



RHONA M. FEAR

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# Attachment Theory

Working Towards  
Learned Security

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# ATTACHMENT THEORY



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# ATTACHMENT THEORY

## Working Towards Learned Security

*Rhona M. Fear*

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*It gives me great pleasure in dedicating this book to my two beloved daughters. Louise Beattie, my elder daughter, has faithfully helped to edit both this book and my previous book, published by Karnac in 2015, on the subject of the Oedipus complex.*

*My younger daughter, Catherine Fear, has supported me emotionally through the year in which this book has come to fruition. More technically minded than me, she has helped me enormously with the frustrations of using the PC, as sometimes it is alien to me!*

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## *ABOUT THE AUTHOR*

**Rhona Fear**, BA (Hons), MA, is a UKCP registered psychoanalytic psychotherapist and an accredited member of BACP. She has been in private practice in Worcestershire since 1994, where she specialises in working with clients in long term therapy. She first qualified as a counsellor with Relate in 1990. In order to broaden her horizons, she then undertook a Master's Degree in Counselling Studies at the University of Keele from 1994 to 1996. Shortly after this, she began training as a psychoanalytic psychotherapist in 1998 and qualified in 2004. This involved a number of years in five-times weekly therapy and considerable years of intensive supervision of her clinical work, as well as academic seminars and work with a number of twice-weekly training cases, prior to the presentation of a Final Qualifying Paper.

She has always maintained a keen interest in writing and in academia, especially since spending some years lecturing in Political Science and Sociology earlier in her career, following the attainment of her first degree. She has also taken an active political role in democratic government and in pressure-group politics. Previously, she contributed to the literature on the Integration debate within the field of counselling and psychotherapy, by publishing a number of refereed papers on the relationship between the counsellors' choice

of theoretical orientation and the meta-theoretical assumptions of their underlying personal philosophies. She has also published a number of chapters in edited textbooks.

In 2015, Karnac published her first book, *The Oedipus Complex: Solutions or Resolutions?*

## PREFACE

I decided to write this book because I have become certain, particularly over recent years, that the most important shifts in the client's psychic organisation are a result of the healing power of the therapeutic relationship. In an earlier book (Fear, 2015), where I detailed strategies employed in the resolution of the Oedipus complex, I grew to think that it is through the transference that mutative change can occur. I believe this still holds true. However, I remain convinced that the processes involved in the development and maturation of the real relationship are *also* of paramount importance. Here, I want to put forward the notion that the most significant change of all involves the client's experience of learning how it feels to enjoy, for an extended period of time, the dependability of recourse to a "secure base" (Bowlby, 1988) when anxiety is aroused. It is during this experience in therapy that the client's psychic organisation changes, and he can then transfer this learning to his relationships with significant others in the external world. The majority of the clients who present to me in long-term therapy suffer from either an insecure ambivalent or insecure avoidant attachment schema. This is as the result of developmental deficit during the individual's childhood, either in the form of a traumatic episode, or sustained lack of consistent, loving attention

from their primary carer. The psychotherapy I offer aims to heal the effects of these developmental deficits and helps the client to change dysfunctional ways of relating.

Since I began to work as a novice psychoanalytic psychotherapist two decades ago, during which time it has been my privilege to work with many clients in long-term therapy, I have gradually developed a way of working that I believe most effectively enables the clients to change their attachment schema so that they can begin to relate in a secure way. This occurs first in the consulting room with me, and then the client can reflect this learning experience in practical ways through his relationships in the external world.

I have always been deeply influenced by John Bowlby's concept of attachment theory, and have followed the development of his ideas by others since his death in 1990. Through extensive reading and research, I have also found that I am drawn to consider the underlying meta-theoretical assumptions of both Kohut's psychology of the self, and Stolorow, Brandchaft, and Atwood's intersubjective perspective. I have gradually sought to achieve an integration of these two theories together with attachment theory, and have developed the theory of learned security.

