Influence Of Bowlby’s Attachment Theory On Understanding Personality And Interpersonal Functioning

One of the most influential theories in relation to understanding personality and interpersonal functioning is Bowlby’s attachment theory (1969). Because attachment theory provides a framework for understanding individuals’ desire for closeness with others, their level of trust in others, and how they behave interpersonally, it makes sense that research has proven the helpfulness of assessing patients’ attachment style. Attachment style have been correlated with the likelihood of individuals to seek out therapy, perceptions and attitudes of the effectiveness of therapy, adherence to therapy, and success of therapy (see Hill et al., 2012; Levy & Johnson, 2019; Vogel & Wei, 2005). When individuals have a more positive perception of therapy, they are not only more likely to seek it out but also to benefit from it. Through executive coaching is not therapy, during the process of executive coaching, facets of the coachee’s personality are discussed in relation to how this affects their leadership within the workplace (Kilburg, 2001). Executive coaching is becoming an increasingly popularized intervention in which a coach assists a coachee in learning more about themselves in order to develop as leaders in the organizational context. There are many similarities in the dyads of coaching and therapy and much of the theoretical frameworks within the field of psychotherapy can generalize and/or relate to principles of coaching, including attachment theory. So, while there is research on the effect of patient attachment style within the therapy dyad, a problem exists in that there is no research on how attachment style influences coachee perceptions of executive coaching. Negative perceptions of executive coaching could hinder the self-exploration and eventual progress towards a coachee’s goals, and on the other hand, positive perceptions could facilitate a positive and effective coaching experience. Knowledge of a coachee’s attachment style would lead to more understanding of the likely perceptions that they might have, which could inform executive coaches on best practices when working with clients of differing attachment styles. Comment by halshorey@me.com: This is what the opening paragraph of your dissertation should look like. This is good.

Executive coaching is an intervention within the field of consulting psychology in which a professional, who is trained in aspects of organizational and corporate dynamics, facilitates one-on-one coaching of an individual interested in developing their leadership skills. In her review of the executive coaching literature, Ciporen (2015) uncovered two underlying assumptions of coaching: “Coaching is a partnership [and] coaching is a process that guides an individual through development” (pg. 7). Further, the consensus is that the “primary goal of executive coaching is leadership development and performance” (Ciporen, 2015, pg. 6-7).

Executive coaching became popularized in the 1980s and 1990s but coaching really traces back to “the Socratic method of asking questions to promote self-discovery,” which has been around for centuries (Ciporen, 2015, pg. 5). Gray, Ekinci, and Goregaokar (2011) noted that executive coaching is becoming one of the most popular interventions utilized in the development of managers and Cox, Bachkirova, and Clutterbuck (2014) found that coaching is “one of the most prominent activities that serve the learning and development aims of human resource development” (p. 139). There are distinct differences between an executive coach and other helping professions. Williams and Anderson (2006) outline those differences and found that an executive coach’s role is to partner with the coachee and empower them, while the

coachee is the one responsible for the execution of their own development strategies. Williams and Anderson (2006) also found that coaching is focused on the present state of the coachee, rather than the past. Ciporen (2015) states that coaching is often a tool that assists coachees in reflective thought to attempt in identifying a link between a specific event and their own professional and personal development.

Many corporations are utilizing coaches, both hiring coaches internally as well as hiring external coaches to come into the company for more specific, time-bound initiatives and projects. It is becoming more widely accepted that psychological traits have a large impact on leadership effectiveness within organizations (Hogan & Hogan, 2001). Hogan (2007) found that about 75% of employees report that the most stressful part of their job is their boss. Poor leadership directly impacts those who report to leaders and this interaction has a large impact on their direct reports' professional lives, their personal lives, and potentially even their families' lives. Although empirical research on executive coaching is limited as this is not only a younger field of psychology, the impact that coaching leaders has is becoming more and more apparent as both an effective and efficient way to improve leaders, society, as well as save organizations money in long run.

The revenue of the leadership development and coaching industry exceeds $10 billion yearly (IBIS World, 2018). This is a staggeringly large number because of the return on investment that companies are noticing when investing in their leaders. Leonard-Cross (2010) found that coachees' levels of self-efficacy increased significantly after receiving coaching and stated that "increased levels of self-efficacy result in further benefits for the organization and individual . . . [which] include communications, job-satisfaction, quality, flexibility, performance, ownership, succession planning and career planning" (pg. 43). When employees feel content in their job, they are more likely to stay committed to their organization, which, in turn, reduces turnover. The study also found that when employees leave the company, it costs the company roughly $10,000 per employee (Leonard-Cross, 2010). Further, the estimated cost of each executive leader that derails is between $1.5 and $2.7 million (DeVries and Kaiser, 2003), which does not account for severance packages, poor corporate performance, and costs associated with disengaged teams left behind (Hogan, Hogan & Kaiser, 2010).

