

## **GREETING**

- Good afternoon. I am delighted to see so many of you again, now that the Covid emergency is much reduced.
- Thank you Doris (Silverman).
- Your generous introductions always remind me of Norman Garnezy who, during my years at Minnesota, was also renowned for setting a very high bar for the speakers he introduced.
- I hope that those of you who are joining us via Zoom are logged in, on time, and have sound.
- We'll post this presentation in case you get cut off or want to view it or share it later.” (Ask Paolo if this is correct.)
- The Rapaport-Klein Study Group’s tradition of scholarship and collegiality has spanned over 50 years. It takes a lot of thought and effort to maintain this tradition and adapt to challenges that inevitably arise every year.

- One constant has been Riggs hospitality. So, we thank Riggs for hosting us again. It wouldn't feel like home anywhere else.
- And, of course, thanks to our co-chairs Paulo Migone and Craig Piers, who, always insure an interesting program and, along with Nadine Desautels, Riggs' Conference Coordinator, see to it that everything is seamlessly executed. Like so many of you, I've enjoyed these meetings as much as anything in my professional life.

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## INTRODUCTION

- As with any scientific theory (*e.g.*, Popper, 1934/1959 ), the evolution and good health of attachment theory has always depended on having good critics. Fortunately, we have had a generous supply of comprehending, thoughtful critics and commentators. These have included George Engel (1971), Virginia Demos (2002), Michael Rutter (1972; 1995), Robert Hinde (1982; 1991), Peter Fonagy (1997; 1999), and recently Michael Fitzgerald, 2020, to mention but a few. Over time, many of the early criticisms have been addressed, lost traction, or by now been incorporated into

the theory. In addition, there remain numerous technical, usually measurement-related criticisms. Although these are important, they seldom challenge fundamental postulates.

- In contrast, recent criticisms from cross-cultural psychologists, anthropologists, and ethnographers raise a number of challenging theoretical issues. Moreover, they have gained traction beyond the attachment literature.

### **Wanted: Room To Flourish**

- At one time, and we hope this time has passed, attachment theorists had a reputation for being, if not aggressive then, perhaps “overly enthusiastic” in responding to criticisms. This was understandable. Early on, attachment theory needed time and space to see what it could do. Correspondingly, those deeply invested in the existing psychoanalytic and learning theory paradigms were highly motivated defend their own positions. Every new theory or paradigm goes through this stage. It is a dangerous time. Even a thin but polemically effective criticism can tip over a new paradigm before its worth is really tested.

- This was the risk when influential psychoanalysts, including Melanie Klein, Anna Freud, Max Schur, & Rene Spitz utterly rejected Bowlby's new ideas when he first presented them to the psychoanalytic community. It was also the case when Melanie Klein declared Bowlby's ideas on early loss anathema. As it was when developmental learning theorist argued that individual differences in infant attachment were *demonstrably incoherent* across situations, behaviors, and any time interval.
- Now, decades later, the Bowlby-Ainsworth paradigm is well established. We might even say entrenched. Yet, there is still a tendency to go at criticisms of attachment theory as if each one posed a serious threat. In this *reflexively defensive* mode, the primary goal is not to *engage* the criticisms but to dispatch them. This can usually be accomplished pretty handily. One simply (1) suggests that the critic misunderstands some key aspect of attachment theory, or (2) argues that the criticism goes to some idiosyncratic or not really central postulates, or (3) you offer some sort of local concession that doesn't really

concede much. Failing in these, attachment partisans often resort to some sort of tactical reply, *e.g.*, “That is not part of attachment theory” or “You don't seem familiar with how that measure is supposed to be scored.”

- Although this stance parries all but the most well-grounded criticisms, it pays little in the way of dividends. In our experience, the vanquished rarely turn around and join the attachment team. More often, they just take their gear and play somewhere else; often feeling a bit put upon.
- Engaging good critics and recruiting talent to attachment study are vitally important to the good health of the enterprise. Refusing to engage criticism thoughtfully is unworthy and counter-productive. Thoughtful critics find this disconcerting, at best, and it is a poor recruiting strategy.
- These are no longer early days. We are more than 40 years past John Bowlby's attachment trilogy. We have countless articles, and reams of data, a fine journal, *Attachment & Human Development*, and even a *Handbook* (Cassidy &

Shaver, 1999, 2008, 2016). In addition, Robert Karen and Robbie Duschinsky have published excellent excellent histories of attachment study (Karen, 1998; Duschinsky, 2020). Criticism is no longer an emergency. We can well afford to give critics a patient, thoughtful hearing. In fact, we would argue that there is much to be gained by doing so.