It has been my enormous privilege to work with hundreds of individuals during my twenty-seven years as a therapist. In a relationship built on trust and dependability, I hope that my clients have appreciated that I endeavour to hold them in mind throughout our work together. Years of clinical experience have enabled me to devise a method that I believe best enables the client to attain a sense of a secure base—something he has never before been fortunate enough to experience.

This book is divided into five sections. In Part I, I examine attachment theory, both as it was devised by John Bowlby and as developed by others in more recent years. We are fortunate that attachment theory has been extended through the work of a group of highly talented practitioners and theorists since Bowlby's time. In Chapter Four of this part of the book, I introduce the concepts of "earned security" and "learned security" which are, in fact, central to this book. Part II goes on to describe some of the ways in which, through traumatic life experiences, individuals develop insecure attachment schemas. Part III focuses upon the central purpose of the book: to explain the theory of learned security. Chapter Eleven seeks to explain

how this integrative theory has been reached, while Chapter Twelve aims to put forward how practitioners may best put the theory into practice in the clinical setting of the consulting room. Chapters Nine and Ten present the central concepts of the two theories other than attachment theory that have been utilised in the integration. Part IV of the book presents four case studies: the aim of these is to evidence how the theory can be applied in the consulting room. Part V concludes the book, and offers a brief discussion of the ideas presented.

I am deeply indebted to the individual clients who have given their permission for the dynamics of their therapy to be used in the case studies. I would also like to thank the many other clients with whom it has been my privilege to work. I never cease to be astounded at the level of courage it takes for one to engage in long-term therapy at what usually is a very difficult point in life.

I am thrilled with the way that relational psychoanalysis has developed in the past two decades. There has been a paradigmatic shift away from the determinist and reductionist approaches in Freudian theory to an appreciation of the complexities of life and of environmental influence, and a growing understanding that attachment relationships have a biological significance. I have found it particularly efficacious to combine the central tenets of attachment theory with the approaches of Kohut and those of Stolorow, Brandchaft, and Atwood. A state of learned security occurs when the client gains a sense of having a secure base to which to return and refuel in times of emotional doubt or trauma, and through which he learns to self-regulate his emotions.

I am aware that the ideas presented in this book might encounter some resistance, especially from those of you who believe that intrapsychic conflict is the cause of neurosis, rather than inopportune environmental factors. However, as testified in a previous book, I am not proposing that intrapsychic conflict is not a causative factor in *dis-ease*; I believe that the answer lies somewhere along a continuum between the two poles. Even within the attachment fraternity, I think that the book might arouse some debate. I hope, above all, that the ideas in this book will lead to further debate and discussion about the valuable concepts of attachment theory that John Bowlby bequeathed us in his legacy.

I conclude this Preface with a few words about the terminology that I have used in writing this book. I have long pondered on the



appropriate term of reference for those courageous individuals who arrive in our consulting rooms and devote their attentions, energies, and finance to long-term therapy. Consequently, I have decided to refer to those individuals as my clients rather than my patients. I have always been uneasy about the use of the term “patient”. My associations to the word are bound up with the medical model, and I am firmly of the belief that the use of this terminology suggests a particular power discourse between practitioner and patient. On the other hand, I truly believe that the word “client” makes an attempt to give the analysand the possibility of controlling his own destiny and his own therapy.

I have used the masculine pronoun to refer to the clients (except when I am writing about specific individuals), and the female pronoun to refer to the therapist. This is just a mechanism that I have employed for the purpose of clarity; in reality, it could just as well be either sex in either of the roles.

Similarly, I have generally used the word “therapy” instead of psychoanalysis or psychotherapy in the narrative of the book, although I think the three words, dependent upon context, are used in the text at different points interchangeably. This book is aimed to appeal to all counsellors, psychotherapists, and psychoanalysts, and purposely attempts to be inclusive. However, as I state clearly in Chapters Four and Twelve, my discussion of the best way to act as a therapist will not appeal to everyone. Clients in long-term learned security therapy will, by its very nature, become very dependent at times, and so this type of therapeutic process might not suit everyone.

