

‘But what are we doing to that baby?’

Attachment, psy-Speak and designed order in social work

Bjerre, Line Søberg; Madsen, Ole Jacob; Petersen, Anders

Published in:
European Journal of Social Work

DOI (link to publication from Publisher):
[10.1080/13691457.2020.1870439](https://doi.org/10.1080/13691457.2020.1870439)

Creative Commons License
CC BY-NC-ND 4.0

Publication date:
2023

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication from Aalborg University](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
Bjerre, L. S., Madsen, O. J., & Petersen, A. (2023). ‘But what are we doing to that baby?’: Attachment, psy-Speak and designed order in social work. *European Journal of Social Work*, 26(1), 54-65.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13691457.2020.1870439>

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal -

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us at vbn@aub.aau.dk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



'But what are we doing to that baby?' Attachment, psy-Speak and designed order in social work

Line Søberg Bjerre, Ole Jacob Madsen & Anders Petersen

To cite this article: Line Søberg Bjerre, Ole Jacob Madsen & Anders Petersen (2023) 'But what are we doing to that baby?' Attachment, psy-Speak and designed order in social work, European Journal of Social Work, 26:1, 54-65, DOI: [10.1080/13691457.2020.1870439](https://doi.org/10.1080/13691457.2020.1870439)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13691457.2020.1870439>



© 2021 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 11 Jan 2021.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 3295



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Citing articles: 4 View citing articles [↗](#)



OPEN ACCESS



'But what are we doing to that baby?' Attachment, psy-Speak and designed order in social work

'Men hvad er det vi gør mod den baby?' Tilknytning, psy-snak og designet orden i socialt arbejde

Line Søberg Bjerre^a, Ole Jacob Madsen^b and Anders Petersen^a

^aDepartment of Sociology and Social Work, University of Aalborg, Aalborg, Denmark; ^bDepartment of Psychology, University of Oslo, Oslo, Norway

ABSTRACT

In this paper, we will examine how attachment has become imperative psychological vocabulary in social work. In a case study of social work practice in one Danish municipality, the use of attachment theory shows that the social workers have undeveloped professional insights into attachment theory, yet still use the concept to help comprehend difficult cases. However, their frequent use of the concepts 'attachment' and even 'detachment' appears theoretically arbitrary, and is more reminiscent of psy-culture than strict evidence-based science, and this has a potentially profound impact on how social workers intervene in families.

ABSTRAKT

I denne artikel vil vi undersøge, hvordan begrebet tilknytning er blevet et imperativt psykologisk sprog i socialt arbejdes praksis. I et case studie af praksis på myndighedsområdet i en kommune, så vi at socialrådgivernes brug af tilknytningsbegrebet var uden de teoretiske nuancer og indsigter, der ses i teorien. Alligevel brugte socialrådgiverne begrebet tilknytning til at navigere i vanskelige sager. I denne artikel argumenterer vi for, at denne brug af tilknytningsbegrebet er løsrevet fra den evidensbaserede viden og forskning, der er om tilknytning, og mere kan forstås som psy-kultur, hvilket potentielt har stor betydning for, hvordan socialrådgiverne interverener i sagerne.

KEYWORDS

Attachment; psy-culture; social work; child protection; decision making


NØGLEORD

tilknytning; psy-kultur; socialt arbejde; socialt arbejde med børn og familier; myndighed

Introduction

Social work practice in Denmark and other Western countries has undergone substantial changes over the past decades. Back in the 1990s it was still customary for each social worker to base their assessment of the family's needs on their own professional beliefs. Gradually, the critique of a lack of transparency in social work gained ground, alleging that the rule of law for citizens seemed to differ from municipality to municipality, and from social worker to social worker (Egelund & Hestbæk, 2003; Kildedal, 2008).

In recent years, several major reforms of child protection legislation have emerged in Denmark, i.e. The Placement Reform in 2006 and The Child Reform in 2011, all aiming at providing more

CONTACT Ole Jacob Madsen  o.j.madsen@psykologi.uio.no  Department of Psychology, University of Oslo, P. O. Box 1094, Blindern, N-0317 Oslo, Norway

© 2021 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

evidence-based approaches (Servicestyrelsen, 2011, p. 264). The shift came from a need to know what works for whom, and a requirement for an alignment of social work practice. These processes seem to reflect a general implementation of management thinking and the marketisation of the public sector, making it more like an enterprise, which in Denmark's social sector amounts to a purchaser – or supplier model – that separates the level of authority and level of execution concerning interventions decided at the authority level. This again calls for increased levels of documentation on both the level of authority and the level of execution, entailing that social workers increasingly need to document both the reasons for the decisions they make, the progress and the treatment plans (Servicestyrelsen, 2011). This entails a gradual increase of methods in social work practice, as a mean to systematise and align practice, not unlike the ideal of taxonomy of the natural sciences. During the past 10 years, nearly all Danish municipalities have implemented the Integrated Children's System (ICS) and many have supplemented with other methods of assessment.