## Goals

- Let me now mention three goals for this afternoon. First, will outline for you the range of criticisms cultural anthropologists and cross-cultural psychologists have lately directed at attachment theory. Second, I will recommend a productive way of engaging such criticisms, based on what philosophers (*e.g.*, Scriven, 1976; Davidson, 1984; Quine, 1960) and legal scholars (*e.g.*, Dworkin, 1986) refer to as the *Principle of Charitable Interpretation*. The key here is patient listening and careful analysis. Although this sounds simple enough, one shouldn't underestimate the difficulties. Thus, I will conclude by outlining a heuristic for implementing this approach.

## **Wrap-up Introduction**

- Getting our arms around scores of cross-cultural criticisms, and realizing how to approach them constructively has been a significant undertaking. Although our project is not yet finished, we have made considerable progress. In addition, we are increasingly confident that our approach can be applied to reviews in other domains. Recalling the Rapaport-Klein tradition of sharing works in progress, my presentation today is *a more a progress report than the last word* on cross-cultural criticisms. If you will allow me this, I promise to spare you the kind of details that only an attachment theorist could love.

## **Clustering Recent Cross-Cultural Criticisms of Attachment**

- The recent cross-cultural literature criticizing attachment is quite extensive. Thus, our first task Morris and I took up was to conduct a detailed review and impose some organization by sorting the scores of criticisms into

categories. We started by reviewing over 100 articles, chapters, and commentaries with titles and abstracts that seemed to relevant to cross-cultural issues in attachment theory. These alone cite 175 different books, commentaries, chapters, and articles that seemed likely to include cross-critical perspectives. 45 % of these were published since 2010, and fully 80% since 2000.

- In the end, we identified 196 critical statements (let me call them items) which we sorted into 11 categories.

(Morris has suggested that such a sorting task might be a useful screen for candidates in the coming primaries. )

**Now, let's have a look at the criticisms  
and categories.**



## Cross-Cultural Criticisms

1. Theory is culture -bound (monocultural).
2. Needs to see a wider range of behaviors.
3. Focuses on mother as primary caregiver.
4. Overlooks situational/ecological influences on parenting.
5. Bowlby's evolutionary analysis is wrong.

### **CATEGORY 1: *Attachment Theory Is Monocultural; Takes Point Of View Of Western Cultures* (36 items)**

This is the criticism that attachment theorists are informed by too narrow a range of cultures.

For example:

- Attachment theory reflects a philosophical/ theoretical tradition that prioritizes autonomy and independence.
- Attachment theory incorporates Western bias toward sensitive-responsive care where as “in most of the world, controlling children is what good parents do”.

### **CATEGORY 2: *Attachment Theory Needs To See A Wider Range Of Behaviors.* (24 items)**

The criticism here is that, even in their own culture, attachment researchers stick to a narrow range of caregiver behavior and developmental outcomes dictated by their theory.

For example:

- Focusing on maternal sensitivity and responsiveness, to the exclusion of other aspects of care that may be more salient or significant in other cultures.
- Focusing on attachment effects on competence-related outcomes, to the exclusion of other kinds of outcomes that may be more salient or significant in other cultures.

### **CATEGORY 3: Attachment Theory Focuses On The Mother As Primary Caregiver; Overlooking Alloparenting (Multiple Parenting). (18 items)**

For example, critics argue that:

- Attachment theory over-estimates the importance of having one primary caregiver.
- And that, in some cultures, an infant is viewed as belonging to an extended range of caregivers or even to the community at large – and that this plays an important role in achieving culturally-valued developmental outcomes.

## **CATEGORY 4: Attachment Theory Does Not Take Into Account How Situational And Ecological Factors Can Influence Parenting.**

(10 items)

That is, patterns of care and the distribution of caregiving effort are not simply a product of evolution. They are closely tied to the demands of living in a particular environment and cultural context.

For example:

- If mother has to work growing food, someone else is needed to help with the children.

