Attachment theory is rooted in observational studies that seek to examine the relational bonds between young children and their caregivers, typically mothers. Over time, researchers have established that children’s affectional bonds with their caregivers are rooted in psychological, as well as biological, motives. Attachment studies across cultures have found that children seek a primary attachment with one caregiver and that most children are securely attached. Moreover, with the advance of attachment research, it has been discovered that childhood attachment patterns affect later adult personality styles and that children frequently develop an attachment style similar to that of their parents.

Attachment theory traces its origins to several scientific and social fields, most notably psychoanalysis, social work, behaviorism, ethology, evolution, and biology. The “father” of modern attachment theory, John Bowlby, motivated by his own frustration with then-prevailing psychoanalytic ideas regarding clinical practice and human development, believed that answers to the most perplexing questions surrounding human attachment were not available from any single discipline. In direct consequence of this approach, scientific findings that have accrued from research on human attachment
ever since continue to be broadly applicable to the social and behavioral sciences, rather than concentrated in a single disciplinary domain.

Attachment theory and research are also very closely aligned with the traditional interests of the social work profession. Both have emphasized infant and child welfare, the importance of relationships with primary caregivers, and the contributions of the extramural environment in shaping human functioning and pathology. The human attachment field has also gained global currency as a result of international research investigations conducted in Asian and African cultures. Indeed, after more than half a century of research on human attachment, the universality of the need for “affectional bonds,” the term Bowlby used to characterize children’s primordial need for their parents’ love and protection, is now taken for granted. Bowlby’s and Mary Ainsworth’s research helped to clarify the notion of intergenerational transmission of trauma and the development of mental disorders. More recently, an even stronger link has been forged between this body of research and social work practice as the findings of attachment research have been applied to clinical methods of prevention and treatment in such diverse areas as child welfare, trauma and eating disorders, and personality disorders.

Research findings from the attachment field have also helped us understand the impact of attachment disruptions on children’s personality development and on their evolving relationships. These findings have, moreover, dramatically altered the content and structure of parent education programs, as well as the training of mental health providers throughout the United States and other parts of the world.

The relationship between attachment theory and research and clinical practice has evolved only gradually. For many years, attachment researchers focused on investigating the influence of attachment disruptions on children’s and adults’ behaviors. Unfortunately, Bowlby’s ideas were not especially well received by the psychoanalytic community, nor were they judged to be truly consonant with existing clinical frameworks. Attachment theory, however, has proven to be a far more natural “fit” with relational and intersubjective theories, ideas that are considered by many to be at the forefront of contemporary psychodynamic practice. Such theories, no longer wedded to earlier psychoanalytic conceptions of the biological primacy of the instinctual drives, had already accorded far greater emphasis to human relationships, or what some psychoanalytic researchers have termed the “preexisting tie to the human environment” (Greenberg & Mitchell, 1983). Furthermore, psychodynamic practice had long been in search of a more
robust empirical framework to which certain assumptions regarding human
development, psychopathology, and psychoanalytic conceptions of treat-
ment might be anchored. Attachment theory and research have furnished
a sound empirical basis for psychodynamic practice principles, particularly
those associated with self psychology and relational theory. Moreover, while
attachment theory does not provide an integrated clinical approach, we will
show how attachment concepts can inform the treatment process.

Both of us are experienced clinicians who became interested in how at-
tachment theory might be meaningfully applied to psychodynamic practice.
We soon realized that little had been published on this topic in the social
work literature, and in discussions with the late John Michel, who was at
that time senior executive editor at Columbia University Press, we recog-
nized the importance of writing this book. We are both also deeply involved
in the academic world, and it has been our impression that many social work
graduate students receive little, if any, exposure to attachment theory. To the
extent that they do become acquainted with attachment theory, it is chiefly
through two routes—the developmental psychology research literature
and condensed summative reviews in graduate-level textbooks—neither of
which addresses clinical applications. Furthermore, most of these publica-
tions do not provide much emphasis on the sequelae of attachment patterns
for later development. We therefore decided to collaborate on an introduc-
tory text that could be used by students in graduate practice classes across
three distinct curricular areas: human development, psychopathology, and
clinical practice. We hope that this book will offer a clear and accessible in-
troduction to attachment theory and research, that it will prove useful to
students in their efforts to understand the relationship between early attach-
ment patterns and later personality development, and, finally, that students
will be able to extrapolate from the findings of attachment research and ap-
ply this knowledge to the broad range of clinical situations involving chil-
dren, adolescents, and adults. To this end, we have included a number of
illustrative clinical cases in the last three chapters of the book, each of which
is thoroughly discussed and analyzed.

Our decision to coauthor this book followed a number of previous col-
laborations on various writing projects, and it underscores our mutual inter-
est in developing and promoting psychodynamic theories and practice prin-
ciples for clinical social work. As we became immersed in this project, we
also found Jerry’s rich clinical experience with children and adolescents and
Shoshana’s interest in cross-cultural practice to be especially complementary.
In the first part of the book, we focus on theoretical precursors of attachment theory in both social work and psychoanalysis, the history of attachment theory and research, the application of ideas regarding attachment to interpersonal and relational theories, and important research developments in the field of attachment over the last few decades. We have included the foremost figures in attachment research, starting with John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth and moving on to Mary Main, Allan Sroufe, and Peter Fonagy, among others. In the last three chapters, we show how attachment concepts can inform diagnostic concerns and the treatment process with children, adolescents, and adults.

We hope that we have provided a succinct yet sufficiently detailed introduction to the field of attachment, its history, and its most important research findings and that students will be able to identify with the illustrative vignettes we have used. Bearing in mind that Bowlby’s ideas regarding attachment could not help but be shaped by the panoply of psychoanalytic theories that arose from the rich theoretical climate of the mid-twentieth century, we have closely examined the relationship between other psychoanalytic developmental models and attachment theory. In keeping with current thinking in our field, we have also emphasized human diversity as it applies both to attachment research and to clinical practice. In this regard, we have selected cases that might be considered exemplars for clinical practice with diverse and special populations, including an urban African American adolescent, a Caribbean American woman, and a young adult with a neurological disability. Finally, we have highlighted the important relationship between attachment and pathology, especially insofar as the influence of trauma is concerned.
ATTACHMENT AND DYNAMIC PRACTICE