The concept of attachment

Of particular interest – concerning both the mentioned legislation and the ICS – are relational issues. The Danish Act on Social Service states in its purpose clause that the municipality is obliged to insure a safe care environment that offers close and stable relations to adults (Act on Social Service §46). In the guidelines for parents' competence assessment, it is highlighted that parents' 'attachment patterns' are to be assessed (Socialministeriet, 2011). In the manual for ICS, the authors state that relational attention is a fundamental part of the knowledge base on which social workers build their professionalism (Rask & Jakobsen, 2012, p. 14).

The *theory of attachment* has been studied and elaborated since the writings of psychiatrist John Bowlby (1907–1990), and the subsequent elaboration of infants' behavioural attachment patterns studied by Mary Ainsworth (1964). The theory has permeated many a practice in infant care, ranging from advice such as having the newborn infant feel your skin and heartbeat and to having parents hospitalised along with sick children. The Scandinavian understanding of a long maternity leave as a necessity of bonding and forming attachment with the infant child also relates to this theory. In Norway in 2012, an expert task force advised the Child Welfare Service to abolish the traditional 'biological principle', which emphasised that children should generally be taken care of by their biological parents, in favour of a 'psychological principle' heavily supported by attachment theory (NOU, 2012).

Attachment is, according to Bowlby (1969), an innate need for forming a close bond to the mother. Bowlby argued that this bond to the primary caregiver is the principal bond, which is qualitatively different from other bonds the child may establish with other people. This also led Bowlby to believe that if attachment with the mother was absent, there would be negative consequences, leading to his hypothesis of maternal deprivation. Bowlby (1969) believed that a disruption of the bond between mother and child, in the first year of the child's life, would result in serious and permanent damage to the child's social, emotional and intellectual development. The attachment to the primary caregiver leads to another of Bowlby's central concepts – 'the internal working model'. The internal working model is a cognitive frame, which consists of mental representations that the child uses when relating to other people and him or herself. According to Bowlby, by the age of three, these working models are an integrated part of the child's personality. This means that the internal working model has a profound impact on how the child (and later adult) perceives the world and interacts with others. In this way, the mother is a prototype for future relations to other people because of the internal working model (Bowlby, 1988).

The reception of attachment

The concept of attachment has in one research tradition been interpreted not as a culturally constructed and dominating concept, but as a matter of natural fact. This view has a substantial research

body into patterns of attachment security and of the consequences of lack of attachment (Cassidy & Shaver, 1999; Collins & Sroufe, 1999; Kvello, 2013; Solomon & George, 1999). A different school of thought highlights how attachment as cultural construct may pathologise mothers, prevent equality; neglect the role of the father; overemphasise psychological explanations, and neglect societal and economic factors in parents' ability to take care of their children (Duschinsky et al., 2015; Solomon, 2002). Also within the field of developmental psychology, the theory has been subjected to critique for being too narrow, for focusing only on a few relationships and only on a few aspects of these relations (Dunn, 1993; Hundeide, 2008; Rutter, 1995). Valsiner (2000) argues that attachment theory makes a problematic shift from interpersonal relations to intrapersonal traits. Valsiner recognises this as a common process in psychology, the essentialisation of dynamic and relational human phenomena.

In research on social work, the same split is often seen – researchers of social work perceive attachment as either a naturalistic matter-of-life phenomenon or view it through a critically informed prism. Howe et al. (1999) maintain that developmental attachment theory has had a particular value for social work, as it addresses the very things that social workers are expected to take responsibility for, such as parent–child bonds, caregiving and addressing the needs of children first. However, Smith et al. (2017) claim that attachment theory is a totalising paradigm that leaves little room for alternate views of relations, with the consequence of biologising how we bring up children. White et al. (2019) argue that the dominance of attachment theory promotes a diagnostic mindset in practitioners, which diverts their attention from other important elements of the development of the children. Attachment theory is drawing on insights from the thriving field of neuroscience, which over the last decades has been instrumental in showcasing the workings of the brains of healthily and unhealthily attached infants (Macvarish, 2016).

Over the last couple of years, attachment theory has evolved into a 'master theory' that currently exceeds a growing global influence over disciplines such as social work with children in care (Smith et al., 2017, p. 1607). Initiatives, such as the Sutton Trust – an educational charity in the United Kingdom that aims to improve social mobility – have thus pleaded for attachment-based practices since a large share of parents do not provide their offspring with good-enough attachment bonds.

The aim of our study

According to Smith et al. (2017, p. 1611): 'Despite its dominance, it is questionable what impact attachment theory has actually had on social work practice over the past thirty years'. By providing ethnographic field work from social work in Denmark, we aim to fill this gap of knowledge, as we will explore concerns surrounding the dominant position that attachment theory inhabits, with the risk of biologising, individualising and politicising different aspects of child-upbringing (Smith et al., 2017), while simultaneously equip social workers with a 'handy vocabulary' that gives them 'comfort' in their work (White et al., 2019, p. 8). We will explore how social workers' psychological vocabulary of attachment – as a normative and cultural concept – can be understood, and furthermore how it reflects the social embedding of a specific psy-culture and particular form of designed ordering.

