contexts in which people live; the person/child, their family, friends, neighbours, community. Ecological models have assisted in developing awareness of environmental issues impacting on family life. For example, while Bronfenbrenner's (1979) work emphasised understanding parents' self evaluations and the views of their child, he directed the primary influencing factors of these to be "related to such external factors as flexibility of job schedules, adequacy of child care arrangements, the presence of friends and neighbours who can help out in large or small emergencies, the quality of health and social services and neighbourhood safety" (p. 7). While social work has a long standing historical relationship with ecological theory emphasising external contexts, attachment theory invites consideration of an often un-texted context within social work practice. Attachment theory highlights the internal environment within the person in regard to their experience of support at times of high stress as context in conjunction with considering external factors as context.

This leads to the second influence that creates coherence and contextual challenges: that of the social worker and the client each with their own attachment experiences and storied inner context. The under acknowledged attachment theory informed inner context

of the social worker and the client includes the five cornerstones of the attachment-caregiver and exploratory behavioural systems addressed in Chapter Two: the attachment classification system (ABCD), the internal working model, the secure-base phenomenon, the construct of danger/stress; and the construct of defensive exclusion/inclusion.

Attachment theory proposes that each of these cornerstones becomes internalised as expectations and beliefs about the self and other at times of high stress where help is needed and or provided. Each of these attachment theory cornerstones identified above can be directly related to the social workers' and the clients' own attachment experiences and their own experiences of being helped, supported, cared about. These experiences and how they are processed, become implicitly formulated as information to the self, concerning one's self in relationship with others at times of high stress/need. Attachment theory advocates that the context of stress is likely to trigger attachment behaviour in both the helper and the helpee.

These cornerstones of inner context within the social worker impact on their capacity to help sensitively, on their capacity to reflect on their own and their client's needs, and on their capacity to create and sustain a working helper-helpee relationship amidst shared pressure. Therefore, a unique and specific understanding of each of these cornerstones is as necessary for the social worker as for the client as these cornerstones impact on the quality of the helper's help when under pressure. Central then for the social worker is mapping their own unique responses to threat/stress/pressure in themselves and being able to access these maps, while sustaining being in a helper relationship with others.

Linked with this understanding and as a further consequence of attachment theory becoming disconnected as a relational practice theory, is the impact of the client's attachment system on the social workers' caregiving system. The reviewed literature exemplified by statements such as "... clients say and do things. Therapists react contingently and with sensitivity" (Howe 2005, p. 268) implies the social worker is not influenced by the client's attachment behavioural system as it connects with the caregiving system in the form of the help offering social worker. However, it is an

assumption, an example of theory-practice incoherence within an attachment theory informed practice that the social worker in knowing what the optimal response might be, will in real time, in the presence of the real relationship, always be able to "react contingently and with sensitivity".

A third influence contributing to a client contextual emphasis in social work practice and within the literature was identified within the social work organisational practice settings. Noted in Chapter Two was a contextual shift across social work settings, from case work to case management and risk assessments (Nash and Munford, 2001). In addition, a current external client focus, with an emphasis on relationship-based social work implying the client's relationships was also noted. However, this current finding stands in contrast with the historical purpose of relationship-focused social work. Historically relationship-based practice was understood to refer to the social worker-client relationship with the emphasis functioning as a way to acknowledge and contain anxiety inherent as a response to distressing and uncertain experiences (Salzberger-Wittenberger, 1976; Trowell and Bower, 1995; Woodhouse and Pengelly, 1991).

It is proposed here that the current social work organisational contexts have become structured to manage the inherent anxiety and uncertainty of social work practice through task oriented risk assessments with an implicit assumption that anxiety in the worker and the client is also being managed through task oriented practice. However, findings from this study have demonstrated that anxiety, stress and angst remain central within social work practice as seen in the comments by the social workers in this study. For example Anne stated: *you cover your back as much as possible ...Social workers fear that... social workers feel that pressure all the time"* and CJ said *"you become so overwhelmed yourself and upset about something you have to do and you know you have to do it".* Belinda said: *"you're under pressure...I think part of the interviewing is not very detailed I think we are not very selective out of the sheer desperation".* Within the interplay between coherence and contextual influences, attachment theory currently is not being made use of to understand connections between felt stress and one's capacity to manage

or be helped to manage at times of stress-distress. In addition the concept of the secure-base is not held in a central theoretical or practice informing position.

To sustain the construct of the secure-base as a relational construct and one that reflects repeated experiences over time in contrast to the provision of an event-based task, is understood here as reflecting a challenge or coherence and context. Attachment theory would assert that, the greater the suffering in the absence of safety, affect containment and "felt security", the greater the likelihood that self protective defenses will be activated at times of high stress for both the social worker and the client. Paradoxically greater suffering can manifest as greater risk, which within the current milieu, especially care and protection settings, is more likely to be responded to with a practice emphasis of risk management in contrast to relationship-based secure-base provision. Therefore it could be said that a risk management emphasis invites a practice emphasis that encourages the social worker to engage the client in a process that essentially functions to advocate exploration for example, problem solving, before the provision of conditions for safety, emotional containment and "felt security".

This understanding raises many questions concerning developing a social work specific understanding of secure-base provision. In providing the conditions for an experience of a secure-base, social workers at best need to come to know what this might mean, for this client, at this particular time. This assertion invites a reflective practice question: What do I as a social worker know about this client that guides the beginning conditions that I offer that would support them feeling safe, contained and secure?

To ask this question assumes however the social worker is experiencing "felt security" in themselves to be exploratory and then responsive to clients secure-base provision needs. The findings within this study highlight that amidst this organisational-theoretical-practice incoherence the social workers within their organisations are often in a similar relationship to that in which they find themselves with their clients. That is these social workers are being organisationally mandated to practice in a way that supports exploration before the provision of safety, affect containment and "felt security" with

their clients while they themselves are experiencing uncertainty exemplified in statements such as *"It's hard to gauge what you should be looking for and what you should do with it...you are finding the stuff out but what do you do with it once you've got it"* (Grace) and Dorothy's response to the vignette: *"I know this kid shouldn't be here...I think where else is she going to go and what's going to happen to her...You have the theory, you know what's ideal....there is a gap between what you know should be in place and what's possible"*.

To briefly recap, coherence challenges were demonstrated in the reviewed attachment theory informed social work practice theory and by the social workers' practice descriptions in this study. Both sources predominantly assigned useful relevance of attachment theory to specific social work practice settings, such as foster care with a specific focus within these settings on understanding the client. In conjunction the predominant current use of the term 'relationship-focused practice' was identified across sources to be mostly descriptive of the clients' relationships. By implication, attachment theory relevance reflected this emphasis. In practice descriptions it was weakly linked as being relevant to the social worker and or the social worker- client relationship. In addition attachment theory informed social work practice theory was frequently theoretically disconnected from the attachment–caregiving–exploration systems (Bowlby 1969, 1973) along with the secure-base and from the social work contextual issues of stress and pressure.

What now follows is a consideration of the implications of these findings for social workers who are engaged in the process of bringing their practice into an understanding of attachment theory. Given the highlighted coherence and contextual challenges, what might attachment theory informed social work practice theory look like if theoretical–practice-organisational coherence was sustained? What theoretical, practice and organisational factors might benefit from becoming foregrounded in working towards sustaining coherence within the process of translating attachment theory into an attachment theory informed social work practice theory? It is to an exploration of these questions that this discussion now turns.

**Bringing Social Work Practice into an Attachment Theory Informed Social Work Practice Theory: Implications for Social Workers**

Amidst exploring possible practice implications of bringing social work practice into an attachment theory informed social work practice, specific to the findings of this study, a pivotal juncture in the research process emerged. While having stayed close to the key research questions and the lived experience of the findings for the duration of this study, the consideration of theory-practice implications marked a new relationship between the sensitizing concepts and experiences that I as a researcher brought into the study, and the research questions. At this time, research rigor processes, including the reflexivity practices described in Chapter Three remained anchors. Anchors to the research questions and findings as the use of myself as a researcher now drawing mostly on my experience of social work practice as a social worker and as a child psychotherapist in collaboration with social work colleagues, became more explicitly present in the study.

"I" as the researcher 'brought practice into theory' and a pathway emerged enabling sustained coherence across findings while simultaneously stepping out from the findings to consider social work theory-practice implications. This pathway was characterized by reformulating the principles relevant to the attachment–caregiving-exploratory systems, across cultures, across the lifespan, into social work practice principles. Principles relevant specifically for social worker-client relationships that often meet in a context identified as being most likely to activate the attachment-caregiving-exploratory systems. It is anticipated that these principles could be used by a social worker and then contextualised further specific to the social work practice context, including cultural and developmental / life span needs of the client.

These principles are presented as building blocks with each subsequent practice principle being constructed through a process of repetition. Key ideas from each subsequent building block are repeated in conjunction with developing the next connecting theoretical proposition. A brief discussion follows the presentation of each principle as a

way to keep the principles connected and coherent with each other, and with the findings and analysis presented in this and the previous chapter.

*Principle One: Attachment theory as a relational theory requires a broadening of the potential scope of relevance within attachment theory informed social work practice theory to be inclusive of the social worker, the client and the social worker-client relationship.*

The concept of the secure-base, being central within the interplay between the attachment behavioural system and the caregiving system with implications for the exploratory system (Bowlby, 1973) implies that at all times attachment theory refers to at least two people, or two relationships. Therefore to sustain theoretical coherence as a social work practice theory, the current client emphasis would benefit from being broadened to include a social worker-client focus. In broadening the focus in this way the construct of relationship shifts from an emphasis on the client's relationships to one inclusive of the client and their relationships, the social worker and the social worker-client relationship.

*Principle Two: Attachment theory as a relational theory specifically addresses relationships at times of high stress/pressure and therefore has shared relevance to the social worker, the client and their relationship within the shared context of distress - stress in which they meet to work.*

Attachment theory is specifically relevant to understanding the impact of stress on the capacity to seek and receive help. Attachment theory asserts when felt stress becomes overwhelming, particularly in regard to attachment-caregiving- exploratory experiences, attachment behaviour is likely to be observed. These experiences while inclusive of those emphasised across the reviewed literature emphasising issues of: loss and change in key relationships prominent in adoption; and foster care oriented social work for example, include a broader array of experiences characterised by stress/pressure. In particular are any experiences of stress/pressure (which may be internal, external or both in origins) which prompt safety/physical proximity seeking when the stress/pressure has become too

threatening and or overwhelming to sustain exploration (Waters and Cummings, 2000). For example, attachment theory findings concerning the suffering of Disorganised attachments, acknowledges that being in relationship, or offered relationship at times of high need, can paradoxically be experienced as a threat to one's self (Crittenden, 1997, 2000).

Social work with children and families includes relationship experiences specific to times of help and need, of both the client family and the social worker and as such is often conducted amidst high anxiety, uncertainty and emotion. Fonagy et al. (1991) assert that "day–in, day-out, social workers (and their agencies) practice in emotionally demanding environments which trigger characteristic coping styles, defensive strategies and adaptive behaviours" (p. 205), with Trowell and Rustin (1991) asserting these "emotionally demanding environments" can impact on the social worker whereby their "capacity to think, reflect, or make links is lost" (p. 236). Therefore regardless of the social work field of practice, when a context of stress/pressure is recognised for the social worker, the client, or both, attachment theory can be put to use to understand the unique responses and needs to felt distress -stress and the impact of these on the capacity of the social worker to provide help and for the client to be able to receive help.

*Principle Three: Attachment theory as a relational theory is relevant to understanding relationships in connection with the secure-base at times of high stress/pressure. Therefore, the secure-base is a relational concept within attachment theory, with direct relevance to the social worker as the provider of the conditions for "felt security" in relationship with the client, the receiver of the conditions for "felt security".*

The concept of the secure-base, central within the interplay between the attachment behavioural system and the caregiving system with implications for the exploratory system (Bowlby, 1973), began with a focus on infants and toddlers in their primary care relationships. However, recent research has confirmed relevance of attachment theory as a life span theory evidenced in adult secure-base seeking-use behaviour (Gao and Waters,

1998; Mikulincer and Shaver, 2003). Secure-base seeking and capacity to make use of the conditions for "felt security" on offer from a secure-base, optimises the capacity to experience high emotion within self, others and the world while sustaining the capacity to think, learn, explore. Moreover, attachment theory infers that the capacity to experience and to be able to reflect on experience at times of high stress/pressure requires that affects, when overwhelming are contained through an experience of "felt security". Integral then to exploration resulting from "felt security" is the containment of affect, of overwhelming emotion.

Within an attachment theory informed social worker-client relationship, it is the task of the social worker, in the role of helper, to assess, and where possible create and sustain the conditions for the client that will optimally provide the conditions for the client to experience "felt security". From a position of "felt security" exploration, problem solving will be more effective. Fonagy et al (1991) stated that:

> Underpinning all practice using an attachment perspective is the provision of relationships in which the other is experienced as available and responsive, consistent and understanding. If social workers are to offer and promote these kinds of relationships, their capacity to reflect on their own functioning, has to be maintained. (p. 205)

Within an attachment theory informed social work practice theory, the capacity to reflect and what to reflect on/about has theory specific meaning: For example, social workers' reflections would begin with themselves in relationship to their significant family members. Reflections become focussed on understanding how one feels, thinks and acts, when stressed and when needing to be in a help provider role at this time. Reflections function to build relational self knowledge about the social workers' internal working model, how the social worker functions in the presence of intense affect and stress and how they relate to others when in a helper/caregiving role. It becomes self knowledge about specific circumstances, relational dynamics and or events that might activate defensive exclusion strategies and it becomes knowledge of how to sustain "felt security" at these times.