# Introduction

In this book, I focus on a new model of therapy that is largely a result of the development of concepts promulgated originally by John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth from the 1940s until Bowlby died in 1990. Bowlby's research supported his notion that it is crucial for the child to receive the consistent loving care of a physically and emotionally available parental figure throughout childhood and adolescence. Bowlby's seminal concepts in developing attachment theory, including the prescient belief that we should all have a "secure base", have had far-reaching ramifications upon some sectors of the therapy world.

There have been many developments in attachment theory, both during Bowlby's lifetime and since his death. Mary Ainsworth's "strange situation" test is world-renowned in the field of psychotherapy, as is the adult attachment interview (AAI). There have been other developments emanating from attachment theory by individuals such as Peter Fonagy, Howard and Miriam Steele, Bateman, Target, Gergely, and Allen. Fonagy and colleagues' (Bateman & Fonagy, 2004; Fonagy et al., 2002) recognition of the concept of mentalization, and then the development of it as a body of thought, is just one example of individuals determined to develop psychoanalytic concepts in the footsteps of Bowlby.

More recent developments and debate about psychotherapy based on the ideas of attachment theory have begun to claim the interest of many in the attachment fraternity, as relational models of psychotherapy have gained ascendancy in the psychoanalytic world. I have been persuaded by the underlying meta-theoretical assumptions of attachment theory ever since I first entered the therapy world in 1989. My initial training in counselling was with Relate, and, in those days, the theoretical approach taught was essentially eclectic. We were trained as counsellors to recognise a range of different theoretical modalities, and learnt to apply different theories according to their suitability. It was as if we had a metaphorical toolbox from which we pulled, in each counselling session, the most appropriate instrument to help the relationship to recover, or, alternatively, to enable the couple to separate without undue animosity. However, even in these early years of eclectic practice, I was drawn towards John Bowlby's theory of attachment. It resonated with me, undoubtedly because of my own personal history, although I had no conscious awareness of this at the time.

Perhaps as a consequence of a combination of this early training and my own personal history, some years later, in 1997, I decided to train as a psychoanalytic psychotherapist in order to specialise in the theoretical orientation that I found most appealing and efficacious in the consulting room. Since qualifying in 2004, I have specialised in working long term with the majority of my clients. I have gradually devised a way of working that aims to repair the developmental deficits that clients have encountered because of traumatological experiences in their earlier years, and this method of working has so inspired me that it has provided the motivation to write this book. I hope that the reader will be as enthusiastic about the ideas in the book as I am, and that it might modify your way of working with your clients. For others, it might not motivate you to change your entire way of working, but I do hope, nevertheless, that it might stimulate your thought processes. Others of you, who do not believe in the radical effects of environmental trauma, might find yourselves reacting negatively to the ideas in this book. It is not that I think that intrapsychic conflict does not cause neurosis; I think, instead, that the answer to the conundrum of what causes neuroses lies in the rationale that we need to take into account both environmental effect and intrapsychic conflict.

Since my qualification as an analytic therapist, I have worked with many clients suffering from neurotic symptoms and I have grown to appreciate that I do not believe that rigorous interpretation of the transference and countertransference and use of psychoanalytic interpretations are sufficient methods to employ alone in psychotherapy where one is trying to help clients to achieve psychic change. As a mature therapist, I am now no longer idealistic enough to believe and hope for a complete “cure”. One can, at best, hope that the client may learn through therapy to avoid repeating dysfunctional patterns of behaviour that are linked historically to his experience in the past, and that he will come to feel more at peace with life. One comes to recognise, as a therapist, that there remains an inevitable tendency within an individual’s psyche to revert to old habits and pre-existing patterns of thought and behaviour in times of stress or under circumstances that replicate old memories. In summation, it seems to me that individuals rarely manage, with the help of their therapist, to eradicate their pathologies entirely.

Given the caveat that one might be unable to achieve a complete cure for the client, what, then, is the theoretical approach that is best suited to help the client’s recovery? After a lot of soul-searching, I have come to believe that the application of the core conditions of empathy, acceptance, and congruence (which form the basis of person-centred counselling, as popularised by Carl Rogers (1961, 1980)) are of inestimable value in the consulting room if we are to help clients to regain a pathway to ordinary, everyday living. This might seem like heresy to those of you of a strict psychoanalytic persuasion, but I do believe that the use of the core conditions is vital in order to help to establish and maintain a relationship where the therapist can be seen as a secure base.