Methods

Psychological qualitative research examines phenomena in a rich context of history, society and culture, where humans are understood as reflective, intentional actors who seek meaning in their experiences (Maracek, 2003). The data used in this paper stems from a doctoral research project (Bjerre, 2017), which consisted of a case study of social work practice from three teams of social workers in a Danish municipality. The case study is an empirical analysis of the context of the team meetings, where social and historical phenomena happen, and where professionals doing social work in this context create assured understandings of families and children

(Flyvbjerg, 2006; Yin, 1994). One of the research questions of the PhD-thesis was, how knowledge and social representations of children's development were negotiated between social workers in practice.

The choice of method was observations. As such, the observations were a qualitative inquiry into how social workers *do* social work, and not based on their reflections about their practice. The overall strategy of collecting data was based on an interest concerning how forms of cultural conduct are structured, and how knowledge and artefacts play out in practice, where children are constructed in certain ways. Drawing on Spradley (1980), the method of observation amounts to data consisting of various focal points such as place, actors, actions, objects, events, time, goal and emotions, whereby the method not only focuses on the spoken words, but also on the bodies, emotionality and atmosphere at the meetings. As a participant observer, Bjerre was present at meetings. The study was approved by the Danish Data Protection Agency and information, thus the identification of the social workers, the families and municipality are anonymised and the researcher had no direct contact to the families. This decision was made in cooperation with the municipality, as it was practical impossible to attend real team meetings, if we had to wait for consent from families. The cases that were discussed at the team meetings were not planned weeks in advance. Rather, the discussions at the meetings centred on the most urgent matter for the social workers. Another consideration was the alliance between the families and the social workers which often were fragile, as the social workers dealt with families with limited resources and sometimes a high level of conflict. A choice was made after ethical reflections not to disturb the processes between the social workers and the families further.

During the three years, the size and organisational structure of the teams fluctuated. As a rule, a team leader and between three to eight female social workers were present at the meetings. The centre of attention during the team meetings was a 'blackboard case'. During the dialogues about the 'blackboard case', the team leader would stand next to a large whiteboard writing details about the family, when the social workers told about the case. Most often, the social worker that was in charge of the case would share a narrative about the family, and the colleagues would supplement and ask questions. The social workers picked out a case to discuss at the meetings, often cases where they needed to decide something or the assigned social worker was in doubt. Some cases were discussed when the social workers thought the case was difficult to handle, because of threats from parents or difficulties cooperating with the school. Many cases that were discussed involved situations where the social workers suspected, that the children in the family were at high risk of maltreatment.

The observations were conducted during three years of fieldwork between 2014 and 2016, and were documented by recording 42 h of team meetings, that later were transcribed, and a substantial amount of field notes. Themes for analysing the practice were established by analysing repeated themes, including emotionally charged themes, in an abductive and dialectic analytic process (Law, 2004). These analytic processes were conducted over the length of the empirical study and were not decontextualised. As a researcher one places oneself in the midst of practice, thereby being placed in the context and process of social work, learning about it with the entire being (Marsico, 2012). Emotional themes, where social workers reacted emotionally was a theme of interest (see Bjerre, 2017; Bjerre & Nissen, 2020), the social workers use of negotiations to comprehend the situations in the families was another theme (see Bjerre, 2020), and the theme of the use of knowledge, in particular knowledge concerning attachment was another recurrent theme during these meetings.

In this article we have chosen to clarify the use of attachment in social work practice. The following two examples present two dialogues from two different meetings, which were observed. They were chosen as representative examples of how the social workers repeatedly try to come to terms with attachment.

Empirical examples

Empirical example 1: what is attachment?

A social worker presents a case to her colleagues and the team leader. It concerns a baby that is socially withdrawn, and the social worker is concerned that the baby is subjected to neglect and abuse. The social worker states that the child needs attachment, and she has to explain this to the family. This calls for a discussion between the social workers (all names used are pseudonyms), as they must explain the concept of attachment to the family. The dialogue is an example of how the social workers choose to develop their understanding of attachment via a meaning making process, through which the concept is negotiated.

- Team leader: So what is it we know about attachment?
- Social worker: It is like if it does not get better.
- Sidsel: And do we know, what this means for the baby?
- Social worker: To put it short, what does it mean?
- Grethe: I guess it means she cannot stay in that home ...
- Team leader: Ha Nooo.. ha ha.
- Hanne: No, if I have to come with this very, very, very, very long explanation.
- Sidsel: Very, very, very long ...
- Hanne: It means one may say that it will influence her attachment to the parents.
- Social worker: Yes, but what does it mean?
- Grethe: Attachment generally?
- Hanne: Yes, but it is the short version ...
- Social worker: YES, but what is attachment?
- Hanne: That is one of the things, which needs to be elaborated.
- Social worker: But what would you write to the family. How would you put this shortly, so the grandfather also understands it?
- Hanne: But I would not do the long, long, long ...
- Social worker: It is the problem of, how does the family understand this, when they do not have the knowledge we have. The knowledge we cannot even explain. Then they will think, – yeah she might be withdrawing from contact, but she eats and sleeps well at night.
- Hanne: But then it is something about That you are worried about permanent damage to her development ... blab, blab, blab something.
- Grethe: Blab, blab, blab?
- Hanne: Yes but those ...
- Grethe: We cannot use this for anything.
- Social Worker: So what does one say?
- Hanne: It is a suggestion, but I get very inspired when I see written examples. Ehmm ... just to find the way.
- Social worker: I think, it is very good, that point, if she does not then it gets the consequence, that she will be permanently damaged, concerning her
- Hanne: Her social and psychological development.
- Grethe: It is serious damage to her development generally.
- Sidsel: Yes, lack of development and this means that
- Grethe: The family will understand that. Ohh this is serious, when it's development, everyone needs to develop.
- Team leader: Yes.