Overall, though efficacy studies are in their infancy in this field relative to other fields of psychotherapy, there are numerous studies conducted that have proven coaching is highly beneficial in multiple different aspects of the development of leaders. Coaching has been found to be one of the most powerful methods of developing "soft skills" that many leaders more talented in technical aspects of their work tend to struggle in developing (i.e. interpersonal skills, effective communication, teamwork skills, self-awareness, etc.) (Bloch, 1996).

Though coaching is different than therapy in many distinct ways, there are also many similarities and consistencies within the goals of both therapy and coaching. Kilburg (2004) states that "material in the form of past experience, emotional responses, defensive reactions, underlying and unresolved conflicts, and dysfunctional patterns of thinking and behaving can contribute to poor leadership and consequently to decreased organizational effectiveness" (pg. 249). This leads one to conclude that while coaching and therapy are different, the human experience and one's personal development cannot be ignored in one's own leadership development. Executive coaching is an opportunity for coachees to reflect on the ways that their own personality has shaped the way that they interact with and lead their peers in an organizational context. In order to provide more nuance and facilitate the development of more specific

hypotheses in relation to coaching, the next section will present attachment theory along with related emotion activated social perception and threat detection processes.

Attachment theory theorizes that humans develop internal models of relationships based on the quality of their early caregiver relationships (Bowlby, 1969), and has been found to be one of the most influential theories when conceptualizing development with various implications on psychotherapy (Dixon, 2003). John Bowlby (1969), a developmental psychopathologist, developed attachment theory after observing the implications of interpersonal loss on children and posited that understanding the function of the early childhood emotional bond formed between an infant and their caregiver is vital to understanding personality development. Bowlby (1969) theorized that the infant-caregiver relationship was evolutionary in that the survival of the weaker, more helpless infant hinged on protection from older humans. Infants who stay close to and feel protected by their caregivers are more likely to feel safe from potential danger, therefore making it more likely for them to survive. During times of distress, if the caregiver's response promotes comfort within the child, negative affect is reduced and the child is more likely to form a healthy, realistic, and coherent sense of self (Fonagy, 1999). Behaviors exhibited by the child are called attachment behaviors, which are adaptive responses to keep the child in close proximity to the mother during times of danger. Bowlby (1969) stated that all mammals demonstrate attachment behaviors to a specific, primary caregiver and that all proximity-seeking behaviors can be defined as attachment behaviors.

When posed with a threatening situation, feelings of anxiety arise, and the attachment system formed dictates how the child is able to navigate the world around them during these times (Bowlby, 1969). The child learns how to balance independent exploration of the world without close proximity to the caregiver while also managing and coping with the anxiety and stress response they may experience. The child's attachment system essentially decides whether they believe their caregiver is "nearby, accessible, and attentive" and if that answer is "yes," the child is more likely to feel loved, secure, confident to explore their environment independent of the caregiver, as well as socialize with others (Gillath, Karantzas, & Fraley, 2016). The child's successful exploration of their environment without experiencing significant amounts of anxiety and fear allows them to develop a sense of self-efficacy, as well as experience less fear in future times of exploration. The caregiver's role is to assist the child in exploration by providing a "secure base" letting them know that they are there if needed and accessible for comfort if the anxiety becomes too overwhelming (Bowlby, 1988). Specifically, the response of their caregiver and the outcomes of distressing experiences are "cognitively encoded, processed, and stored in the form of mental representations of self and others, which in turn provide the skeleton of a person's attachment style" (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007, p. 149).

A well-known experiment known as the Strange Situation was a laboratory procedure to measure and categorize a child's attachment style to their caregiver. The Strange Situation is a laboratory experiment in which children experienced simulated stressful situations, and this provided a standardized method to measure attachment behaviors. The Strange Situation is still used in some settings (Rehn, McGowan & Keeling, 2013) and has been found to be empirically supported with strong reliability and predictive validity (Solomon & George, 2008). The premise of the experiment was to observe children's behavioral responses to three situations. First, the child and the mother entered an unfamiliar room with toys. Researchers watched how and if the children departed from the mother in order to explore the room and toys on their own and whether or not they utilized their mothers as a "secure base" in order to do so. Next, a stranger entered the room and researchers watched the children's behavioral reactions to the addition of

this unfamiliar variable. Lastly, the mother exited the room leaving the child with the aforementioned stranger and behavioral reactions were recorded in regard to how the child responded to both the mother's departure and return.