It is common for clients to present with issues concerning their relationships: these may be their core romantic relationships, or relationships with parents or other relatives, or sometimes with friends or work colleagues. Attachment theory provides us with the meta-theoretical, underlying beliefs that underpin how best to work with these individuals. However, while John Bowlby was a giant among individuals as a theoretician, he was not a well-practised clinician. He maintained a small clinical practice, working mostly at the Tavistock Centre, while his primary interest lay in research and academia rather than in the practical application of his theory. A similar point may be

made regarding Ainsworth and colleagues (strange situation test, 1978) and George and colleagues (who developed the adult attachment interview, 1985).

I have always been interested in academia and in the meta-theoretical underpinnings of belief systems. To my mind, it is better to underpin one's work with a theoretical rationale than to rely purely upon an eclectic toolbox of skills, for the latter might be underlain with unexamined prejudice. My dissertation for my MA focused on the meta-theoretical assumptions and *weltanschauung* underlying each of the principal categories of different theoretical orientations. Subsequently, I co-wrote and published a number of academic papers and chapters in books during the 1990s and the millennium on the subject of integration of theories in counselling and psychotherapy (Fear & Woolfe, 1996, 1999, 2000). I have followed the integration debate for over twenty years. In 1996, a colleague and I published (Fear & Woolfe, 1996) an attempted integration of Wachtel's cyclical psychodynamics (Wachtel & McKinney, 1992) and attachment theory. Even twenty years ago, I was not convinced that attachment theory alone provided the optimum solution for many individuals in therapy.

I would now like to consider the possibility of how we might employ the concepts of empathy, acceptance, and congruence as valuable adjuncts to the underlying core modality of psychoanalysis. Unlike Carl Rogers, however, I do not believe that they are "the necessary and sufficient requirements for change" (Rogers, 1957) to be engendered. Anyone who is familiar with the session of Carl Rogers and his client Gloria in that delightful and fascinating work (*Three Approaches to Psychotherapy*, filmed by Dr Everett Shostrom, 1964) detailing her sessions with therapists of differing theoretical persuasions (Albert Ellis, Carl Rogers, and Fritz Perls, respectively) might also remember that while she found Carl Rogers' session the most comforting and empathic, she did not see it as enabling the most progress to be made.

Consequently, it appears to me that although these core conditions are useful, they are insufficient in themselves. Thus, I am aware that we need the skills of timely interpretations, of proactive use and interpretation of the transference and countertransference, and the linking of past and present, if one is to achieve insight and psychic change for the client. Alongside these skills, I believe that we need a working knowledge of the psychoanalytic theories we can apply in analytic

practice (as can be seen in my previous book concentrating on the use of the theories of the Oedipus complex (Fear, 2015)). However, extending the concepts of Bowlby's attachment theory, I have come to believe that the therapist needs (in long-term therapy) to create and foster a relationship that enables the client to enjoy the healing experience of "knowing" what it is to have a "secure base". Through the practical application of my theory, which I have named the theory of learned security, I believe that the therapist can help her client to recover from the developmental deficit(s) suffered in earlier years. It is often precisely as a result of the lack of a secure base that a client will present in therapy, although clients do not tend to attend early sessions with a formulated notion of this. Few clients ever present in our consulting rooms with a secure attachment schema. This is due to the simple fact that individuals who have experienced a secure base, while suffering the same vicissitudes in life as those who tread a path to our doorways, are able to withstand and deal with the crises and life difficulties that befall them, without the need for recourse to professional help.

It seems to me that the individuals who *do* require our help are most often in need of a secure base experience, in order to enable them to gain the fortitude and resilience to face life's difficulties robustly and to comprehend their meaning. By the therapist's provision of a secure base on which to lean in times of difficulty, they not only overcome the presenting problem, but also are given the tools with which to manage whatever else life may throw at them in the future.