In this first example the social workers have concluded that attachment is the key component for the child's development, but as they need to communicate this to the family, they realise that they cannot explain the phenomenon. The need to elaborate on what attachment actually is, and this makes the social workers fumble and procrastinate. They end up with a very broad conclusion – that attachment is essential, otherwise the child will be permanently damaged. They do not try to gain insight through literature or by any other means, but only by negotiating the theme, leaning on influential cultural understandings of attachment and psychology.

Empirical example 2: attachment and detachment.

In the second example, the social workers discuss attachment without defining attachment, rather through a novel concept, which they call 'detachment'. The social workers have discussed detachment before. In a previous team meeting, the social workers all agreed that an infant being removed to foster care needs to be gradually withdrawn from the contact with his or her biological parents; this is what they call 'detachment'. Detachment seemed, in this context, to be an understanding of attachment existing at birth, meaning it would therefore be cruel to remove the child without a de-escalation of the contact with the biological mother. However, at this following team meeting, the team has a new team member. Six social workers – two of which are new in the team – are present. They talk about an infant boy, and they are certain that the parents cannot provide sufficient emotional care for the child, so they discuss how they will remove the child from the home and place him in a foster family. The social worker who is responsible for the case, talks about how much the parents should be able to see the child, once the child is placed in a foster family:

- Social worker: It needs to be a process. You start one place, where they see him more, than they shall in four months.
- New co-worker: No. It is the other way around. We have to leave the foster parents alone with the baby, so they have peace, so he can establish an attachment to the foster mother. The parents really should not come in the beginning. I would say a fortnight without contact. After that once a week. That is the need of the child, if you want it to form attachment. The child gets confused, he has been at home with mom and dad, and then they come by three times a week. He gets confused.
- Team leader: But he has to be detached first. The child is attached to his biological parents. Especially this boy he has been at home for three weeks Will you just say, 'cut'?
- New co-worker: But the newest research shows that they can be moved, if they have learned attachment.
- Social worker: He has not learned attachment, which is the reason we are removing him from home.
- New co-worker: But he has learned something otherwise, he would not already have been removed from home.
- Team leader: Well jahhhh hmmm
- Social worker: This is not what our superior used to say.

[A little later in the conversation, another social worker interferes]:

- Grethe: We have talked about this before. We only have one chance. There is only one chance of a good start. Therefore, we just have to do it.
- Social worker: (Breathe in heavily, raising her voice) No, I just cannot tell them, they cannot see him for fourteen days.
- Grethe: Then a week?
- Team leader: I cannot do this. I cannot. I think this is difficult. What are we doing to that baby?

The concept of detachment seems to be rather homegrown. It appears as if it is a local interpretation, a mélange of Freudian grief theory and French infant theory, but not a known concept in the social work vernacular nor in its practice. When the new social worker challenges this interpretation of attachment as an innate phenomenon, she introduces another interpretation, namely that attachment is learned in a few weeks of the infant's life. As we see, these words and interpretations are not just words: They have a profound impact on how the social workers intervene in the families. The interpretation of attachment as an innate phenomenon, and not an innate need to establish secure attachment through positive interactions with primary caregiver the first two years of life, paves the way for the detachment hypothesis that the child has to be 'phased out' from its mother. The other interpretation – that attachment should be established because it is learned by the five-week-old infant – leads to a rather distinct intervention, where the foster mother should not be disturbed in forming a new attachment bond.

When the social workers at team meetings talk about attachment, it is primarily understood as a social representation of a bond between parents and children. This bond is special and necessary for

the child's well-being and future positive development. At the same time, the dialogue between the social workers show that the social workers do not talk about the child's adaption to their surroundings (which is an important point in the theory of attachment security), and they believe attachment to be a biological entity you are born with, more than a relational development happening over time. They use the concept of attachment intuitively as the most important parameter of the baby's psychological development, but do not extend this understanding to talk about the quality of the relational bond between parent and child nor the child's adaption to its surroundings. Hence, the social workers have great difficulty in being precise about what attachment *is*. However, they have a social representation of attachment, which they place so much weight on they end up basing their analysis of the child's needs on a concept they have great difficulty defining.