*Principle Four: Attachment theory as a relational theory relevant to understanding the workings of helper–helpee relationships at times of high stress/pressure has shared relevance to the social worker as helper, the client as helpee, the social worker-client specific relationship and the contexts in which they meet to work-explore solutions.*

Attachment theory invites specific exploration of self; self in relationship with others when stressed and when in either or both a help seeking/help offering role. While the client may conduct this journey in relationship with the social worker, at best the social worker has already begun their own journey in a different relationship where their role is more likely to be help seeker, for example, in supervision. For the social worker in the assumed helper role with clients, self knowledge specific to help provision would be central to understand in parallel the clients' experiences of being helped in a sensitive (Ainsworth et al., 1978) way at times of high need.

Ruch (2005 b) asserted that "uncertainty, anxiety and emotionally charged subject matter, work against relationship based practice" (p. 111). Paradoxically it seems that while attachment theory provides a way to understand the impact of uncertainty and anxiety on relationships, the general social work focus at these times is oriented towards excluding the relationship. Instead, emphasizing a client focus while managing risk to the worker and the organisation that these clients sometimes carry as a manifestation of their suffering.

It is the clients who by the nature of their suffering who can engender a sense of failure, hopelessness and fear in the social worker while being in need, by virtue of their suffering to be listened to, to have the time taken with them. As such they can also be the clients who are the most difficult to listen to and to spend time with. This research asserts that the social work task of secure-base provision requires much further specification and understanding concerning what this means, for different clients, and for different social workers. In addition the apposite research based work of Ruch (2005 a and b) would

benefit inclusion regarding further considerations. Ruch (2005 a and b) explored the conditions that facilitate reflective practice where she found a balance of facilitating conditions within the social worker and within the functioning of the organisational context. Drawing on the work of Bion (1962), Ruch proposes that for social workers to be optimally engaged in reflective practice an organisational context providing "holistic containment" (Ruch 2007, p. 660) is necessary.

*Principle Five: Attachment theory as a relational theory relevant to understanding the workings of helpee–helper relationships in relationship with the secure-base, in the light of mental representations of past repeated secure-base experiences at times of high stress/pressure therefore has shared relevance to the social worker, the client and the contexts in which they meet to work.*

Attachment theory advocates that at times of overwhelming stress/pressure, our capacity to experience stress/pressure and be able to think and act in ways to reduce the stress/pressure is related to the quality of the relationship that we have, or can in the present establish, with a secure-base. In turn attachment theory asserts that the quality of relationship made possible with the sought after secure-base is influenced by the internal working model of relationships and the type of defenses of exclusion/inclusion activated to protect against any expected suffering specific to attachment-caregiving experiences. In addition the experience with the secure-base at times of high stress impacts on the capacity and content possibilities of reflection.

In conjunction, within social work practice theory Ruch (2005b) stated that "...for the potential of relationship-based practice to be fully realized practitioners need to develop their reflective capabilities" (p. 111). Therefore increasing our capacity to experience ourselves in relationship with others at times of high stress increases the material in which we can reflect on, in turn increasing "reflective capabilities".

To support this endeavour, the recent work on reflective functioning (Fonagy et al. 1991) within the attachment-caregiver-exploratory systems promotes relational reflective

functioning. That is, to be able to at the moment of stress/pressure be able to access, consider and act coherently on information coming from the self and the other. Also the work of Meins et al. (2001) on the capacity for "mind-mindedness" relates specifically to the capacity to respond to attachment seeking needs in another while sustaining an awareness of one's own mind and needs.

These new constructs propose that what has been 'mentalised' of situations, events, happenings (that is, the recorded unique experience of an event or happening in contrast to a description of the event devoid of unique experience) becomes what is held in-mind. The recent attachment theory advances have proffered that coming to identify 'what is held in mind' in addition to finding out event based details is very important, as that which is 'held in mind' has been shown to impact on what of the attachment-caregiving system experience can be attended to in the self and in others (Meins et al., 2001).

What is 'in-mind' then, what is available for reflection and the degree of relational capacity that can be sustained while reflecting, in turn impacts on the caregiver's capacity to provide sensitive responding; to attune, to interpret, and to respond within the child's time frame (Ainsworth et al. 1978). Therefore an attachment theory social work practice theory implication would assert that a social workers' memory of experience is not always a full indicator of the moment being described. This issue is further examined in the following chapter through a proposed attachment theory informed model of reflective practice.

## Conclusion

The social workers, in conjunction with the reviewed literature in this study, tell us that current social work practice is increasingly orientating and at times encouraging the social worker towards roles reflective of case managers in contrast to participants with specific roles in, working relationships. In addition social work while continuing to be presented with the stress/distress of the client, and at times the social worker, has yet to foreground attachment theory as being potentially useful to understanding and developing

social work practices that would in turn foreground the social worker-client relationship. The endeavour to implement attachment theory within this milieu has been demonstrated to highlight coherence and contextual challenges within: practice theory; practice; and the social workers' experience, described as a phenomenological practice-theory-organisational gap.

Finally, in light of this discussion, what might now be considered as ways to begin to address these findings and proposed attachment theory social work practice principles? The next chapter provides an opportunity to reflect on the methodology of this study as the vehicle in which the current findings and practice principles have developed within. Integral to this reflection is a consideration of practice recommendations based on these findings, for social workers to use in their practice. In addition consideration is given to future research directions.

## Chapter Six: Concluding Reflections and Future Research

As this research journey comes to a close, concluding reflections now take centre stage alongside findings-based future research possibilities. This chapter begins by revisiting the two key research questions originally presented in Chapter One followed by reflections on the philosophy, method and methodology used within this study to address the research questions. Conclusions regarding the research questions; recommendations for social work practice with future research possibilities are then considered. This chapter concludes with a final reflection on the research process, marking the close of this chapter and this current study.

## Concluding Reflections: Revisiting the Research Questions and the Philosophy, Methodology and Method of Enquiry

This qualitative phenomenological oriented enquiry set out to explore the relationship between attachment theory and social work practice from the position of the social workers' described experience of the use of attachment theory in practice. While previous research has explored arenas such as the theory-practice relationship and attachment theory as a theory for use in social work practice, this study focussed on the social workers' experiences of using attachment theory in their practice. The seeking of social workers' experiences was of particular interest as attachment theory has in more recent times become oriented as a practice theory across disciplines including social work. This interest has occurred alongside other emerging interests and theory-practice developments such as evidence-based practice and risk-averse practice. While the two interests are not mutually exclusive there has been a tendency over the decades for social work to place less emphasis on relationship-based practice, than has been traditional in social work (Ruch, 2007).

This study sought to foreground and understand social workers' experiences of these changes and provide Aotearoa/New Zealand based qualitative social worker based

research. As such this study addressed two key questions: What do social workers say about their experiences of putting attachment theory into social work practice with children and families? And: Are there identifiable patterns, implicit and or explicit, being used by the interviewed social workers in their processing of attachment theory as a social work practice theory, to inform child and family oriented social work?

These research questions were addressed by a selected review of the literature followed by eight semi-structured interviews with social workers who had self nominated to participate, based on the participation criteria. Then audio recorded data from the interviews was: saved as digital audio files; re-constructed as transcripts; and re-constructed again as "Letters of understanding". These letters were sent to participants for review and a request for their consents for use. Data analysis processes were informed by the work of van Manen (1990) and Colaizzi (1978) and influenced by the reflexivity processes structured into the research that in turn influenced the construction of conclusions.

The research process of constructing conclusions drew together the rationale and justification, underlying philosophy, sensitizing and clarifying concepts outlined in Chapter One. These elements present throughout the research process were foregrounded again within the ongoing reflexive processes so as to contain all that became data: from the interviews, from the transcripts and the "Letters of Understanding", to that which became findings and practice implications, finally to be written and rewritten as concluding reflections on the social workers experiences of attachment theory and the identified patterns within these experiences.

While all efforts to ensure a rigorous and ethical research process throughout the entire study were made, two key limitations have been identified. First, in-depth interviewing, with a small sample size, not only takes time (Fontana and Frey, 1994) but precludes the capacity to generalise the research findings. While taking time is a generalised limitation, in this study, 'taking time' has created space for the social workers' voice in relationship to social work practice and social work practice theory. Second, this study has not been

able to provide inter-rater reliability. Protective factors against this research limitation have included the regular presentation of findings within my supervision and mentoring sessions and the use of the "Letter of Understanding" with the participants. While there was a process to check back understandings constructed from the interview, with the social worker participants, the step to present findings from across the interviews, described in Chapter Four and discussed in Chapter Five is to occur after the conclusion of this thesis as part of the feedback process to the participants and the community. In addition, the feedback process will include concluding reflections from this chapter, specific to the key research questions. It is to these we now turn.

## Concluding Reflections: Social Workers' Experiences of Attachment Theory and Patterns used to describe these Experiences

What did social workers say about their experiences of putting attachment theory into social work practice with children and families? First, while descriptions regarding initial meetings with attachment theory can be summarized as *"wow"* and *"life changing"*, the described experiences of using attachment theory in practice were characterized by uncertainty, angst and loss. In addition, while descriptions regarding the relevance of attachment theory initially began with an understanding of shared relevance, *"to professional... personal... social"* relationships, the descriptions of relevant settings and contexts for the use of attachment theory as a social work practice theory were markedly reduced to the clients' world of relationships.

It was noted, as attachment theory traversed from a personally experienced theory to a social work practice theory, the social workers' personal and professional relationships, including the social worker-client relationship became background, while relevance to the client and their relationships became foreground. This change in relevance as theory became practice theory was also noted within the reviewed literature as described in Chapter Two. In addition, within the reviewed social work practice theory literature, the literature repeatedly showed the predominant current use of the term 'relationship-focused practice' to be descriptive of the clients' relationships, and not the social worker-client relationship.

Second, social workers in this study each working closely with children and families repeatedly described experiences of stress and anxiety. Social workers predominantly related their experiences of stress in relationship with attachment theory with practice setting issues such as: crisis work; short term work; lack of resources; lack of training and not having enough time to form relationships with clients for example, as Anne described. While reflecting on social work practice and attachment theory the social workers in this study did not make theoretical connections between stress/pressure and attachment theory, specific to themselves or their clients. For example, the social workers did not connect their experiences of work stress/pressure with their social work experiences regarding their perceived "*ability to form and sustain relationships*".

In addition there was little emphasis on the impact of the social workers' own attachment-caregiving and exploratory system experiences on their capacity to provide social work services amidst situations of stress/pressure. Neither did the reviewed literature foreground the social workers' attachment-caregiving-exploratory system as impacting on worker capacity to be a provider of the conditions for "felt security" in relationship with the client, the receiver of the conditions for "felt security", especially at times of stress and or distress.

Irrespective of practice emphasis, attachment theory would attest that where there is stress-distress the first intervention is the provision of conditions most likely to enable an experience of "felt security". That is, "felt security" precedes exploration. In this study, while the secure-base was referenced and mentioned at times across the interviews as a social work task, this was predominantly theoretically disconnected from the attachment-caregiving-exploration systems (Bowlby 1969, 1973, 1982). The key exception to this trend was the standout work of Schofield et al. (1999), Schofield et al. (2005) and Schofield et al. (2006) who have actively re-centred the secure-base as a coherent theoretical and practice construct within social work practice theory.

Given these key concluding reflections on what was said, what patterns, implicit and or explicit, were identified regarding the processing of attachment theory into a social work practice theory, to inform child and family oriented social work? As a precursor to these concluding reflections the reader is reminded that while the focus of how this question was addressed shifted from looking at 'theory into practice' to looking at theory in the social worker as expressed through their practice descriptions and reflections, the quest to identify the processes used to bring practice into theory remained constant.

The social workers in this study, through their descriptions showed that their starting position of the theory-practice dance, was neither theory nor practice, but themselves, especially themselves at a level of rich experience. They first brought themselves through an experience of attachment theory, then their practice into theory, a process described in this study as "bringing practice into theory". This processing pattern highlighted: the central position of the social worker as the carrier of theory and practice and the challenges within practice theory and practice to sustain a shared view of the self of the social worker alongside a client emphasis.

With the social worker foregrounded between practice and theory another processing pattern came into view: a unique translation process that seemed to occur implicitly within the social worker whereby theory became transformed into "understood theory". The social workers in this study, through their descriptions showed that what is acknowledged as personal knowledge of a theory may not always be able to be followed through with theoretical and practical coherence into a social work practice theory. For example as evidenced in initial understandings of attachment theory being a relational theory, when transformed as a practice theory, attachment theory was presented as a theory of other, relevant to the client's external world with little demonstrated evidence that attachment theory sustained relevance for the social worker and the social worker in relationship with the client. Attachment theory as a practice theory was shown to include theories about the social worker and themselves in practice.