As has been intimated before, I do believe that psychoanalytic and psychodynamic interpretations are not sufficient in themselves to provide the experience of learned security. I think similarly of the Rogerian core conditions. The deficit here necessitates that we employ and integrate some person-centred techniques with those of psychoanalysis. To this end, I have drawn upon a number of theories: the intersubjective perspective of Stolorow and colleagues (1983, 1995), and Kohut's ideas in self psychology as well as Bowlby's attachment theory. In Chapter Eleven, I put forward an integration of these three theories; additionally, I have employed the use of the core conditions in describing how to use this integrative theory in a therapeutic setting (Chapter Twelve).

In order to achieve theoretical integration, one must seek recourse to a higher level of abstraction. It is a matter of finding common

underlying meta-theoretical assumptions and concepts within the theories. It is helpful if there is a common *weltanschauung* (or world view) underlying the theories one has chosen to integrate. One of the taxonomies of world view was inaugurated by Northrop Frye (1957, 1964) in his analysis of Shakespearean literature. It was then taken up by Messer and Winokur (1984), and Shafer (1976), who applied Frye's taxonomy to psychoanalytic theory. Frye identified four major visions of reality: tragic, comic, romantic, and ironic (See Fear & Woolfe, 1999, 2000 for a detailed exposition of these visions). Each of these visions, while essentially different in their approach to life, have at their core some overlapping meta-theoretical concepts such as optimism/pessimism; the degree to which self-actualisation is possible; positive/negative stance on life; internal/external locus of control.

I discovered, by analysing the theories of Stolorow and colleagues, Bowlby, and Kohut, that all three theories are, in essence, relational models (rather than being drive models, as in Freudian theory). All three theories share the meta-theoretical assumption that relationships in life are of pre-eminent importance. In terms of integration, they are all underpinned by a tragic view of reality. In short, this encompasses the beliefs that not all is redeemable; neither can everything be remedied in life. As Shafer (1976) puts it:

it requires one to recognise the elements of defeat in victory and victory in defeat; the pain in pleasure and the pleasure in pain; the guilt in apparent justified action; the loss of opportunities in every choice and by growth in every direction. (Shafer, 1976, p. 35)

All three theories stress highly the provision of empathic attunement; they also give due regard to the healing power of the transference between therapist and client. In the theory of learned security, I have developed the concept of empathy to have a specific meaning. I am putting forward the notion that intersubjective empathy involves a collaborative experience: it refers to the need for the therapist to consistently engage with the client by actively checking out with him if she is "alongside him". I am talking about a co-constructive process where the therapist actively seeks the feedback of the client. Similarly, I believe that we need to employ a co-constructive process when helping the client to create a sense of autobiographical competence (Holmes, 1993). In the theory of learned security, this is also one of the

important underlying purposes of long-term therapy. All three theories focus on the interpersonal, on both the “real” and transference relationships between the therapist and client, and also give priority to the client’s relationships in his external world.

I am indebted to Jeremy Holmes (2010) and several others for the initial concept of earned security. This concept has begun to take root within the attachment fraternity. However, I have been frustrated by the fact that I have not been able to trace very many books, apart from Holmes (2010) and Odgers (2014), that focus on precisely how this sense of earned security is to be achieved by the therapy dyad. In Odgers’ book (2014), there are three chapters describing case studies (Haynes & Whitehead; Patrikiou; Richards) that give examples of how earned security might manifest itself in the clinical setting of the consulting room. These two books have served to increase my dedication to the integration put forward in this book. However, I am not aware of any treatise on the underlying theory that incorporates concepts from Kohut and from Stolorow, Brandchaft, and Atwood. I believe that concepts from these theories are needed to achieve the endpoint of learned security. I hope that this book may help other therapists to develop such a way of working. I have named this theory the theory of learned security (*learned* rather than *earned*) for two reasons: first, it has a number of essential differences from earned security and, thus, requires a separate delineation. Second, I believe this title signifies more directly the informal learning process that is involved in helping individuals to intuitively learn experientially what it means to have a secure base.