Analysis

Attachment – a psy-cultural concept

Famously, Michel Foucault (1998, p. 249) called psychology – not a science – but a cultural form. Rose (1996) argues that psychology gained a position in advanced liberal Western democracies throughout the latter half of the twentieth century, to an extent that it became fundamental in shaping us as the human beings that we have come to think we are. Psychology is thus not to be understood within the realm of abstract theories but – as Rose has stated (1996, p. 11) – as '*an intellectual technology*, where certain aspects of human behaviour, experience and relations become both visible and understandable. In addition, psychology has contributed to forming governmental practices where some experts' gain authority over lay people, and where this authority supports preferred ways of what it entails to be a human being. An argument posed by Keddell (2015, 2017) is that psychology and especially attachment theory operates as a powerful 'psy' discourse, in a way that reflects prevailing social, cultural and political beliefs. Seen in this light, the social representation of attachment in the social worker's practice is to be understood as psy-culture.

The empirical examples show a lack of theoretical knowledge, but at the same time a shared certainty of the importance of the phenomenon of attachment. This discrepancy demonstrates that the way the theory is used is not with theoretical nuances, but based in a normative cultural form. The social workers 'live' a distinct psychological cultural form that is not only moral and normative, but also difficult to explain. This can be explained in the following manner: The looking glass through which they see the world mirrors the fact that they are participants in the Danish mainstream culture of the twenty-first century. This explains why the social workers use the word attachment, but cannot figure out how to communicate what it *actually* is concerning this family. At the same time, however, they negotiate this cultural form, thereby trying to install meaning, which – in our perspective – must be perceived as a social representation of the moral and historical meaning of attachment. This is very much in line with Munro's (1998, p. 98) descriptions of how social workers' usage of psychology entails common sense understanding of psychology. Munro shows how a lack of knowledge about psychology, and its special status, makes the social workers eager to use a psychological discourse, because it is a legitimate frame of reference in our culture. This need to use psychological discourse also reflects the power of psy-culture and the structures in which the social workers work. The growing inclination in contemporary society to document and use 'facts' also amplifies the need for the psychological language.

The knowledge embedded in the social worker's conversations about attachment does not reflect nuances of the theoretical concepts in question but an analysis of the parents and whether the parents are the 'right' parents in the morally correct understanding imbued in the cultural scripts. This hence addresses specific ways of acting and doing parenthood that are expected in our time and culture. The social workers make a moral assessment of whether parents are doing (or not doing) the right things in line with the norms of the society. Without these normative evaluations, the situations in the families would be hard to grasp, because the social workers need to navigate in

ambiguous territory, grappling with the interaction between parents and children as well as the complex reactions of children as such. They are in need of norms, and the moral reading of the situations is a help for the social workers, because when they lean on the concept of attachment they have social representations of good and morally correct parent behaviour.

The use of knowledge – managing the un-manageable

In the two examples, the social workers use the concept of attachment and detachment as a management tool. These concepts cannot only guide them, they can also legitimise their actions in relation to the family. The need for documentation – and the institutionalised demand to academically argue for their decisions in order to legitimise their actions – compels the social workers to use psychological concepts and theorise. Psy-culture is in this sense extremely powerful, as the psychological vocabulary asserts power when defining right from wrong, and furthermore when societal norms are defined. Yet, it also paves the way for the randomness that is displayed in the examples. If the team did not get a new social worker, they might continue a practice where the concept of detachment would still be legitimised. They could keep on implementing this de-escalation of contact between birth mother and child, and vice-versa if they believe that attachment is formed within a few weeks. They will keep on declaring that the foster mother needs not to be interrupted by the biological parents, thereby risking ruining the attachment. In both versions however, they operate with attachment as an all or nothing phenomenon that has a onetime chance of happening – very much in discrepancy with the theories of attachment as they have developed after the writings of Bowlby (Rutter, 1995).

The quest for documentation and for managing social work practice by demanding the use of knowledge and theory does not seem to make social work practice any less random. The social workers may be able to legitimise their decision with the use of concepts, but misconceptions regarding the nuances of the concepts results in the same randomness that was the basis of the critique of social work before the onset of documentation and management techniques. They may use 'knowledge' but it is fragmented and random.

Discussion

Attachment theory as designed ordering

Throughout this article, we have tried to show that attachment theory has become such a vital element in the practice of social work that it has reached a stage of becoming almost naturalised. That is, the underlying premises of the theoretical approach serve as the overarching arbiter of the judgments and actions taken by social workers because it is the 'right' or 'natural' thing to do. In that respect, critique and counterarguments are left out of the equation and thus not taken into consideration. One way of understanding this naturalised practice is by applying the concept of design used by Zygmunt Bauman (2004). More specifically, Bauman uses the concept in relation to his overall theory of modernity, which according to him is characterised by the constant striving towards normatively designing society according to an idea about how it ought to be: Modernity is characterised by the ongoing quest for order (Bauman, 1991). As he states:

If modernity is about the production of order then ambivalence is the waste of modernity [...] Ambivalence is arguably the modern era's most genuine worry and concern, since unlike the enemies, defeated and enslaved, it grows in strength with every success of modern powers. (Bauman, 1991, p. 15)

In other words, ambivalence is so frightening because it entails disorder. It entails the great unknown and unmanageable, a residue that we are unable to tame completely. However, ambivalence is a central part of social work practice, as the social workers do not *know* what goes on in the families. This not knowing is formulated by Ferguson:

At best, child protection – like social work and welfare practices more generally – is constituted by snapshots, fleeting images and fragments of people's lived experiences ... Yet the paradox is that these snapshots have to be made to endure in terms of reaching risk assessments and judgements of children's safety and welfare. (Ferguson, 2005, p. 788)

This ambivalence and need for connecting the dots into a full picture, which is still dominated by doubt, is in dire contrast with the thinking of new public management and the standardised goals for documentation and accountability. However, in light of this, the concept of attachment is helping to tackle the ambivalence, the doubt and the ambiguous.