Similar outcomes of processing attachment theory into a social work practice theory were reflected within the literature. Theoretically attachment theory was shown to have become disconnected from the attachment-caregiving-exploration systems and from the social work contextual issues of stress and pressure. There was little demonstrated within the literature of attachment theory being useful in understanding the workings of the social worker-client relationship. In addition, the reviewed literature repeatedly showed the predominant current use of the term 'relationship-focused practice' to be descriptive of the clients' relationships, and not the social worker-client relationship.

Finally it became possible to identify a processing pattern concerning a link between theoretical coherence and context. In tracking theoretical coherence-incoherence from the social workers' understandings of attachment theory as theory about personal/professional/social relationships, to a social work practice theory, issues of context were identified by the social workers. External contextual practice oriented issues: crisis and or short term work; lack of resources; training; and time, were frequently identified as impacting on the social workers capacity to make use of the theory in practice.

It is suggested here, that issues of coherence and context might influence and adapt each other. It could be asserted from the findings in this study that theoretical coherence challenges were shown to impact on the contexts of social work practice that were emphasized as being directly relevant to the use of attachment theory. For example, attachment theory as a social work practice theory was often theoretically disconnected from the attachment-caregiving-exploration systems (Bowlby 1969, 1973) and as a consequence was theoretically disconnected from the social work contextual issues of stress and pressure, albeit internal and or external contexts.

However, it is also possible to infer that context impacts on coherence. In recent advances of attachment theory (Fonagy et al. 1991; Main et al. 1998; and Meins et al. 2000 for example), assertions that the inner world experience of the attachment-caregiving system greatly impacts on inner, relational and social coherence, have been consistently made

and confirmed across a number of longitudinal studies as cited in Chapter Two. In this study, the inner context of the social worker was found to be backgrounded with the inner context of the client more likely to be acknowledged amidst foregrounding their external contextual issues: such as life events, and happenings. Attachment theory would attest that contexts both inner (such as the social worker's and the client's internal working models, defences, secure-base experiences for example) and outer such as environmental contexts can impact on issues of theoretical and practice coherence.

What is exciting about the emergence of this pattern is that the dance partners of context and coherence could be situated a step closer to the social worker-client relationship than the partners of theory and practice. This potentially indicates a new site of research enquiry and one that is possibly more immediate and accessible to the social worker (and the client) in contrast to enquiry focussed on the constructs of theory and practice. For example, while a social worker may be introduced to ideas of theory and practice, such as through education and training, the social workers in this study through their descriptions implicitly highlighted, that they as carriers of theory and practice, are met with context and coherence challenges, within and external to themselves, as they enter the realm of practice. In describing the theory-practice dance from the position of the social worker, it could be said that the choreographers of the dance include context and coherence.

This study showed the combined impact of coherence and contextual challenges within practice on the use of attachment theory as a social work practice theory to include: a reduction in the perceived theoretical scope of relevance of attachment theory to social work practice and therefore the underutilization of attachment theory to inform social work practice. In addition, from a position of reduced theoretical coherence it becomes theoretically possible to have a non-relational client focus; to emphasize exploration before "felt security" in conjunction with the social worker as manager of client risk, while upholding attachment theory as a key informing practice theory. This issue is explored further below in this chapter regarding possibilities for future research.

In light of these concluding reflections specific to the key research questions and being mindful of sustaining a view on the microsphere of practice as stated at the outset of this study, what response might this research offer? A response that: foregrounds the social worker in practice; foregrounds the social worker as a bridge between theory and practice; acknowledges issues and challenges of context and coherence; supports the social worker in making and sustaining personal links with attachment theory while amidst practice; supports the social worker to sustain a view of theoretical relevance of attachment theory in practice settings where stress and distress are present; and that supports the social worker to have a way of considering the social worker-client relationship as containing relevant practice information for assessment, planning and intervention.

Inclusive of these acknowledgements, combined with the sensitizing concepts and experiences of the researcher, including attachment theory and models of reflective social work practice, the following response was offered in the form of recommendations for practice. To elaborate, attachment theory is understood here as a relational theory, a life span theory that addresses the interplay between the attachment-caregiver-exploratory systems when under high stress/pressure. In addition attachment theory addresses secure-base and "felt security" experiences across the life span. In conjunction with the more recent developments within attachment theory concerning "reflective functioning", these ideas have been teamed with another practice bias of the researcher, the use of reflective social work models within practice.

While these conclusions invite the consideration of many recommendations, focus centres on the possibility of forming a bridge within the social worker between theory and practice through accessing issues of coherence and context (both of which have been shown to traverse the domains of theory and practice) through proposing the development of a working model of attachment theory informed reflective practice.

## The Key Recommendation: A Working Model of Attachment Theory Informed Reflective Social Work Practice

Why a Reflective Model of practice? As seen above attachment theory is theoretically and experientially linked with the construct of relational reflection, shown in the recent work of Fonagy et al. (1991) and Meins et al. (2001), for example. Moreover, attachment theory advocates that reflection is at best 'relational'. Attachment theory does not assume that what we report, have immediate access to for reflection, is all there is. It assumes instead, that by increasing our capacity for "reflective functioning" and "mind-mindedness" that we will come to know much more of what is there to be known of an experience across the attachment theory relevant contexts specific to the self, key relationships and others. In addition, reflective models of social work practice endeavour to bridge the gap between social work theory and practice, through emphasizing experience as the primary subject of reflection. (Payne, 2005; Redmond, 2004; Ruch, 2005 a and b).

What might an attachment theory informed reflective model of social work practice look like? It is proposed here, based on the understanding of social workers bringing themselves and their practice into their understandings of theory, within their practice contexts, that the first feature of a bridge within the social worker between attachment theory and attachment theory informed social work practice theory and practice, is to provide a structure for the social workers' experiences. It is recommended here that this structure have as its primary function: to work towards meeting the coherence and contextual challenges highlighted throughout this study by sustaining a constant view of the attachment-caregiver and exploratory systems.

An attachment theory informed model of reflective social work practice could provide:

1. A structured way to seek understanding and offer empathy;
2. A guide for social work specific conversations regarding linking observable behaviours with internal pictures; and

3. The social worker with a way to engage in relevant meaningful empathic conversation with clients, about their key experiences and relationships within the attachment-caregiving-exploratory systems as a way to support the engagement process and the ensuing social worker-client relationship.

Goals of an attachment theory informed reflective model of social work practice based on the findings, discussion and ensuing practice principles above could include:

1. To create a secure-base from which social workers can explore their social work practice specifically in relation to the attachment-caregiver and exploratory systems;

2. To offer a structured way for social workers to personalize attachment theory as part of the process of using to inform practice;

3. To provide social workers with a map of the attachment theory originally developed by Bowlby and Ainsworth that can then function as a base to explore and adapt current research and theoretical ideas;

4. To provide the social worker with a map to access their own internal working model, the clients' internal working model and the impact of these when brought together under stress to work in partnership. A map such as this could facilitate the provision of conditions for "felt security" before exploration. In turn this supports the transition from behaviour focused management, to seeing behaviour as a communication to be processed by the caregiving system, understood and then conveyed back meaningfully to the child/family as part of the providing the conditions for "felt security";

5. To help social workers develop their experiential, observational and reflection skills concerning their experiences with clients and within their organisation, where stress is likely to activate the attachment-caregiving-exploratory systems;

6. To help social workers develop their reflective functioning capacities by sustaining as much as possible a relational view of their work; and

7. To help social workers develop their capacity to sustain being in relationship with themselves, their organisation and their clients while being in the moment of communication with the client, the self and or the organisation.

Findings from this study, confirm that the key resources to build such a model, to meet these goals already exist. First, reflective models of social work practice and supervision are present within the literature and social work practice (for example see Redmond, 2004; Ruch, 2005 a and b)[24]. Second, attachment theory, a theory specific to helper-helpee relationships experiencing high stress, provides maps to increase the specificity of our reflections. Included is each person's own inner world of relational experiences and expectations as well as maps to reflect on the interplay between; internal, relational and social worlds at times of high stress/need.

Third, what is background regarding the experience of the social worker in relationship with theory and practice throughout the literature and the interviews would benefit from becoming foreground material in an attachment theory informed model of reflective practice. For example, within the attachment theory informed social work practice literature, support for the phenomenological of the social worker was noted albeit as backgrounded information, for example as cited in Fahlberg (1991), Howe et al. (1999) and Stalker (2001).

Proposed here is to first, bring the social workers' experiences to the foreground of social work practice theory. That is: experiences of making sense of attachment theory in practice; their own attachment-caregiving and exploratory system experiences, and their own mentalisations and defences to the foreground of social work practice theory. Second, becoming foreground within practice theory might then invite the social worker, in practice, to not only be a manager of an idea, intervention or task, but to first be a participant in the process of conducting the interventions/tasks.

One way to begin to meet these goals could be to bring the social workers' experiences into the existing available resources across attachment theory and social work practice theory. To 'bring practice into theory', through formulating attachment theory informed questions that any social worker could make use of in their practice in conjunction with any other social work practice theory. For example to develop attachment theory

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[24] See also: D'Cruz et al., 2007; Sheppard, 1995 and 1998.

informed reflective questions concerning: the social workers' own relational self knowledge; the social workers' internal working model; how the social worker functions in the presence of intense affect and stress and how they relate to others when in a helper-caregiving role; knowledge about defensive exclusion strategies used, when they are used and with whom. Knowledge of self becomes inclusive of knowing how one feels, thinks and acts, when stressed and when needing to be in a help provider role at this time. To develop attachment theory informed questions that are structured so that at all times the challenge to think and act in a relational way is present.

A working example is presented in Diagram 6.1: Secure-Base Reflective Questions. This diagram has evolved based on the work of Zeanah, Boris, Scott Heller, Hinshaw-Fuselier, Larrieu, Lewis, Palomino et al. (1997), who during infant-parent assessments keep in mind a key question throughout the process. That is: "what it feels like to be this particular infant in this particular relationship with this particular caregiver at this particular time" (p. 186). It seems possible to extend this key question to assist in addressing the challenges to the social worker as described throughout this study.

For example within Diagram 6.1, a reflective circle with a number of questions are posed, with the social worker taking the position of the key relationships, and reflecting on what it is like to be in this position in relationship with self and others. These formulated questions are not intended to be exhaustive nor representative of all key relationships within the microsphere, they are but a working example in which to begin to anchor the social worker in considering the attachment-caregiver-exploratory system, often manifested as "implicit relational knowings" at the outset, formation and duration of the social worker-client relationship.

Figure 6.1: Secure-Base Reflective Questions

*What might it be like for this client to be in relationship with me? How helpable might they feel? How useful do they think I might be to them? How easy – hard is it for this client to let me know what matters most to them? What do I know about this clients' experience of meeting with me/colleagues? How stressed do I think this client is about working with me?*

What it like for me to be the social worker in relationship with this child/ ren? How useful do I feel? How useful do I think the child/ren expect me to be? How easy – hard is it for me to let the child know about my social work role? What am I aware of in myself before I meet with this child/ren?

What is it like for me to be the social worker in relationship with this client? How useful do I feel? How useful do I think the client expects me to be? How easy – hard is it for me to let the client know about my social work role? What am I aware of in myself before I meet with this family? How stressed do I feel when working with this family?

What might it be like for this child/ren to be in relationship with me as a social worker? How helpable might they feel? How useful do they think I will be in helping their parent/s to help them be/feel safe? What might the child/ ren wish that I as their social worker could understand about their position in this family right now?

What might it be like for this child/family to be parented by this parent? How helpable night they feel? How useful do they think their parent will be in helping them be/feel safe? What might the child/ren wish their parent could understand about their experience in their family?

What might it be like to be this parent to be in a parenting relationship with their child/family? How useful might they feel in being able to help their child/ren? How useful do they think their child/ren expects them to be regarding reducing stress in the family? How easy – hard is it for this parent to help their child/ren be and feel safe ? What's it like for this parent and child when the family is stressed?

Following a consideration of these questions, the following four questions in Table 6.1: Secure-Base Conditions Clarification Reflective Questions, could facilitate a client and relationship specific secure-base response to accompany any other social work modality.

| | |
|---|---|
| 1. | Based on what I have understood about the internal working model of help seeking-provision of this client/client family, what do I need to offer this client/client family to provide the conditions for them to have an experience of *"felt security"*? What support might they need to optimally feel safe in receiving help and support? |
| 2. | What does the client/family need to offer to their own family, so as to provide the conditions for their own family to have an experience of *"felt security"*? What support and or systems would optimally provide the conditions for the family to experience efficacy and family belonging/membership. |
| 3. | Based on what I know of my own internal working model of help seeking-provision, what do I need to be offered and receive from my team/colleagues for me to have an experience of *"felt security"*, so I can help this client/client family? |
| 4. | What other key relationships and social resources might I consider as being useful to have on offer for this client family so as to provide further conditions for *"felt security"*? |

Table 6.1: *Secure-Base Conditions Clarification Reflective Questions*

## Future Research Recommendations

Within the literature reviewed no New Zealand attachment theory studies were found attending specifically to cultural contextualisation. This is an arena of research that would warrant future exploration with Maori, Pakeha (NZ Europeans) and Pacific Island peoples. In light of this proposition, the ongoing development of an attachment theory informed reflective model of social work practice, be considered specifically within an Aotearoa/New Zealand context. By implication issues of bicultural practice, cultural safety within relationships and working within the principles of the Treaty of Waitangi

create a unique setting in which to more closely explore issues of coherence and context, from a position of cultural specificity. From this position also, recommendations for future research, based on these conclusions are made with a view to generating culturally specific information for the Aotearoa/New Zealand social worker.