Following the original Strange Situation experiment, observed behavioral responses of both the mother and child resulted in the classification of three different attachment styles: secure, insecure ambivalent, and insecure avoidant (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978). There was a fourth attachment style (fearful/disorganized) that emerged later based on findings that there were a small percentage of children who did not fit perfectly into one of the three originally proposed attachment styles (Main & Solomon, 1990).

There is further evidence that attachment patterns persist beyond infancy and childhood and manifest into adulthood as well. Though the various strategies that adults utilize to maintain closeness with an attachment figure are not identical to the strategies employed by the infants in the Strange Situation experiment, they tend to be "conceptually parallel and empirically predictable" (Fletcher & Fitness, 1996). Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991) expounded on the theory to postulate four styles of attachment in adulthood that roughly correspond to the infant classifications. These four adult attachment styles are classified as secure, preoccupied, dismissing, and fearful, which will be described synonymously to the childhood attachment style classifications in the following sections.

In the Strange Situation experiment described above, children who displayed a secure attachment style were able to explore the unfamiliar room and play with their toys. When the caregiver left them with the stranger, they initially displayed a moderate amount of negative affect and became upset, but they were easily soothed when the caregiver returned. It is theorized that if the caregiver is consistent in meeting a child's needs, the child will develop a "secure" attachment, which "enables him or her to become increasingly independent, to manage distress, to build adaptive relationships with others and to form a positive self- image" (Burke, Danquah & Berry, 2016, pg. 142). The secure attachment style is characterized by feelings of confidence and trust in the availability and responsiveness of the caregiver, which promotes the ability of the child to explore their environment freely with the knowledge that they can return to their caregiver in times of need (Bowlby, 1988). When securely attached children do experience distress and subsequently seek out their caregiver, caregivers consistently respond in a nurturing way, which, in turn, soothes the child allowing their anxiety and distress to subside.

Bowlby (1988) posited that securely attached children can freely explore their environment and trust that they will be comforted physically and/or emotionally when they return to their caregiver. Children will then learn that they can safely explore the world around them when they experience the caregiver as a secure base in which they can return to in times of need (Bowlby, 1988). Therefore, the quality of the caregiver's response (e.g. level of sensitivity, warmth, nurturance, etc.) to the child's needs largely influences the child's expectations of the caregiver and how the child will respond in future experiences. The more that a child has success in separating from the caregiver, the more they internalize and trust in the fact that they can confidently explore their environment, which subsequently allows them to learn (Weinfeld, Sroufe, Egeland, & Carlson, 1999). Therefore, if the caregiver displays warmth and support toward the child, the child can ultimately learn to trust that others will be there for them when they need them, that they are entitled to nurturance and protection from harm, and that they can safely navigate the world around them (Brennan et al., 1998).

Adults who display a secure attachment style have also been found to possess a high degree of self-efficacy and self-confidence (Ahmad, Mohammad & Shafique, 2018). Over time, they have only further internalized the belief that they have the ability to successfully explore the world on their own. In challenging situations, securely attached adults have the ability to remain calm, regulate their emotions, and manage the stressors that the experience may be triggering in them (Levine & Heller, 2011). Further, securely attached individuals will carry this belief and trust in others' availability and support into significant adult relationships and romantic relationships (Bowlby, 1969; Levine & Heller, 2011).

Children categorized as having an insecure ambivalent attachment style are more hesitant to play with the toys in the room and were more focused on the caregiver during the Strange Situation experiment. Additionally, when the caregiver left the room, they also showed signs of distress; however, they were not easily soothed and continued to display distress even after the caregiver returned. The insecure ambivalent attachment style typically represents a distrust that the caregiver will return after they leave and develops when caregivers are inconsistent in how they respond to the child in times of need (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). The responses from the caregiver may vacillate between soothing and nurturing the child and dismissing and rejecting the child, which leaves them confused and, at times, angry at the caregiver. This leads to the child experiencing a lack of confidence in being able to explore on their own because they do not know how the caregiver will respond to them or if the caregiver will respond at all in times of distress.

Main (1979) found that children who display an insecure ambivalent attachment style tend to display a hypervigilance of negative cues given off by the caregiver and distrust in the world around them. This distrust causes these children to fear independent exploration due to perceived threat because they do not experience the parent as a secure base to return to in times of danger. These children also become hyperaware of and sensitive to negative social cues. Additionally, because they do not actively engage in exploration, they ultimately do not develop self-efficacy and belief in their competence because they have become so dependent on the attention of the caregiver (Weinfield, Sroufe, Egeland, & Carlson, 2000). This leads them to believe that others may not be there for them when they need them and that the world is unsafe for them to explore on their own (Brennan et al., 1998).