The creation of a societal order necessitates two things: First, the socially embedded perception that the creation of order also entails progress, that is, the process of ordering has to be framed as a 'march' towards something better (Bauman, 1991). In social work this 'better' is the demands of alignment and less haphazardness, ensuring that citizens receive the same treatment no matter where in the country they live and who their social worker is. Secondly, this process necessitates making choices. In that respect, making choices entails the elimination of those aspects that do not fit into the specific societal order. In order to do this, Bauman suggests, designing is applied. To design something is, of course, a craft. This necessitates the understanding of the raw material with which one works and is hence a comprehension of the formability of this particular material. Nevertheless, designing also entails categorisation, that is, designing always involves perceptions of good and bad. When designing, a central element of this procedure is to eliminate the bad and advance the good. One might talk about this in terms of progress: All designing aims at making progress, be it the design of chairs, hospitals, psychology or society per se. In that respect, designing always involves the elimination of those elements that are believed to be a hindrance towards establishing the good or the socio-cultural understanding of progress. Thus, progress has to be perceived in relation to the norms and social rules that are socially sanctioned within the particular field of interest. In a centralisation of the concept of attachment, this progress takes place by the elimination of attention to socioeconomic factors as possible explanations. During field work this lack of attention to socioeconomic factors were a pattern, something also seen in other inquiries into ongoing social work both in (Henriksen, 2013), and outside of Denmark (Duschinsky et al., 2015).

Giving psychology away

Attachment theory has – not without reason – been characterised as 'the most important developmental construct ever investigated' (Sroufe et al., 2005, p. 51). Attachment theory also undoubtedly qualify as one of psychology's most successful export articles in recent years. An increasingly popular motto within psychology over the last 50 years has been the late George A. Miller's (1969) 'giving psychology away' in order to solve societal problems. The underlying assumption is that the greater the application of psychological knowledge the better for society and humankind. However, as Madsen (2014) pinpoints in a reflection over the long-awaited 'psychological revolution' that Miller's anticipated, the distribution of psychology has perhaps more to do with psychology as a cultural form, rather than in a strict scientific sense. Also associated with this increased influence is the underlying tendency for 'concept creep' where psychological concepts gradually come to expand and encompass a wider range of phenomena than initially intended (Haslam, 2016).

Besides the motivation for implementing a psychological revolution by giving psychology away (Miller, 1969) and the inherent expanding logic of psychological concepts (Haslam, 2016), one also needs to pose the question *why* a psychological theory like attachment theory becomes such an important reference point in social work. The 'official' and scientific answer would probably correspond to something like the following: 'Because the bond between infant and caregiver is the most important developmental hallmark in a person's life'. However, there is a 'truth' that we have attempted to demonstrate here by what attachment *does* rather than *is* – a concept hard if not impossible for the professional social workers to spell out: that attachment allows us think

about children's development under Western advanced liberal democracies in a way that suggests that the authorities and child welfare may have to help them govern themselves to enable them to later become autonomous self-governing productive citizens, something their current caregivers seem psychologically unfit to do.

Conclusion

The current demand for documentation and accountability makes the psychological vocabulary powerful, legitimising the use of its concepts. The problem is that it does not solve the problem of arbitrariness, as the use of concepts such as attachment is just as random as the early problems – the local practices and norms of the social workers the demand for documentation tried to eradicate. This means that the psy-cultural language should be recognised as normative and moral, instead of facts and evidence.

The situation in social work at the new millennium has been described as paradoxical since it is largely agreed that certainty in social work is not possible; however, the current political and organisational climate seems to demand it (Parton, 2008, p. 260). The solution has often been to introduce changes to sidestep this paradox and 'substitute confidence in systems for trust in individual professionals', which results in a failure to acknowledge the moral competence of the professional social worker (Parton, 2008, p. 260). This relocation of the focus for social work means that social work is less and less social, and correspondingly more and more informational, according to Parton (2008, p. 263). This is short in duration, able to cross long distances and easy to enter into the electronic register systems of computers and databases.