While a plethora of options for further research could be advocated, returning to the key research questions for the final time refines the possibilities. Based on this study, it is advocated: that amidst the simplicity of asking social workers about their experiences of theory and practice; useful, relevant and complex material arises. It is advocated here that by continuing to bring the social workers' experience into a foregrounded position, by continuing to invite narratives that include space and exploration for the "implicit relational knowings" of the social worker, that this in turn may provide an experiential knowing within the social worker that they in turn can bring into their practice.

Specifically, staying with the social workers' experiences, to explore more the attachment theory research findings related to parents and children with the social worker-client relationship. For example to further research the proposition that emerged from reviewing the literature: Is it possible within a theory-practice relationship, to propose that the way attachment theory becomes internally represented (influenced in turn by the social workers' attachment-caregiver-exploratory system experiences) and how this then becomes an internal representation of the theory is a greater indicator of what a social worker will bring of the theory to practice, than any external verifiable documented theory?

In addition, social work practice research that is methodologically structured to benefit the participating social worker and in turn the social worker-client relationship and practice-outcomes is advocated. That is to integrate social work practice methods of enquiry with research enquiry methods as a way to further develop the enquiry process of practice. For example, there is much potential to methodologically develop the work of Ainsworth et al. (1978), Meins (1999) and Fonagy et al. (1991) for instance, in conjunction with ecological conceptual frameworks such as the Network Model (Capra, 1997) and The Convoy Model of Social Relations (Antonucci et al., 2004) referred to in

Chapter Two, as a way to increase the probability that at all times any emerging findings are viewed in relationship to and with each other and then structured into social work specific use.

In addition, further exploratory research from the position of the social workers' practice experience of attachment theory and contemporary social work practice orientations including risk averse, management oriented practice is advocated. To research shifts in theory and practice from the position of context and the capacity to sustain coherence while practicing amidst complex social worker-client. In turn these understandings could further guide the necessary conditions, within and across social work contexts needed to provide for a social worker experience of "felt security".

Finally, there remains much to know about the journey of theory through the person of the social worker, their inner context and capacity for coherence with the mutually influencing arena of practice on theory. There remains much to know about the impact on bringing the self of the social worker and their practice into theory and in turn much to know about what shape, relevance and usability this transformed theory takes. It is this theory that seems to be implicit and influential in the formation and sustaining of working relationships and as such worthy of much further acknowledgement, understanding and supportive exploration.

## Closing Methodological Reflections

Throughout this research study there has been an active interplay between the research process and re-construction of the emerging data, findings and conclusions. As the final conclusions, recommendations and future research ideas have been considered, consideration now returns to the closely aligned research process: at times explicitly present, yet ever implicit throughout this study. Two inter-related arenas of methodological interest arose: First, the use of attachment theory being both an informing theory to the research and a subject of enquiry within the research and second, an unfolding appreciation of the reflexive process of "writing and rewriting".

First, attachment theory in this study was both a key theoretical informant to the methodology and a subject of enquiry. Central to the informing theory and to the practice of this research study was "felt security" through access to a secure-base. The provision for an ongoing experience of "felt security" throughout this study came from a number of sources including my own internal world, my immediate family, my Massey University supervisors and my research mentor. In addition Massey Human Ethics Approval also provided methodological security. From this position of "felt security", exploration of the reviewed literature and the semi-structured interviews could occur.

In this research journey, exploration from a position of "felt security", did not always equate with a sense of purposeful direction. At times clarity was a distant memory with confusion and chaos a daily constant. These moments, that sometimes stretched across days or weeks were difficult and dark, made tolerable due to a capacity for "mind-mindedness" and "reflective functioning" in relationship with the data. This capacity was greatly supported by key sources and resources within this study who provided the conditions for "felt security" to me through their "mind-mindedness" and capacity for "reflective functioning".

Second, throughout the life span of this research, an evolutionary understanding and appreciation for "writing and rewriting", a primary methodological activity, developed in conjunction with attachment theory concepts. For example, the attachment theory informed concepts of "mind-mindedness" and "reflective functioning" in conjunction with the elements of "sensitivity"; to attune, interpret and respond (Ainsworth et al., 1978, p. 142) were noted to also be informing the reflexive process of "writing and rewriting" (van Manen, 1990).

The statement "writing and rewriting" assumes the presence of someone who is "writing and rewriting". As such, "writing and rewriting" came to be understood as including "writing the researcher into the research" (Scott, 2002, p. 929) and through acknowledging "personal experiences, standpoints and knowledge..." (Ruch, 2000, p. 103). Within an attachment theory informed research practice this knowledge of the

researcher, like that advocated for the social worker, includes specific relational knowledge that guides understanding of the researcher's own capacity for "mind-mindedness", "reflective functioning" and "sensitive responding".

Moreover, to practice "mind-mindedness", to develop "reflective functioning", to meet another with "sensitivity" by attuning, interpreting and responding, requires a lived experience of relationship between participant and researcher. Not only for the duration of the interview, but for the duration of the research study. Paradoxically then in "writing the researcher into the research" (Scott, 2002, p. 929) it becomes increasingly possible to find the other's experience. It is as if the Researcher lends themselves as a vehicle to understanding the participants in a similar way a "sensitive" parent attends to a child, struggling to share their experience. The 'sensitive researcher', like the parent in these circumstances, through the use of themselves, drawing on implicit knowledge (Stern, 2004) and "implicit relational knowings" (Stern et al., 1998) for example, arrives at a response that brings acknowledgement and recognition to the participants' communication.

As such, "writing and rewriting" came to encapsulate a process that included writing, reading, listening and talking, over and over, with each repeat of the cycle bringing a mix of muddle, darkness, wondering and sometimes clarity. Writing included the participants' data that became findings as well as the researcher writing and rewriting not only the participants' contributions but also aspects of my own lived experience that arose throughout the duration of the study. In writing myself as a researcher into this phenomenological qualitative research a bridge was formed within myself as a researcher between the research processes and research data. This bridge, supported through the reflexive processes and relationships structured into this study functioned to sustain coherence between research processes and data, reconstructed into findings, conclusions, research recommendations and future research possibilities.

# Conclusion

Schofield (1998) in highlighting the complex process of theory use within practice settings, proposed that "it is necessary to use theoretical frameworks that make sense of the distinctive social work processes involved when social workers attempt to understand need and offer help to families" (p. 67). This study has argued that attachment theory when viewed at source beginning with an understanding of the Bowlby-Ainsworth work and reviewing more recent developments in attachment theory and research in relationship with this work, has much to offer social work contexts where stress and distress are common and where helper-helpee roles are constructed through the social worker-client relationship.

In conjunction, focussing on the practice experiences of the social worker in relationship with attachment theory, the contribution that practice experiences can make to the ongoing development of attachment theory informed social work practice theory for practice was shown. In exploring attachment theory and social work practice through the window of experience, the social workers in this study positioned advocates of the use of attachment theory in social work practice, highlighted that their theory-practice explorations often began through a process of "bringing practice into theory". "Bringing practice into theory" highlighted a myriad of coherence and contextual challenges across theory, practice theory and social work practice, that impacted on the social workers' practice and on their experience of the use of attachment theory in their practice.

"Bringing practice into theory" also highlighted the social worker as a bridge between theory and practice. A dynamic bridge that: brings practice into a lived experience of theory; theory into a lived experience of practice; and seeks to contain the phenomenological stress and anxiety predominant when theory and practice meet at the juncture of lived experience, especially heightened in child and family oriented social work. In foregrounding the social workers' experiences and in considering these as context along with the clients' experiences as context, the context of the social worker-client relationship can be found amidst contemporary practice.

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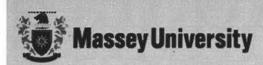
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# Appendix A: Massey University Human Ethics Approval

**Massey University**

3 May 2006

Dear Maree

**Re:    HEC: Southern B Application – 06/10**
**A phenomenological exploration of social workers' experiences of translating, integrating and transforming attachment theory into their social work practice**

Thank you for your letter dated 2 May 2006.

On behalf of the Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern B I am pleased to advise you that the ethics of your application are now approved. Approval is for three years. If this project has not been completed within three years from the date of this letter, reapproval must be requested.

If the nature, content, location, procedures or personnel of your approved application change, please advise the Secretary of the Committee.

Yours sincerely

Dr Karl Pajo, Chair
**Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern B**

cc   Dr Mary Nash                        Prof Robyn Munford, HoD
     Dept Sociology, Social              Dept Sociology, Social
       Policy & Social Work                Policy & Social Work
     PN371                               PN371

## Appendix B: ANZASW Noticeboard Advertisement

**Social Work and Attachment Theory Research.**

My name is Maree Foley. I am a trained Social Worker and Child and Adolescent Psychotherapist who is currently completing a Masters degree through the School of Sociology, Social Policy and Social Work, Massey University. I am conducting research into social workers' experiences of putting attachment theory into social work practice. I am especially looking for social workers to participate who have more than three years experience following graduation in a setting/s working with children and their families and who have an interest in attachment theory and social work practice. To avoid any potential conflict of interest, practitioners who I have a current or past supervision relationship will not be able to participate. On completion of this project, I will conduct professional development workshops on attachment theory informed social work practice open to all social workers. Participants will be able to attend this workshop free of charge. If you are interested in participating and want more details on what would be expected of you as a participant please contact me:

NB: All personal contact details have been removed.

# Appendix C: Information Sheet

## Social Workers' Experiences of putting Attachment Theory into Social Work Practice

**Researcher: Maree A Foley**

**Supervisors:**
Dr Mary Nash. Senior Lecturer, Massey University and Professor Robyn Munford. Professor, Massey University.

*What is this study about?*

This research is interested in coming to understand more about social workers' experiences of putting attachment theory into social work practice. It aims to generate accessible and useable theory informed practice ideas. These findings will be especially of interest to social workers who wish to extend their practice in the area of attachment theory and its social work practice implications.

*What do you have to do?*

If you agree to take part you will asked to participate in two ways. First, participating in two separate focus group meetings (2 hours maximum each). The first meeting will focus on your general social work experiences of putting attachment theory into practice. This focus group will occur in Central Wellington, either during a lunch time, and or an early evening. Following the first focus group, participants will be provided with a brief summary of the reviewed literature pertaining to this project. This material will provide the focus for the second focus group to see how close the literature represents your experience, or not.

Second, participating in a one-hour interview to talk further about your experiences of the issues raised in the first 'focus group'. Prior to this interview, I will send you an interview guide based on my processing of the information provided in the focus group. Your interview will be audio taped. A copy of the transcript, with the tape will be returned to you for review.

If you take part in this study, you have the right to decline to answer any question and to withdraw from the study up to the time of completion of the second focus group. You can also ask any further questions during the research process as they come to mind.

*Anonymity and Confidentiality*

All the information that you provide, will be treated confidentially. Participant's names will not be used in the research report or in any presentation of the findings. You will be asked to provide a pseudonym to protect your identity. No specific statements that you make throughout the research will be used without your informed consent.

This research is about social workers' experiences. Over the course of the interviews you will be asked to think about your experiences when with clients. At no time are you to use clients names, instead pseudonyms can be used.

Your participation in this research is also to be kept confidential. This is not only for your own privacy but also for the privacy of the other participants. All interviews will be outside of work time and no identifying details regarding place of work will be requested. Types of social work practice that you are engaged in will be requested but not employer details.

Each participant is responsible for checking out their unique employer – employee contracts regarding participation in research projects outside of work time where no identifiable employer and or client details will be requested or provided.

### *What will the research project offer you?*

As a participant, you will have access to a summary of current literature review findings on the topic of social work practice and attachment theory. You will also have access to the abstract of the completed thesis and information where to source the thesis. A spiral bound copy of the thesis, will also be made available for circulation among participants.

After the research has been completed, in recognition of and appreciation to you for your time and participation you will be invited to attend a one day professional development workshop focused on some of the social work practice implications of attachment theory. This workshop will be conducted by the researcher. The timing of this is estimated to be around April 2007.

### *Interested in participating?*

If you are interested in participating, send me an email. I will then send you a list of the proposed focus group meeting times and venues.

Thank you for your interest in this project. If you are aware of other people that are suitable for the study that might also be interested, please pass this information on. Alternatively feel free to give out my contact details and ask them to contact me.

Many thanks,

Maree Foley

*This project has been reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee, PN Application 06/10 If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research, please contact Dr John O'Neil, Chair, Massey University Campus Human Ethics Committee: Palmerston North, telephone 06 350 5799 x 8635, email:humanethicspn@massey.ac.nz.*

# Appendix D: Updated Information Sheet

## Social Workers' Experiences of putting Attachment Theory into Social Work Practice

**3 August 2006**

**Researcher: Maree A Foley**

**Supervisors:**

Dr Mary Nash. Senior Lecturer, Massey University. Professor Robyn Munford. Professor, Massey University.

*What is this study about?*

This research is interested in coming to understand more about social workers' experiences of putting attachment theory into social work practice. It aims to generate accessible and useable theory informed practice ideas. These findings will be especially of interest to social workers who wish to extend their practice in the area of attachment theory and its social work practice implications.