The book is divided into four sections. In Part I, I provide an exposition of attachment theory; developments in theory post-Bowlby and a description of the concept of mentalization, which has been developed in this century. I believe Bowlby’s theory clearly states that emotional security depends indubitably on whether there is a deficit in childhood, and whether a satisfactory close emotional attachment is made to a reliable, responsible, and attuned parental figure. However, I am convinced that “loss” does not only encompass physical loss, but also the intrinsic loss of emotional connectedness that constitutes a major reason for individuals unable to grow up with a secure base.

In the four chapters of Part II, I focus upon differing ways in which one’s experience of childhood might lead to a loss of emotional



connectedness, and how this, in turn, prevents an experience of “containment” (Bion, 1984). In Chapters Four to Six, I provide an exposition of the effects of toxic nourishment, maternal deprivation, and the results of an attachment figure being emotionally unavailable. I look, in Chapter Seven, at the biological effects on an infant’s brain of emotional unavailability by a parental figure who is not emotionally attuned to the child. I am indebted to Sue Gerhardt for her seminal book, *Why Love Matters: How Affection Shapes a Baby’s Brain* (Gerhardt, 2015) for the facts that she has collected there. Here, at last, there is physiological evidence for John Bowlby’s beliefs that such emotional attunement and “companionable interaction” (Heard & Lake, 1997) between parent and infant are so life changing. This research unquestionably shows us now that there are biological ramifications if the child is not in receipt of emotional connectedness. The fact that Romanian orphans, whose early childhood consisted of lying in a cot without the emotional stimulation of adult figures, effectively have a “black hole” in their brains due to the failure of the orbitofrontal cortex to develop is quite shocking. It is also worth noting that negative emotions can actually prevent the baby’s brain from developing because they lead to the production of cortisol, and this, in turn, stops the development of endorphins and dopamine, creating a circularity whereby glucose is not manufactured. The brain requires glucose to develop.

Part III of the text concentrates upon the theoretical underpinnings of the theory of learned security. In Chapters Nine and Ten, I put forward a summation of the other two theories (the psychology of the self and the intersubjective perspective) that have been utilised to reach this integration. In Chapter Eleven, I present the integration of these three theories, which underlies the practical application of the concepts used in the theory of learned security. Chapter Twelve concludes this section by focusing upon the way in which I think that one needs to engage in the therapeutic process if one is convinced that there is a need for the client to gain a sense of earned security or learned security.

Part IV consists of case studies of four individuals with whom I have worked for some considerable time. Here, I attempt to show the reader how the therapist plays an essential role in enabling the client to “know” what it means to truly experience a secure base on whom he can rely. I also examine the effect of this upon the client’s emotional

and psychological self. I am particularly indebted to one client, Nick, who has written a narrative of what therapy has meant to him. The reader is given the opportunity to appreciate how the client may assimilate and view his therapy from a subjective perspective.

I hope that the book will serve to make you think about the purpose of psychotherapy. I have been passionate in my motivation to write this book, just as my years in clinical practice, honing the therapy that I describe, have been challenging, stimulating, and hugely rewarding. I hope that other therapists among you may learn from this book, and that it fosters debate in order to enable individuals to continue along the path that I have outlined. Some theoreticians and clinicians might take the ideas in other directions that they deem worthwhile and exciting. I trust that others of you may find the energy and motivation to develop the ideas that I have suggested here, in order that we as an analytic community continue to employ the initial concepts developed and promulgated by John Bowlby.

My thanks go to all of the clients with whom I have worked over the past twenty-seven years. Had it not been for you, the writing of this book would never have been possible. It takes a lot of courage to present oneself in psychotherapy, and a dedication to the process if one is to achieve significant change together with the help of the therapist. I am particularly indebted to the four clients who have allowed me to use the dynamics of their time in therapy with me, so that I can share with you the way that the theory of learned security works in practice.



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## PART I

# ATTACHMENT THEORY AS THE UNDERLYING BASIS OF THE THEORY OF LEARNED SECURITY



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