There are similar reports from social work in other Scandinavian countries, like Norway, where the editors Ellingsen et al. (2015) in the introduction of a new basic text book for social workers in the twenty-first century draw attention to the methodology of 'social case work', which is now mainly referred to only as 'case work'. This could simply be due to practical convenience, but it may also reflect a departure from 'the social' that no longer resonates as the essential basis for professional work. Their reflections also come on the background of an apparent tendency in Norway and Denmark to treat any element of social work that is not accountable in numbers to be forced to the background (Kroken & Madsen, 2016). This is again linked to ongoing streamlining reforms of public sectors, such as the Norwegian reform of the Labour and Welfare Administration, which seems to reward the registry of individuals. This is directed at clients and disfavours much of social work's social, economic and structural legacy (Røysum, 2010).

In this accountable and neoliberal ideological landscape attachment theory seems to fit the bill perfectly for reaching its youngest citizens in danger of falling behind, but ironically its lasting legacy within social work may be a psychological framework that only increases the dominant view of children and youths as individuals *detached* from their historical, political and social surroundings.

Acknowledgement

We would like to thank the anonymous Danish social workers that allowed us to conduct research within their team meetings.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

No funding was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributors

Line Søberg Bjerre is PhD in Social Work and Assistant Professor in Psychology and Social Work, Aalborg University, Denmark. Her research focuses on social work practice, the psychological understandings of children and emotionality in social work practice.

Ole Jacob Madsen is Professor at the Department of Psychology, University of Oslo, Norway. His work research concerns how psychology manifests itself in society and helps in influencing late modern subjectivity (often referred to as «the therapeutic culture»). He is the author of *The Therapeutic Turn: How Psychology Altered Western Culture* (Routledge, 2014), *Optimizing the Self: Social Representations of Self-Help* (Routledge, 2015) and *The Psychologization of Society: On the Unfolding of the Therapeutic in Norway* (Routledge, 2018).

Anders Petersen is Associate Professor of Sociology at Aalborg University, Denmark. He is the co-author of *Late Modern Subjectivity and its Discontents* and the co-editor of *The Social Pathologies of Contemporary Civilization, Imaginative Methodologies: The Poetic Imagination in the Social Sciences and Critical Happiness Studies*.

References

- Ainsworth, M. D. (1964). Patterns of attachment behavior shown by the infant in interaction with his mother. *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly of Behavior and Development*, 10(1), 51–58. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23082925>
- Bauman, Z. (1991). *Modernity and ambivalence*. Polity Press.
- Bauman, Z. (2004). *Wasted lives*. Polity Press.
- Bjerre, L. S. (2017). Fortællinger om og konstruktioner af børn i socialt myndighedsarbejde [Narratives and Constructions of Children in Social Work]. Ph.d. thesis. Aalborg University.
- Bjerre, L. S. (2020). Meaning making processes in a professional community of social workers. In F. Van Alphen, & S. Normann (Eds.), *Cultural psychology in Communities. Tensions and transformations. A volume in annals of cultural psychology* (pp. 65–78). Information Age.
- Bjerre, L. S., & Nissen, M. A. (2020). Does it feel right? Emotional and embodied processes as a 'shadowy epistemology' in difficult child protection cases. *British Journal of Social Work*. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcaa172>
- Bowlby, J. (1969). *Attachment*. Vol. 1. Basic Books.
- Bowlby, J. (1988). *A secure base*. Basic Books.
- Cassidy, J., & Shaver, P. (1999). *Handbook of attachment*. Guildford Press.
- Collins, W. A., & Sroufe, L. A. (1999). Capacity for intimate relations. In W. Furmann, & B. B. Brown (Eds.), *The development of romantic relationships in adolescence* (pp. 125–147). Cambridge University Press.
- Dunn, J. (1993). *Young children's relationships*. SAGE.
- Duschinsky, R., Greco, M., & Solomon, J. (2015). The politics of attachment. Lines of flight with Bowlby, Deleuze and Guattari. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 32(7-8), 173–195. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276415605577>
- Ellingsen, I. T., Levin, I., Berg, B., & Kleppe, L. C. (2015). *Socialt arbeid*. [Social work]. Universitetsforlaget.
- Egelund, T., & Hestbæk, A. (2003). *Anbringelse af børn og unge uden for hjemmet* [Placement of children and youths outside of the home]. Socialforskningsinstituttet.
- Ferguson, H. (2005). 'Working with violence, the emotions and the psycho-social dynamics of child protection. *Social Work Education*, 24(7), 781–795. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02615470500238702>
- Flyvbjerg, B. (2006). Five misunderstandings about case-study research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 12(2), 219–245. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800405284363>
- Foucault, M. (1998). Philosophy and psychology. In P. B. Rabinow, & J. Faubion (Eds.), *Aesthetics, method, and epistemology. Essential works of Foucault, 1954-1984* (Vol. 2, pp. 249–259). The New Press.
- Haslam, N. (2016). Concept creep: Psychology's expanding concepts of harm and pathology. *Psychological Inquiry*, 27(1), 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1047840X.2016.1082418>
- Henriksen, K. (2013). Kvalificering af socialrådgiveres socialfaglige vurderinger [Qualification of social advisors professional verdicts]. Ph.d. thesis. Aalborg: Institut for Sociologi og Socialt Arbejde.
- Howe, D., Brandon, M., Hinings, D., & Schofield, G. (1999). *Attachment theory, child maltreatment and family Support*. Macmillan.
- Hundeide, K. (2008). *Børns livsverden og sociokulturelle rammer* [Children's lifeworlds and sociocultural frames]. Akademisk Forlag.
- Keddell, E. (2015). The ethics of predictive risk modelling in the Aotearoa/New Zealand child welfare context: Child abuse prevention or neo-liberal tool? *Critical Social Policy*, 35(1), 69–88. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0261018314543224>
- Keddell, E. (2017). Interpreting children's best interests: Needs, attachment and decision-making. *Journal of Social Work* 17(3), 324–342. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468017316644694>
- Kildedal, K. (2008). Kvalitet og faglighed i socialt arbejde [Quality and professionalism in social work]. In M. Hviid Jacobsen, & K. Pringle (Eds.), *At forstå det sociale* (pp. 179–198). Akademisk Forlag.