*What do you have to do?*

The research method has changed from the original proposition in response to participant interest and their respective locations across the country. As a result, the originally plan for a process of focus group – interview and a second focus group, has been changed to begin with the interviews. After the interviews have been processed there may be an opportunity to engage in some focus groups for those in the Wellington area.

The interview will be about one hour long and will focus specifically on your experiences of putting attachment theory into use in a social work setting.

All other information enclosed in the first information sheet remains as originally stated.

I will be in contact over the next day or so to ascertain if you remain interested in participating given this change, and if so to arrange a time for the interview.

Many thanks,

Maree Foley

This project has been reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee, PN Application 06/10 If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research, please contact Dr John O'Neil, Chair, Massey University Campus Human Ethics Committee: Palmerston North, telephone 06 350 5799 x 8635, email:humanethicspn@massey.ac.nz.

## Appendix E: Participant Consent Form

## Participant Consent Form

(This consent form will be held for a period of five (5) years)

I have read the Information Sheet and have had the details of the study explained to me. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction and I understand that I may ask further questions at any time.

I agree/do not agree to the interview being audio taped. I understand that I have the right for the audio tape to be turned off at any time.

I agree to provide information to the researcher on the understanding that my name will not be used. I understand that I will be invited to provide a pseudonym for any information that directly belongs to me.

I agree not to use clients' real names, or provide data that would make them identifiable in any way, such as place of employment, place of residence, school etc.

I understand that I am to keep confidential my participation in this research and that of other participants. I understand that I am not to provide the name of my employer throughout my participation in this research. I understand that it is my responsibility to check my employer-employee contract regards my participation in this research.

I understand that the information I provide will be used for this research, publications arising from this research project and training workshops.

I agree to participate in this study under the conditions set out in the Information Sheet.


**Signature:** ............................................................ **Date:** ...................

**Full Name - printed** .................................................................................

**Signed and Dated: Name:**

## Appendix F: Transcriber Confidentiality Form

**Transcriber Confidentiality Form**

I have agreed to provide transcribing / note taking services to Maree Foley.

I understand that the all the material is confidential. I understand that I am not to discuss any of the details of this material outside of my discussions with the researcher.

I understand that I need to advise in writing to the researcher where the tapes will be stored while I am working on the transcribing process. I will adhere to the researcher's written guidelines for safe storage processes while the tapes are in my care.

I understand that I am not to keep any material such as tapes, scripts or notes, pertaining to the participants' information. This information must be returned to the researcher.

**Signed:**

**Name:**

**Date:**

Contact Details:

Researcher: Maree A Foley.

Supervisors:   Dr Mary Nash. Senior Lecturer, Massey University.

Professor Robyn Munford. Professor, Massey University.

*This project has been reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee, PN Application 06/10. If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research, please contact Dr John O'Neil, Chair, Massey University Campus Human Ethics Committee: Palmerston North, telephone 06 350 5799 x 8635, email:humanethicspn@massey.ac.nz.*

## Appendix G: Audio Tape Destruction/ Storage Form

**Social Workers' Experiences of putting Attachment Theory into Practice**

**Audio Tape Destruction/ Storage Form**

As part of this research, you have some choices to make about the storage and destruction of the audio tape of your individual interview.

Please tick one of the options below:

1. I wish for my interview tape to be given to me for my own safe keeping at the completion of this research.

2. I wish for my interview tape to be destroyed at the completion of this research.

3. I wish for my tape to be stored for 5 years. If I have not contacted the University within five years of this date, the supervisor of this research will destroy the tape.

Name:

Date:

*"This project has been reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern B, Application 06/10. If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research, please contact Dr Karl Pajo, Chair, Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern B, telephone 04 801 5799 x6929, email humanethicsouthb@massey.ac.nz."*

## Appendix H: Interview Questions

**Social Workers' Experiences of putting Attachment Theory into Practice**

**Interview Questions**

1. Where do you go to, for information on attachment theory for social work practice? How have you found the process of looking for this information?

2. What written material has been most helpful to you in putting attachment theory into practice? What do you think it was, about this material that made it most useful to you?

3. What kinds of social work practice do you think attachment theory is best suited to?

4. What aspects of attachment theory do you think are most applicable to social work practice?

5. Is talking about your experience of putting attachment theory into social work practice something that you have talked about much before?

6. What has is it been like for you fitting attachment theory into the social work practice theories that you tend to favour?

I am very interested in the many ways that we take a theory and put it into practice. I am really interested in the processes that we use to do this. Are you okay about exploring together the vignette below, not as a test of your knowledge but to see if we can understand more about how you might use attachment theory in your social work practice.

Social Worker

.....When I am with this foster mum Melanie, I feel like I want to tell her to go easy on Karen ( aged 8). Karen has been in this foster family for over 12 months and its really the best we have on offer right now for her. I feel really bad though that Karen is not getting what she needs emotionally. She's being cared for like a boarder but there is no warmth in Melanie. Melanie won't have a bar of the emotional stuff and just wants to talk about reimbursements, if her payments have gone through or not and how I am getting on with organizing her to get a new washing machine and stove. Today Karen had stolen some stuff from school and she was in her room when I arrived for stealing and then lying about stealing! Melanie had said that Karen had to stop being naughty and drawing negative attention to herself. Melanie was angry that Karen was reflecting badly her own family. Melanie wanted all of my time and didn't think I should see Karen, unless I was intending "to give her a good talking to". Melanie was concerned that Karen didn't seem to be making any progress and that she was actually making life hard for herself. Melanie said that the best she can do for Karen is to show her that "we don't do things like that in our family and she will have to choose what she wants, our family rules or out". I can't change the placement. Melanie is not abusive...I don't know what I can do to help make it any different......I don't see the point....all she does is go over the same stuff over and over again, she never puts into practice what we have talked about because she says that she forgot, was too busy etc. What's the point, I am not using my skills as a social worker....

**This vignette is not based on any one real family or social worker conversation. It is intended to be representative of a social work conversation, rather than reflective of any specific family/social worker.**

## Appendix I: Participant Profile Sheet
Name:

Contact:

Gender:

Ethnicity:

Social Work qualification:

Other relevant qualifications:

Social Work Practice Area:

Years of practice as a social worker:

Approximate time since actively interested in attachment theory:

- **Forms received and signed where necessary:**

    1. Participant Information Form
    2. Update Participant Information Form
    3. Letter of consent from Employer where necessary
    4. Consent Form
    5. Audio Tape Destruction/Storage Form
    6. Authority for release of transcripts

Tick and date as completed:

- Interview date made
- Venue Confirmed
- Interview Tape made: date ................duration.........................
- Interview tape sent to Jane for transcription
- Interview script and tape returned from Jane
- Interview script and tape sent to participant
- Interview authority for release of tape transcripts sent to participant with script and tape
- Script and tape returned
- Authority for release of transcripts form signed and returned.
- Maree: to action the storage of tape preference.
- Feedback to participant
- Organize access to the thesis

## Appendix J: Letter of Understanding Sample

12 November 06

Dear Anne,

Thank you very much for being available for an interview as part of the research study that I am currently engaged with. Anne, it was a privilege to meet with you and for us to talk about your work, specifically in regard to the use of attachment theory. As I have continued to be with the interview over the weeks, I wanted to let you know what has been going on in my head, as the conversation that we had together, although formally finished for the purposes of this interview, has continued on for me. This brief letter is an attempt to convey to you what I have understood from our time together.

The inserts below from your interview are ones that I would like to consider for inclusion in my thesis. I imagine that I will not be able to include them all, given the tight word limit restrictions however, I wanted you know something of the richness of your interview, that is contributing to the findings of this study.

In reflecting on your social work journey in relation to attachment theory, I have considered the following aspects of your interview as being especially rich and communicative of the theory-practice dance. This letter is simply structured in a loose form. The focus is on some of your reflections throughout the interview. What I have done is preceded these with a brief descriptive sentence to provide you with a picture of where your reflections have been met in my reflections. It is this piece that I find especially exciting as it highlights the shared contribution of you as a participant and me as researcher with 'time' to reflect on your reflections.

The social workers' day-to-day relationship with formal theories like attachment theory:

*I think probably I've just been quite busy as a practitioner. Like when we were doing my competency assessment... they ask what theories you use and I'm kind of like well on a day to day basis it's not, you don't use theories. You talk to people and you form relationships with your clients and you have to do things on time, like you've got deadlines and you've got reports to write..."*

While you could identify that you had read a lot of literature, you most readily recalled the work of Vera Fahlberg as well as a book within your own service:

*Yes, that's the biggest part that makes sense in terms of what happens to children that don't get secure attachments and have them disrupted... you can see the children's behaviour and link it back into their attachment cycle and knowing that this is what happened when they were a baby and now... the outcomes afterwards".*

*"we've got a good book called "Love is Not Enough"... it just says love is not enough for these children they need extra help....".*

While being a busy practitioner, not thinking directly about "theories" your reflections on your practice showed the practice implications of the theory. First were your own personal theories of relationships that guide your practice:

*"... respecting their story, being non-judgmental with people, having empathy with people...I think having empathy for people is really important..."*

Second, was an ongoing developing understanding of your own attachment relationships:

*" I think that through my doing the degree and various other bits and pieces... I have learnt a lot about how me and my attachments have been over the years...Why I have attached to people why I have got into relationships that I have done...what happened between my Mum and Dad and trying to understand that and then... trying to understand why Mum got into other violent relationships... so a lot of that knowledge about myself has informed me about how I work with people in similar situations. How I work with children who have been in similar situations as I have And I guess I try to help children understand why things like that happen and looking at where their feelings and relationships are with their parents and why they have certain behaviours..."*

Third, was your capacity to recognise attachment behaviours in children:

*" probably the main part of it...is the independence that these children show and the self-soothing and the just the pushing away of any affection and linking that back into their early days and what actually happened and the fact that their needs didn't get met and so therefore they needed to meet their own needs. Head banging and rocking and all that sort of stuff...they push it away because they've never had it. It's totally foreign to them...."*

*"... and we have had cases where children just totally reject the primary caregiver so the child will ignore the mother when she comes into the room but will be friendly with other people as a sort of way of punishing and being over friendly with strangers but totally reject their families and it is really hard and adopted parents think it's their fault or they think it's the child's fault and start rejecting the child back and that gets really difficult. I'm just trying to figure the difference between disruptive and disorganized... what's disorganized is again?...."*

Fourth, was your capacity to structure what you actually did and said to families based on your understandings of attachment theory. For example, you talked about actively supporting young children's attachments through a continuity of routine and care.

: *"... the passing on of blankets, the sense, the smell stuff. If they had a toy, if their birth parents had given them a toy right from the beginning making sure that carries through to the final destination and blankets and sheets and clothing and all that sort of stuff to ensure that it continues also... the routine and how the birth parent comforts and*

*how the caregiver comforts the child is really important for how the adopted parents comfort their child.*

*"...especially in this work when you are working with children who are just don't have any voice or any sort of control over the situation and you've got all these adults around and it's about changing their perceptions, the way they think to actually thinking for the child and not thinking "Oh God it's going to cost $100 something a night to go up to Auckland and spend time with this child". It's like well this child needs to get to know you and needs a transition plan and all that sort of stuff and then they kind of think oh yeah okay. It kind of makes sense for them."*

Fifth, while you reflected that it's hard as a practitioner to think about formal theories while in the thick of practice, I noticed that you entered the theory-practice dance through the door of practice. To questions of the link between attachment theory and social work assessments you responded with practice examples:

*"Yes I think so. One case in particularly cropped up...."... "But she is really quite articulate about what happened to her. She understands that her mother had a mental illness, she had post-natal depression and she doesn't hold any anger toward her family. She has relationships with her siblings, not fantastic relationships because they remained in that home and they were damaged themselves but she still communicates with them. Her foster mother died and her foster father remarried to quite a nice lady so she actually has quite a good relationship with them and has talked to her foster father about the treatment that his wife gave her. So she has been able through therapy and counselling, to recognize what happened and she doesn't feel like any of that is her fault".*

*"...She has been able to form secure attachments to her husband, to friends, and just been really open about it. with people that don't go through that resolving, you see that they are not open and you can tell that they're holding back information and not being completely honest with you...that they have some guilt that it was their fault and perhaps if they were not so naughty that it may not have happened. So yes, we do take people through and make assessments on whether they have moved on..."*

Social work practice issues that supported you using attachment theory in your social work practice included: The implication for you/colleagues of your social work role:

*It's a lot different from when I worked with care and protection... especially in investigation... you had a specific role... you needed to go in there and you needed to ensure the child's safe and quite often you're not forming relationships with the parents or you try but because of the situation they don't, the relationships hardly ever work... whereas when you've got volunteer clients, they come to you for a service, they are from all kinds of backgrounds...they don't do drugs and alcohol, they don't have violence in their lives and they have good relationships with their families.*

*"...I don't understand the whole generic thing because it is two different mindsets... you've got investigations happening and you've got long term clients...to work effectively in those two areas... the mind shift that needs to happen on a daily basis is beyond me".*

*"investigation is a priority for the time frame and you've got all that extra systems like KPI's and you've got to make sure the child is safe and in a certain timeframe so it gets priority over the other long term work where its really important to maintaining the relationship because sometimes with long term clients....when they are moving around from placement to placement... you're the one solid person that has been there throughout the whole time... so to maintain those relationships and to ensure that the child actually sees you as somebody they can talk to and to feel safe around... you can't do that when you're rushing around uplifting children".*

*"But it is also a very different practice if you've got to make a decision about care and protection of the child, that's your function in that hour. It is a totally different job than going to check out how school's going and how the kid's doing with their friends. It's a different kind of pressure".*

Second, having time to form relationships:

*"... because you're working with allocated couples right from the beginning and they go through a series of education days you're meeting between those education days and then you're spending time with them. you could be hours. I mean look at that couple I told you about before. I spent quite a bit of time with them because there story was quite complicated and detailed and there is a trust that is built up between the social worker and clients and so the relationships comes from that and forms from that".*

Third, having time to form relationships so as to conduct assessments that inform decision making:

*"...the assessment process does have an attachment section in it and in that section we talk about their relationships with their parents and the relationships with their siblings, how they were brought up, what were the issues that come up for them, what were some of the good things, bad things, what would they do doing differently with their own child to the way that they were parented we look at their relationships with other children, like friends children...so we look at their attachments with their families and explore any issues".*

*"I don't think care and protection social workers have enough time or perhaps enough knowledge about looking at how the parents have been brought up and looking at their relationships and their experiences of being parented, how they've moved on from that Because you're looking at the child you're kind of making judgments without having a full story about where they come from as well".*

*"it's really hard.... because it is all reactive and it's all brought about by an incident where the child has been abused... I think sometimes we're a little bit too quick*

*to remove when we don't need to and perhaps because of our own sort of fear of the what if, the risk we are all on tippy-toes going oh well we better remove her in case it happens again and if it all turns to crap we're going to be in the firing line...you cover your back as much as possible ...Social workers fear that too much rather than looking at the situation and taking some time to actually do some proper work in there.*

*"I think social workers feel that pressure all the time and because of the work load they don't have enough time to actually look into any of the other stuff that we should be looking at "*

*The Vignette:*

*"Well it's obvious she is not getting her emotional needs met....Melanie hasn't formed any attachment to this child, it's been a year...I think it would be interesting to see what Melanie's background is and why she doesn't feel that she can actually take the suggestions from the social worker....maybe work with Melanie to look at her own past ...instead of giving her suggestions or tips about how to handle things actually look at how her parents handled different situations...like, if she's been brought up with the fact that her parents sent her to her room every time she did something without talking to her or giving her a hug or whatever... then she can start thinking that's how I felt as a child when my parents did that to me and moving that into how Karen may be feeling when she does that to Karen...."*

What happens next:

I continue to have an audio file of the interview on my PC and will copy this onto a CD at the end of the project, where it will be safely stored for 5 years as requested by you.

I am aware that your professional identity and your personal journey would not usually be open to general view, therefore I will be guided by you if there are any inserts above that you do not wish to be included in their direct form in my thesis. There is space on the form enclosed (Authority for release of Transcripts) for you to let me know what sits most comfortably with you.

Anne, when you have a moment, what I need you to do next as agreed is write me a brief note about what it was like for you to receive this information about your interview and to clarify with me that this information fits with your experience of the interview and what you understood you talked with me about.

If it is possible for you to get this feedback to me along with your signed Authority for release of Transcripts form sometime over the next month before the Christmas rush that would be so very much appreciated. While I will email you a copy of this, I will also be sending a hard copy for you through the post.

Anne, in writing this letter to you, I am aware that I am and have been, very moved by what you shared. I am very honoring of you and your professional journey. Thank you so very much for being part of this research study.

Kind regards,


Maree Foley

## Appendix K: Authority for Release of Tape Transcripts

**Social Workers' Experiences of putting Attachment Theory into Practice**

**Authority for Release of Tape Transcripts**

**This form will be held for a period of five (5) years**

I confirm that I have had the opportunity to read and amend the transcript of the interview conducted with me.

I agree that the edited transcript and extracts from this may be used by Maree Foley in reports and publications arising from the research.

**Signature:** .................................................................... **Date:** ....................................

**Full Name - printed** ....................................................................................................

> *"This project has been reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern B, Application 06/10. If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research, please contact Dr Karl Pajo, Chair, Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern B, telephone 04 801 5799 x6929, email humanethicsouthb@massey.ac.nz."*

## Appendix L: Secondary Consent Form
### Key Informant Secondary Consent Process Form

26 June 2007

Dear Ruth,

The management of your material given that you are a key informant and a senior practitioner requires as agreed a secondary consent process so as to ensure at all times your identity protection. Enclosed are the direct quotes and information from your interview that have been integrated into the thesis draft. Could you please have a read and make any changes to your material. Once you are satisfied with the changes that you have made, please return to me and I will adjust your material in the draft as required.

Once the draft changes have been made, these changes will be viewed by my supervisors. I will then send you a letter confirming that these changes have been made.

This will complete this secondary consent process.

Kind Regards,

Maree Foley,

**Signature:** ...................................................................  **Date:** ...................................

**Full Name - printed** ............................................................................................................

*"This project has been reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern B, Application 06/10. If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research, please contact Dr Karl Pajo, Chair, Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern B, telephone 04 801 5799 x6929, email humanethicsouthb@massey.ac.nz."*

## Appendix M: Interview Summaries

### Introducing the Interviewed Participants.

### Ruth

For this participant, attachment theory was introduced as a primary theory for practice at the beginning of her training and has remained the primary informing theory that she uses in her work. Of her first introduction to attachment theory she described her experience:

*"... the thing that changed my life was hearing Vera Fahlberg's work actually. And the thing that it gave me was those attachment cycles. That for me was just revolutionary. It gave me a job to do and it gave me a way of practicing as a social worker ... it gives you a way when things aren't working to ask questions about what is going on here and that's the strength of theory for me is not that it gives you answers necessarily but it gives you a framework for asking more questions when things aren't right or aren't working...So however bumbling my efforts were in terms of being a good therapist in the end it was good enough in terms of getting a good outcome for social work practice".*

Inclusive of these experiences was the profound effect that seeing one of Robertson films had had on her. In addition, this participant was very clear that for her the process of putting attachment theory into her social work practice was primarily through being offered supportive experiential experiences alongside focusing in an in-depth way on one family, in the form of a case study:

*"[My trainers were] very much saying that you had to do it experientially, that the workers needed to get in touch with their own, perhaps unresolved issues, round loss and attachment if they were actually going to take on and do the work. I believe that very strongly... having done two cases in that kind of detail my decision-making around the other 9 families was different... it was that my thinking about where they should go and who they should go to and the kind of advice to caregivers particularly needed was different... and those placements survived... "So however bumbling my efforts were in terms of being a good therapist in the end it was good enough in terms of getting a good outcome for social work practice".*

This participant also highlighted that for her the theory practice journey had been an active ongoing one, where not only had she kept pace with the recent emerging findings, she had remained reflexive; inviting this new theory to also find a new experiential home in her. She told the following magnificent story, which occurred easily twenty years after her first introduction to the theory.

*" it was only 2 years ago perhaps 3 years ago, my Mum got really irritated at Christmas time and said what is it about you girls who have to have real pine trees. You've never*

*had a real pine tree in your life so what's this about. And I said but Mum we did. Never. I said I remember having a real pine tree when I was 6. Oh that tatty old thing she said...What I discovered which, I hadn't realised was that... my Mum had gone into hospital after my sister's birth, left my Dad with a 6 year old and a 4 year old and a newborn baby who was breastfed and hadn't been weaned...(some friends of dads but strangers to us said \*) we'll go round and take the 2 older kids and look after them. Well it felt like an eternity, foster care, because I didn't know them and we went to the strangers home for 4 days, it felt like it was months or weeks. I was really surprised when Mum said it was only 4 days but we came home on Christmas Eve".*
*\* (I have added this in to provide coherency for the reader as I tried to edit as much as possible without losing the essence of your story)*

Three key factors were presented as key for this participant in the bridging theory and practice: learning attachment theory experientially; drawing on attachment theory as a guide for practice' and third the need for social workers to be able to make use of a consultation process where *"it's not just as simple as social workers having a bit of knowledge, they need a consultative kind of base...."* In addition three issues were presented, highlighting a gap between the rhetoric of attachment theory and the grass roots day-day practice understandings: First was the issue of identification of an issue being equated with intervention: *"in New Zealand social work practice quite often children were identified as having attachment issues but then that was kind of like the end of it...that stability and long term placement, would create the answer and that's where I felt attachment theory just isn't understood... just because a child is in a placement for a long time doesn't mean to say they revise their inner working model to include in the possibilities of secure attachment. They can stay actually disorganized attached for quite long periods of time...change in the environment doesn't change the child's inner working model".*

Second, attachment theory was not being evidenced as an informing theory where it would be most likely to be expected, such as in care and protection issues with toddlers:

*"But they don't know what they are looking for so they don't even realize there is a problem, in fact it's the opposite, they think things are fine because they've got these settled switched off kids then they wonder about the violence down the line".*

*"I think my most horrible story is of a foster mother ringing me up saying could I just call round... So I went round and when I go in the French doors at the end of their lounge I notice a new toddler I've not seen before by the door and he froze and dropped his bottle. I walked in ...I'm busy having a bit of a chat with this foster mother but I can't help but notice this little boy and he stood there absolutely frozen. I eventually turned to him and said "you don't need to bother about me, I am nothing to do with you and you don't need to worry about me". He sidled up around the wall in behind the foster mother and after about another 5 minutes she said actually you've done what I needed you to do I shall ring you and explain what this has all been about. You can go now. So I went ...I noticed her picking up this little one, he buried his head in her breast and wouldn't look up until he heard the gate click. When he heard the gate click he looked up, saw I was*

*going. Apparently, after I had gone he was busy playing, chatting, absolutely fine and what she wanted to establish was that if a stranger came, he would be frightened and scared that he would be kidnapped again and having established that of course we then tried to get the social workers to leave him because they were moving him on Monday to his 6ᵗʰ or 7ᵗʰ placement in as many months aged 18 months old. She said he is just beginning to form attachments to me, he doesn't want to go to anybody but me and they want to move him. They moved him".*

Third, a related issue that this social worker highlighted was a gap in her experience between the said use of attachment theory in social work practice and being able to have an attachment theory informed practice conversation that then informs decision making. For example in relation to the above situation she contacted a senior social worker to discuss her observations. Of this conversation she stated that: *"There is no way they could have listened to that and understand and the thing I really understood after that was that there is nothing to talk about because there is no analysis. They don't see the problem because there is no way of understanding that there's problem because there is no language..?...they don't see the suffering. They didn't see that little boy standing in the corner frozen and suffering and that I see over and over in my experience".*

## CJ

For the second participant, unlike that of the first, attachment theory was introduced while she was in the thick of practice and had been for more than ten years. Her initial introduction to the theory was described: *"It would have been a piece of literature that started me off and then I started attending seminars and reading anything I could find really".* She described her experience of finding relevant material as, *"pretty hard...very hard, it's been really hard to find really good books".* What she did find however was *"that David Howe book...it took me a while to read. I had to put it down and then read a little bit more and even Vera Fahlberg as well but those two books have been awesome. Awesome in terms of understanding attachment theory and trying to put it into practice in my work where I can".*

Somewhat similar to the first participant, this social worker was somewhat 'struck' with an experience of the theory. She reported: *"I've noticed just how important it is and how it permeates right throughout when we're adults. It is so relevant in our relationships whether they are professional or personal, social it just goes right across you know...I'll be standing there, not even at work, I'll be in a social situation in some conversation and I'll be going oh yeah that's that or you know like not this about babies. It really fascinates me.* She then went on to describe the impact on her practice: *"the way I practice has changed and it's changed because I understand what attachment means...It is the most important as far as I am concerned....because that is the core essence of the realities of the way you develop and so I just think my practice is different now than it used to be".*

Like that of the first participant, she described that her practice began to change because of the way that she had begun thinking: *"it has enabled me to do better assessments, I*

*can pick up that something is wrong in the attachment and I will now refer to a psychologist for attachment disorders...* For this participant keeping her social work role distinct from a counselling role was an important issue. While she was comfortable using child attachment behaviour check lists at times she said: *"I can recognize it but I certainly can't treat it ...my job is to recognize it... to get the right support to work with that... I'm certainly no therapist ...I'm learning to become more aware... it's hard to put it into words...it is understanding what the children need and the children need consistency and reliability, security and that's what I can offer".*

When invited to elaborate more on how she saw attachment theory informing her in her social work role she said: *"If I want to know them then I really need to know what's going on in their world. I have to build a relationship with them... and I am aware that they do use me as a secure-base so I try and be interested and reliable but you have to give the time to do that because if you try and rush it, it is actually really unsafe for them".*

She then provided a practice example, emphasising the way she was consistent and reliable:

*"the.... new place wasn't going so well I was the secure-base I was making regular visits, bringing the toys, stickers...( over time ) I could see that she was relying on me less and less and she was becoming more and more attached to Auntie and she was seeking the approval or acknowledgement or validation from Auntie so my visits became less and it was more over the phone to Auntie rather than my physical presence and withdrawing. Because I didn't need to be that secure-base for her anymore, it was Auntie".*