- Kroken, R., & Madsen, O. J. (2016). Fra sosialt arbeid til sosialt entreprenørskap – en moralsk forvandling? [From social work to social entrepreneurship – a moral shift?]. In R. Kroken, & O. J. Madsen (Eds.), *Forvaltning av makt og moral i velferdsstaten* (pp. 152–165). Gyldendal Akademisk.
- Kvelling, Ø. (2013). *Børn i risiko* [Children at risk]. Samfundslitteratur.
- Law, J. (2004). *After method*. Routledge.
- Macvarish, J. (2016). *Neuroparenting. The expert Invasion of family life*. Palgrave, Macmillan.
- Marsico, G. (2012). Idiographic science: It's polyphonic arena and need for reflexivity. In S. Salvatore, A. Gennaro, & J. Valsiner (Eds.), *Making sense of infinite uniqueness* (pp. 133–146). Information Age.
- Madsen, O. J. (2014). Psychology oblivious to psychology. *Theory & Psychology*, 24(5), 609–629. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0959354314543969>
- Maracek, J. (2003). Dancing through mine fields. In P. Carnic, J. Rhodes, & L. Yardley (Eds.), *Qualitative research in psychology* (pp. 49–70). APA.
- Miller, G. A. (1969). Psychology as a means of promoting human welfare. *American Psychologist*, 24(12), 1063–1075. <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0028988>
- Munro, E. (1998). Improving social workers' knowledge base in child protection work. *British Journal of Social Work*, 28(1), 89–105. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordjournals.bjsw.a011320>
- NOU. (2012). *Bedre beskyttelse av barns utvikling*. [Better protection of Childrens' development]. Departementenes servicesenter.
- Parton, N. (2008). Changes in the form of knowledge in social work. *British Journal of Social Work*, 38(2), 253–269. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcl337>
- Rask, L., & Jakobsen, I. S. (2012). *Teoretiske perspektiver på arbeidet med ICS* [Theoretical Perspectives on work with ICS]. Sosialstyrelsen.
- Rose, N. (1996). *Inventing our selves. Psychology, power, and personhood*. Cambridge University Press.
- Rutter, M. (1995). Clinical implications of attachment concepts: Retrospect and prospect. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 36(4), 549–571. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-7610.1995.tb02314.x>
- Røysum, A. (2010). Sosialarbeiderens profesjon utfordres [Social workers' professionalism challenged]. *Fontene forskning*, 1, 41–52. Retrieved from <https://fonteneforskning.no/forskningsartikler/sosialarbeidernes-profesjon-utfordres-6.19.264797.b708e1d81b>
- Servicestyrelsen. (2011). *Håndbog om barnets reform* [Handbook of the Childrens' Reform].
- Smith, M., Cameron, C., & Reimer, D. (2017). From attachment to recognition for children in care. *British Journal of Social Work*, 47(6), 1606–1623. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcx096>
- Socialministeriet. (2011). Retningslinjer for forældrekompetenceundersøgelser [Guidelines for parental competence surveys]. <http://socialministeriet.dk/media/14977/retningslinjer-for-foraeldrekompetenceundersogelser.pdf>.
- Solomon, B. (2002). A social constructionist approach to theorizing child welfare: Considering attachment theory and ways to reconstruct practice. *Journal of Teaching in Social Work*, 22(1–2), 131–149. https://doi.org/10.1300/J067v22n01_09
- Solomon, J., & George, C. (1999). The measurement of attachment security in infancy and childhood. In J. Cassidy, & P. R. Shaver (Eds.), *Handbook of attachment* (pp. 287–316). Guilford Press.
- Spradley, J. P. (1980). *Participant observation*. Waveland.
- Sroufe, L. A., Egeland, B., Carlson, E., & Collins, W. A. (2005). Placing early attachment experiences in developmental context. In K. E. Grossmann, K. Grossmann, & E. Waters (Eds.), *Attachment from Infancy to Adulthood* (pp. 48–70). Guilford Press.
- Valsiner, J. (2000). *Culture and human development*. SAGE.
- White, S., Gibson, M., Wastell, D., & Walsh, P. (2019). *Reassessing attachment theory in child welfare: A critical appraisal*. Policy Press.
- Yin, R. (1994). *Case study research* (2nd ed.). SAGE.