Another example that she described was of a common social work specific task, that of driving children in care to appointments etc., and how as a result of her understanding of attachment theory, she had managed to change her view, of her role as a social worker during this task. She said: *"if my children have to go to A to B and if the caregiver can't do it I will do it and I will not have them picked up by strangers all the time being carted from A to B...being in the car...it's great for relationship building and they get to trust you and all that security with that...I've found that if you put in that time in the beginning it might be really quite intensive and you might have to do it regularly every week whatever it is for a few months but it will pay off. You will get to a better outcome faster and it will be faster, than if you don't do that and you do strangers picking up. In fact you'll probably never get to a good outcome actually".*

Not only did this worker indicate that she understood the importance of taking the time, she also highlighted that she implicitly understood the healing connection between her taking the time and the child healing over time as a result of an active intervention process:

*"I am thinking of one child who has been in care for like 8 years when I became the social worker. He'd been everywhere multiple placements, huge problems. Obviously had attachment disorders, really complex but lots of social work, lots of change constant change that was the only constant thing in his life. I've been working with him now for*

*about 2 years and in terms of like he's been in care for 8 years I wouldn't expect something to happen, I think 2 years is fast. So I've seen a huge turnaround in his life and his behaviour and his psychological well being and the way he interacts and relates and he can now start to communicate with people in the 2 years than what I've read in 8 years of his history. I think 2 years is fast. When I say fast I don't necessarily mean a few weeks or months you know".*

This social worker also described the impact that her job at times could have on her personally. She described a situation where she needed to move a preschool child from one care placement to another: *"I didn't want to do it but I had to do it and how was I going to do that that was safe for her and she was still feeling insecure and I'm talking about a 3 to 4 year old... how to move this child that offered her predictability, reliability and security in a month of being insecure".* To assist her she sought external consultation support from a child mental health specialist. She was advised to phone the *"child every day even on the weekend and tell her count down the days...so I did that and I phoned her on the weekend as well".* Of this experience for her as a worker she said: *"you become so overwhelmed yourself and upset about something you have to do and you know you have to do it but you know it's going to be really upsetting that you, you want to protect the child, you don't tell the child too much which is actually the wrong thing to do".*

### Grace

The third participant had been a social worker for five and half years, been trained in the United Kingdom and had much previous experience as a volunteer. She said that *"before I did social work training I was involved in a lot of things .... stuff that my son had been involved in...so from that stage I started to have an awareness of attachment theory and the impact that a good attachment could have...."* It was later on, during her volunteer training that *"we and had a lecture from a psychiatrist and she went through all the different developmental stages and all the attachment (styles) ... like WOW... because all the stuff that I had absorbed on a more informal basis...it fitted in a structure and it was just so fascinating....it's in every part of us... it's part of all the other theories because it so much impacts on people's ability to form and sustain relationships".*

Inspired by this experience this worker entered into a social work training programme of which she said: *"When I was studying I had time and I spent days looking up stuff and was so immersed in it but that was fine because that's what I was doing then. I wasn't trying to do a job...."* Key influences were identified as the work of Harlow, Vera Fahlberg and David Howe. She described her experiences of reading Vera Fahlberg's book as *"absolutely amazing and I didn't read it cover to cover at all... it was just one of them I kept referring to...she gives you a list of things to put in a report... she just puts it so well".*

Of David Howe's book she said: *"...you could read it and understand it, you didn't have to think about, you didn't have to work out what he was telling you and the same with Vera Fahlberg... I think that being readable is quite important as well because, however*

*good the piece of work might be if it's in a language that is not user friendly I won't be able to read it and think how I could apply that to this and that...some texts I found very difficult because of the language although it's English its different English and it became a lot more jargon".*

For this social worker she described the practice challenge of how to make use of the theory in practice: *"You're looking at who they see as their primary attachment person whether it's the person who is formally mum or dad you can ask who they would go to for support and for comfort....and likewise when you're going to place a child you're looking for somebody who can build a good strong relationship....and take them through to their adult stage of the placement whether a short term planned period".*

Important for this participant, was the assessment process and her experience of endeavouring to assess attachment relationships as mandated by her employer as part of her social work tasks. She described several social work decisions that she had made with attachment theory in mind in conjunction with an informal attachment assessment process: *"It's hard to gauge what you should be looking for and what you should do with it...you are finding the stuff out but what do you do with it once you've got it...I suppose you're always looking... in terms of the emotional and developmental needs of the child and for their relationship experiences....you're looking for a relationship that is going to hold up".*

She described an assessment process as occurring in the following way: *"She was 4 years old she'd had a horrendous life... taken out of her home... I came in once she was already placed I was just thinking so much of this just doesn't feel right and it took me a wee while to work out what bit it was that didn't feel right and it was all the emotional support the little girl wasn't getting".*

In another example provided by this participant, a social work decision had been made that family reunification would no longer be viewed as an option. This decision was made clearly in the presence of other assessments but not inclusive of an assessment of the mother and the children in terms of their attachment relationships. What follows is a brief dialogue that occurred between myself as the interviewer and this participant. After listening to the initial story of this family I asked:

*Maree: "So has there been an attachment assessment of her and the children"?*

*Grace: "There was an assessment done...but in terms of the actual attachment, no".*

*Maree:"So we don't know what kind of attachment relationship they have, whether it is disorganized etc."?*

*Grace "No we don't have that detail... it's very poor in some respects because the children have been moved about... Mum hadn't had full time care of the children for some years and she's placed them on an informal basis with people before we were involved so the children really don't quite know where they are or why they are where*

*they are although they know some of the stuff that happened...Some of its character based, some of it they saw, some of it they heard but they don't really know why they're not back with mum".*

**Anne**

This social worker, an experienced social worker of over 8 years, described her relationship with practice theory in general in the following way: *"I think probably I've just been quite busy as a practitioner. Like when we were doing my competency assessment... they ask what theories you use and I'm kind of like well on a day to day basis it's not, you don't use theories. You talk to people and you form relationships with your clients and you have to do things on time, like you've got deadlines and you've got reports to write".*

However amidst being a 'busy practitioner' she has maintained an active interest in attachment theory. She identified her key influences as being the work of Vera Fahlberg along with another book "love is not enough". When invited to describe what it was about the theory that made the most sense to her said: *"the biggest part that makes sense is in terms of what happens to children that don't get secure attachments and have them disrupted... you can see the children's behaviour and link it back into their attachment cycle and knowing that this is what happened when they were a baby and now... the outcomes afterwards".*

As with the previous interviews this social worker began her explorations of the theory-practice dance through the door of practice. To questions of the link between attachment theory and social work assessments she immediately responded with practice examples such as, *"one case in particularly cropped up...."* Each of her practice examples represented three interconnected ways that she had engaged in, integral to her putting attachment theory into her practice. The first was identifying her own personal theories of relationships that guided her practice. She described these as: *"... respecting their story, being non-judgmental with people, having empathy with people...I think having empathy for people is really important...".* Second was her ongoing developing understanding of her own attachment relationships: *"...I have learnt a lot about how me and my attachments have been over the years...Why I have attached to people why I have got into relationships that I have done...what happened between my Mum and Dad and trying to understand that".*

Third, was her developing capacity to recognise attachment behaviours in children: *"probably the main part of it...is the independence that these children show and the self-soothing and the pushing away of any affection and linking that back into their early days and what actually happened and the fact that their needs didn't get met and so therefore they needed to meet their own needs. Head banging and rocking and all that sort of stuff...they push it away because they've never had it. It's totally foreign to them".*

This worker provided examples of how attachment theory was informing her practice. For example, she talked about actively supporting young children's attachments through a continuity of routine and care:

"… *the passing on of blankets, the sense, the smell stuff. If they had a toy, if their birth parents had given them a toy right from the beginning making sure that carries through to the final destination and blankets and sheets and clothing and all that sort of stuff to ensure that it continues also… the routine and how the birth parent comforts and how the caregiver comforts the child is really important for how the adopted parents comfort their child".*

"*…especially in this work when you are working with children who are just don't have any voice or any sort of control over the situation and you've got all these adults around and it's about changing their perceptions, the way they think to actually thinking for the child and not thinking "Oh God it's going to cost $100 something a night to go up to Auckland and spend time with this child". It's like well this child needs to get to know you and needs a transition plan and all that sort of stuff and then they kind of think oh yeah okay. It kind of makes sense for them".*

Of the assessment process within her organisation she said: "*…the assessment process does have an attachment section in it and in that section we talk about their relationships with their parents and the relationships with their siblings, how they were brought up, what were the issues that come up for them, what were some of the good things, bad things, what would they do doing differently with their own child to the way that they were parented. We look at their relationships with other children, like friends children…so we look at their attachments with their families and explore any issues".*

She then provided an example of part of her assessment of a potential adoptive parent: "*… she is really quite articulate about what happened to her. She understands that her mother had a mental illness, she had post-natal depression and she doesn't hold any anger toward her family. She has relationships with her siblings, not fantastic relationships because they remained in that home and they were damaged themselves but she still communicates with them. Her foster mother died and her foster father remarried to quite a nice lady so she actually has quite a good relationship with them and has talked to her foster father about the treatment that his wife gave her. So she has been able through therapy and counselling, to recognize what happened and she doesn't feel like any of that is her fault… she has been able to form secure attachments to her husband, to friends, and just been really open about it. So yes, we do take people through and make assessments on whether they have moved on".*

Three specific social work practice issues were also identified that had impacted on this social workers experience of putting attachment theory into practice. The first issue revolved around the social work role. Of her current social work position she described: "*it's a lot different from when I worked with care and protection… especially in investigation… you had a specific role…you needed to go in there and you needed to ensure the child's safety and quite often you're not forming relationships with the parents*

*or you try but because of the situation they don't, the relationships hardly ever work... whereas when you've got volunteer clients, they come to you for a service".*

This led to the second issue of having time to form relationships: *"... because you're working with allocated couples right from the beginning and they go through a series of education days... you're meeting between those education days and then you're spending time with them. You could be hours. I mean look at that couple I told you about before. I spent quite a bit of time with them because their story was quite complicated and detailed and there is a trust that is built up between the social worker and clients and so the relationships comes from that and forms from that".*

The third related issue was having not having enough time and feeling under pressure:

*"I don't think care and protection social workers have enough time or perhaps enough knowledge about looking at how the parents have been brought up and looking at their relationships and their experiences of being parented, how they've moved on from that. Because you're looking at the child you're kind of making judgments without having a full story about where they come from as well... it is all reactive and it's all brought about by an incident where the child has been abused... I think sometimes we're a little bit too quick to remove when we don't need to and perhaps because of our own sort of fear of the what if, the risk we are all on tippy-toes going oh well we better remove her in case it happens again and if it all turns to crap we're going to be in the firing line...you cover your back as much as possible ...Social workers fear that... social workers feel that pressure all the time they don't have enough time to actually look into any of the other stuff that we should be looking at".*

### Dorothy

Participant five, a social worker for many years described her process of coming to link attachment theory with social work practice. She said: *"I'd done individual papers and I knew about attachments and I knew about John Bowlby and all that stuff but I didn't actually correlate it to the behaviour that was seen with the teenagers".* She then went on to say that during her third year of her social work training, a social worker from the community conducted an a presentation on attachment theory, of this presentation she said: *" I knew then what I'd been seeing in my work... I had a model to put around it...I knew what the disruptive behaviour was; I knew straight away... it was just amazing...I can think of the kids... one boy, you know we would move him with his rubbish bag, moving the kids all the time from placement because they would disrupt and the caregivers would get sick of them and throw them out because they've smashed the walls...they'd pinch their car and all that testing stuff about not belonging anywhere....it was like Oh my god there is a whole body of knowledge out there about why this is happening...it's really about their attachments".*

When asked to reflect on key theoretical influences within her journey she highlighted as had many others the attachment cycles of Vera Fahlberg, the Ministry of Social Development clipping service and the work of Bruce Perry:

*"I remember the Bruce Perry model of arousal and the creation of the hormones and it actually impacts on how you grow, it actually changes the structure of your brain. WOW. It's amazing and like the nurturing and the response in someone picking you up and just that responsiveness you get in a mother/child bond or mother and grandmother or whoever Mum, Dad, baby it changes your brain and it affects how you are going to grow and who you are".*

Like the other participants the theory comes to life through practice examples, the theory immediately brings practice to mind. For this social worker, she described a critical aspect of her putting the theory into her practice was through taking time. Of her post graduate study she said:

*"I took the time out to just look at this stuff that I realised really that a lot of it is about… belonging Don't do anything until you've found a family, find somewhere safe to put that child".* An integral aspect of this time, was having spent some time as a social worker in a therapy oriented organisation. She said that *"I'm not a therapist but I actually wanted to have some sense of how that was for kids to actually do it and then I wanted to come back to this work".* A consequence of this experience also was the exposure to different ways to attend to understanding the communication and where the dynamics of relationships are focused on as part of the intervention. Of her current attachment theory oriented social work she said: *"…we don't do that work really around transference and counter-transference".*

Regarding her current social work practice, like that of the third participant, she began her reflections of the assessment process. She was very concerned about this aspect of her practice. This concern extended beyond herself personally and extended to her colleagues and organisation. She specifically made reference to a risk assessment tool that was used in her organisation:

*"There is a framework in the risk assessment tool used where you have to judge the mother's attachment, you have to judge the attachment and I always write… I have done 2 observations or 1 observation and 1 home visit. I'm not qualified to do attachment assessments…I would just do observation, we've got no tools around that. It is really dangerous …we're out there and you don't know what you're looking for when you're looking at a lot of those bits on that risk assessment system…You can't actually sign off anything unless you've done it… this is really dangerous".*

Linked with this concern was a concern for this social worker that New Zealand is yet to become actively engaged in assessing the social work – care and protection – foster care system. This comment was made in a heart-felt way:

*"Because we have hardly any research at all and I wonder about how many of our kids get maltreated in foster care. We don't track that… it's not that the foster parents are bad people it's something to do with the dynamics that goes on and I'm not quite sure what it is. It's like something that is happening because these kids don't quite*

*belong...maybe it is to do with how the child behaves but I can't think, always every week we are taking kids out of placements because they've been hit, because they've been sexually maltreated. We don't take them out when they're neglected. We don't take them out when we know there not nurtured and loved unless we've got somewhere else to put them".*

She then went on to say: *"I think that is one of the reasons we lose a lot of social workers, they can't do that anymore, they're not going to keep doing that harm anymore and they will go and work somewhere like Family Start for $10,000 because it is never about the money in social work. Because you can't work like that forever and a day because if you don't have something that drives you... you're not going to keep doing it... if you're really seeing what you're doing".*

## Maggie

First, as was a feature in many of the other interviews, this social worker reflected that it's hard as a practitioner to think about formal theories while in the thick of practice and she showed as did the other social workers interviewed that her theoretical reflections began with a process of by bringing to mind practice examples. When beginning to think about attachment theory she said: *"I just have a few cases at the moment, actually one I've just seen which is going through my mind".*

For this social worker, the key aspects of attachment theory that made sense to her were described as being, *"for the child and the primary caregiver be it the parent or the foster parent to have the relationship where both of them feel, more for the child I suppose, they feel safe and wanted and loved and protected... (the)... thing that stands out for me is having a pivotal person in the child's life and there is another bit that really stands out is that you have to have these people within a few years of life...a pivotal person be it an auntie, a school teacher..... if that's interrupted say a 3 or 4 year old or a 5 year old is removed and put into foster care, again if they have a person who they still have a good relationship with that can maybe build resilience".*

In addition was an understanding of long term outcomes: *"I am always working towards to get people to think of the long term effects...okay she might be presenting now because that was the crisis point in her life but it was the years down the track that worried me".* For this social worker, a strength of attachment theory was that it was not just about babies, it is about having access to relationships that are helpful and nurturing throughout the life span.

This worker highlighted the practice context issue of stress. She said that *"sometimes I talk to them about how they would handle stress before in previous situations and try to get an idea of how they are going to be in an ante-natal situation, how they might deal with the stress of having a baby in the unit...stress can interrupt it because it's an abnormal medical situation that they've gone into. Just going to the unit alone is really freaky and tense and busy and frightening and parents are just exposed to a whole array*

*even just of medical information that they never would have dreamt they had to know and then babies are tiny and red and not what you expect".*

Central to the interview for this participant was the inter play between her specific social work context, that featured short term crisis work, her own valuing of relationship based social work practice and the aspects of attachment theory that she had come to hold as important to feature in her work. She said that: *the hard part about this job... is that you don't have that long term relationship with people. It is very here and now.* With the work context often being short term crisis oriented work, this worker observed that *" when you meet people in a crisis state...some people are receptive and some aren't of trying to talk them through what it may be like to have their baby in the neo-natal unit setting... in the back of your mind you are always concerned about bonding and attachment with mums and their babies in the neo-natal unit because for people who live locally they have to go home so you have to look at that whole issue of walking out of hospitals without a baby which is what you've come into have....there is the potential for post-natal depression if they're not prepared. So I try and do a bit of work with how important it is to be with the baby as much as you can, come in and go back to work is fine, come in at nights, they have to express their milk and store it and they've got other kids at home which that relationship is interrupted for as long as they are...there are a plethora of issues that come up but I'm always mindful of people who like a lot of information at first and some people like it is dribs and drabs and some who just don't want to know anything. They don't want to talk to a social worker".*

Another special social work context issue was the differentiating of her role within her service from that of Child Youth and Family. She said: *"you really have to get in quick to give a synopsis of what you do otherwise we can't engage with them and they don't want to know ".*

## Belinda

Following nearly two decades of social work training and practice, attachment theory was introduced to her about seven years ago by her external supervisor whose practice drew on an *"attachment theory base and who had been to Germany for a few months where she worked together with Professor Brisch".*

In terms of the aspects of attachment theory that made most sense she described: *"...The early stuff, the very, very early stuff rather than waiting until things go wrong actually at the very early start trying to prevent them in the first place and contradicting the expectation that people just get it right anyway and I think it's going hand in hand with education about it so it is not labelling people as inadequate or whatever it's is more along the lines of the early style and guidance and education through that... so that's what I really like about it".*

Of her current social work job she said that *"...I get really complex cases ... extremely damaged siblings, multiple placement changes, years of care protection, cruelty and then they came over to me...okay they are in need of placement... they have been dumped into*

*the too hard basket and....now find a permanent place for them... it is about looking at the disorganized attachment... and in particular disrupted attachment when children or families come to our notice".*

In exploring how attachment theory was informing her as a social worker amidst this complex work she, like the other participants offered descriptions that focused on practice:

*"...it gets even more complicated in terms of permanency work...you get the case when a caregiver has decided to take orders... the little of what you are doing has actually been supporting them through the process in terms of care and working out a financial package... and it is really difficult because sometimes they have been left to drift for a long time...where children have been with those caregivers for years and years and you actually worry because it doesn't seem to be right its by default and your doomed if you do and your doomed if you don't for a lot of those kids it is the only place they know and the physical care is taken care of quite well but there is other stuff there that is not...the caregivers....none of them are actually open to any form of intervention or service because they feel so threatened, they have been left on their own... the children are in a limbo place and now it's your job to actually make the right decisions and your left with something that is actually no good...and ...it is about the lack of resources even though the Act refers to the child should be now to be able to form a significant attachment".*

She went on to describe a specific situation: *"we had one situation a six year old girl with reactive attachment disorder, post traumatic stress, oppositional defiant disorder she was suspended from school.... placed with the grandmother... she had the commitment, commitment into building the attachment... the reality is that sometimes we have to be on the level that we've got".* In this situation she was describing that sometimes even in the face of multiple issues the new placement becomes the whole intervention.

The issue of assessment was also raised by this social worker:

*"I think the pressure is really in terms of a temptation to sometimes get cornered because your under pressure but at the same time you are working with the actual caregiver ...you look at their own attachment...it would be generally their relationship, generally their upbringing for them , what their memories are, the good ones and the not so good ones, also looking at their present relationships...employment...looking if they have their own children, observing them with their own children, sometimes talking to the children...getting to know the children, in terms of getting to know what the needs are, not only their behavioural problems but actually looking at how they relate to the world, how they relate to their caregivers, looking at the caregivers, how they relate to the children and then looking at prospective permanent caregivers and it's looking at how to match the caregiver with the children and vice versa".*

This social worker acknowledged that during this process that she did not use any structured assessment tools. She described that her decision making was *"quite often on*

*gut feeling.... once you know the children and you meet the caregiver and then somehow I don't know what it is it's like your guts says it's ok...it is looking at the ability to emotionally hold and contain altogether the big thing is about being able to work in with other people... with other professionals".*

### Summary of Responses to the Vignette:

*.....When I am with this foster mum Melanie, I feel like I want to tell her to go easy on Karen (aged 8). Karen has been in this foster family for over 12 months and its really the best we have on offer right now for her. I feel really bad though that Karen is not getting what she needs emotionally. She's being cared for like a boarder but there is no warmth in Melanie. Melanie won't have a bar of the emotional stuff and just wants to talk about reimbursements, if her payments have gone through or not and how I am getting on with organizing her to get a new washing machine and stove. Today Karen had stolen some stuff from school and she was in her room when I arrived for stealing and then lying about stealing! Melanie had said that Karen had to stop being naughty and drawing negative attention to herself. Melanie was angry that Karen was reflecting badly on her own family. Melanie wanted all of my time and didn't think I should see Karen, unless I was intending "to give her a good talking to". Melanie was concerned that Karen didn't seem to be making any progress and that she was actually making life hard for herself. Melanie said that the best she can do for Karen is to show her that "we don't do things like that in our family and she will have to choose what she wants, our family rules or out". I can't change the placement. Melanie is not abusive...I don't know what I can do to help make it any different......I don't see the point....all she does is go over the same stuff over and over again, she never puts into practice what we have talked about because she says that she forgot, was too busy etc. What's the point, I am not using my skills as a social worker?*

*(This vignette is not based on any one real family or social worker conversation. It is intended to be representative of a social work conversation, rather than reflective of any specific family/social worker )*

### Ruth

*"Well everybody's stuck, the girl's stuck, the social worker's stuck, the foster mother's stuck".*

*"The social worker is identifying with the child...(but)...what is it about this child that pulls out this really punishing witchlike side of the foster mother...How much is the foster mum and how much has this child actually got a problem? ...Melanie... is trying to teach this little girl to be good...probably the little girl isn't actually able to learn about consequences and understand about it...she is struggling...I have a mandate from Melanie to talk to Karen... I saw that as a way in really...Karen is making life not only hard for herself but hard for Melanie...I'm not sure that Karen is able to choose...is she behaving...impulsively or unconsciously... For example stealing...this is a sign something is going wrong, here's a child in distress in some way...so I am immediately starting to think what's going on in this relationship".*

*"It would be very much attachment orientated in my own thinking and I would also be looking very much not just at the little girl but at the relationships".*

## CJ

*"There is no attachment...the child is acting out as well...there is no attachment there at all although the child is seeking contact proximity from the foster mother, like she's being rejected...the caregiver is being avoidant...the child is trying anything, this stuff's not happening so now she is moving into meaningless behaviour, anything to get attention".*

*"I would start by talking about how attachment occurs normally and do that little flow chart of baby's needs and what happens if baby's needs aren't met. Then I would talk about current history. Before I went out there I would find out exactly how many placements she had had, over what duration, how long....why she came in, whatever that was...I'd talk about the change of placement, how her emotional needs have not been met, about every time you change how the rules change, expectations change, the way you interact in relationships... I'd leave a little bit of literature. Depending on how long that literature was I might join in one or two sessions. I would...talk about her responses to the child and I would make a decision about whether I would leave that child there or not based on her responses and whether I thought she was prepared to make changes... and if she wasn't that child would be out of there".*

## Anne

*"Well it's obvious she is not getting her emotional needs met....Melanie hasn't formed any attachment to this child, it's been a year...I think it would be interesting to see what Melanie's background is and why she doesn't feel that she can actually take the suggestions from the social worker....maybe work with Melanie to look at her own past ...instead of giving her suggestions or tips about how to handle things actually look at how her parents handled different situations...like, if she's been brought up with the fact that her parents sent her to her room every time she did something without talking to her or giving her a hug or whatever... then she can start thinking that's how I felt as a child when my parents did that to me and moving that into how Karen may be feeling when she does that to Karen".*

## Dorothy

*"I can't change this placement knowing there's no abuse although I actually have to change the placement of taking kids out of places that upsets the fostering care team up there. I have moved kids where I felt there was no nurturing. After I've moved them I've always been shocked at the state of their clothes, they stink, their full of holes, they come back out of care with no clothes".*

*"What's the point, I'm not using my skills for social work" (quote from the vignette)....I would have to say I relate to this because sometimes you think... this kid shouldn't be here.   I know this kid shouldn't be here...I think where else is she going to go and what's going to happen to her...and the two times I have moved kids recently, I got into major ructions about it".*

*"You have the theory, you know what's ideal....there is a gap between what you know should be in place and what's possible...you're still patching it up for them".*

## Maggie

*"I'd just take her out.   I think it's terrible...she is lying and stealing.   She is screaming out for attention because she is not getting any warmth and her emotional needs are not being met at all and like she is being kept like a boarder which is heartbreaking.   She is not being included in the family and doesn't seem to be making any progress and making life hard for herself.   She has no relationship with her, she's not a role model, I think she's there for the money personally.   I personally think that this social worker should remove Karen from the house because she is not having any of her needs met.   She is in an 8 year old perspective and the caregiver is not responding to her as a caring warm person and that is going to impact on Karen as she gets older, forming her own relationships and I suppose even trying for Karen to get an understanding of how adults should be interacting with children and yeah.   Relating it to the attachment theory I would have huge concerns....why is she acting out.   she wants attention and those two have absolutely no relationship with bonding or attachment".*

## Belinda

*"...for me it's probably more the educator comes in, in terms of saying yeah it must be hard but I go home at 5 o'clock so it's easy for me to give you all those bright ideas.   It's more in terms of the acknowledgement and actually sort of bringing it in in terms of I'm not perfect I'm not going to tell you how to do your job but it is also wondering about it must be really hard, how can you like that kid.   It's actually sometimes wondering out aloud what they actually may feel".*

*"you get information once the placement breaks down because you get this phone call and you've got a child that is sexually acting out and then all of a sudden the caregiver rings up and I can't because I was actually sexually abused at that age...there is that information but she hadn't resolved it there is no way anybody should place a child either a sexually abused child or a possibly sexually acting child should never be placed with the kid if they haven't actually resolved it".*

*"I think part of the interviewing is not very detailed I think we are not very selective out of the sheer desperation in terms of getting caregivers".*