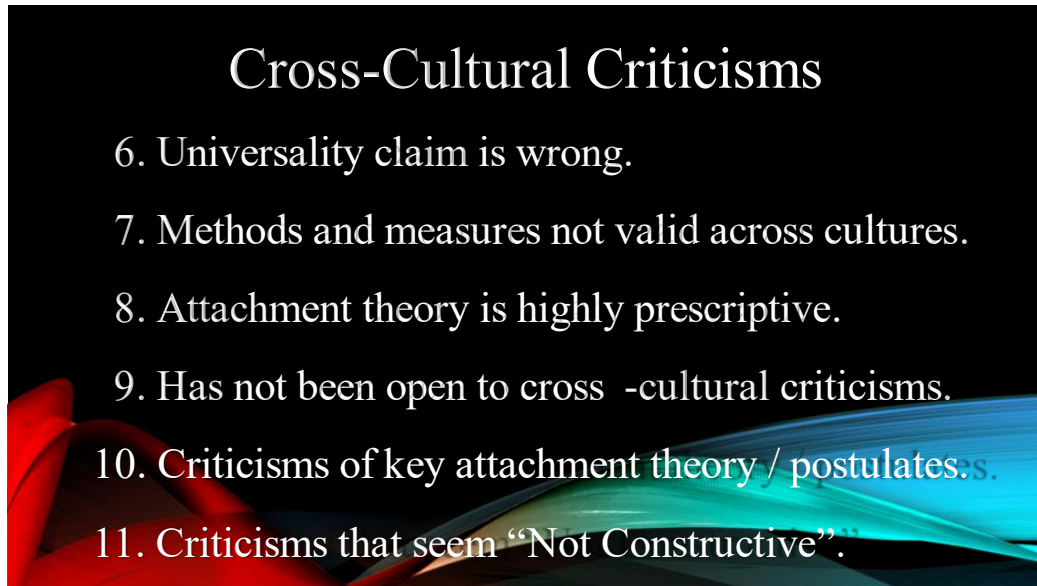
## **CATEGORY 5: Bowlby's Evolutionary Analysis Is Wrong (11 items)**

This goes to a core issue and includes several themes.

For example:

- Bowlby's ideas about attachment and protection from predators are overstated and out of date.
- It is illogical to argue that attachment is both part of our genetic endowment and yet depends on the quality of early experience.
- If secure “attachment is an “evolutionarily adaptation”, then a greater proportion of infants should be “secure”.

Here, there is room for clarification and correction on both sides.



### **CATEGORY 6 Universality Claim Is Wrong (19 items)**

Here, as in the previous category, there has been considerable misplaced controversy on both sides.

Critics argue that:

- Attachment research privileges human universals over human variation.
- They also argue that many attachment theory claims about universality simply don't comport with cross-cultural evidence.

I will comment on this issue in my Discussion.

## **CATEGORY 7: Attachment Methods And Measures Are Not Relevant To Other Cultures.**

(25 items)

This is a familiar from cross-cultural critiques in many domains.

- An interesting claim here is that cross-cultural consistency in attachment literature is an artifact of constructs and methods used.

## **CATEGORY 8: Attachment Theory Is Prescriptive With Respect To Cultures To Which It Does Not Apply. (14 items)**

For example, critics argue that:

- Attachment theory insists that the kinds of care they focus on are “ideal” (for everyone).
- Attachment theorists apply attachment theory in interventions that are not appropriate to other cultures.”  
Keller: 2021. p. 234.

## **CATEGORY 9: Attachment Theory Has Been Unresponsive To Input From Cross-Cultural Theorists And Researchers. (5 items)**

- Here, critics argue that attachment theorists have not been open to cross-cultural criticisms even when cross-cultural theorists have reached out to them.
- Descriptively, there is some truth to this. However, it takes some analysis to understand what is happening.

As the Captain famously proclaimed, in *Cool Hand Luke*, “*What we have here is a failure to communicate.*”

### **CATEGORY 10: Criticisms Specific To Attachment Theory Postulates. (Not Cross-Cultural) (27 items)**

The criticism here is that *key concepts of attachment theory are not well-defined* or that attachment is not well-structured as a scientific theory.

For example,

- There is no clear definition of “emotional bond”.
- The “prototype hypothesis” that infant-mother and adult-adult relationships are similar in kind, is not correct.
- “Felt security” concept is problematic because attachment is not the only source of feeling secure.

This is a long list (27 items) and the content is not specifically cross-cultural. Nonetheless, *charitable interpretation* often uncovers theoretical issues that are more interesting than the criticism itself.

### **CATEGORY 11: Criticisms That Seem “Not Constructive”. (7 items)**

Finally, we encountered a small number of criticisms that can only be read as “Not Constructive”.

For example:

- “Attachment researchers are more interested in confirming the theory than in testing it. They also resist changing it in the face of awkward results.
- Based on the cultural/intellectual backgrounds of Bowlby and Ainsworth, Attachment Theory is not as scientifically solid as has been claimed.
- Incorporating evolutionary theory was a (disingenuous?) effort on Bowlby’s part to lend scientific credibility to his social ideas.

As one would expect, there are few such criticisms (<5%) and we disregard them.

**Overall:**

- Even reducing 196 items to 11 categories, one is easily left with an impression of overwhelming complexity. Nonetheless, we view this part of our project as a significant contribution in itself. Categorizing the items familiarized us with their content and range and often revealed complexities that would require *Charitable Interpretation*.
- We hope it will also lead to commentary, theoretical work, and new research in an area that previously seemed forbiddingly complex.

### **Now On To The *Principle Of Charitable Interpretation*.**

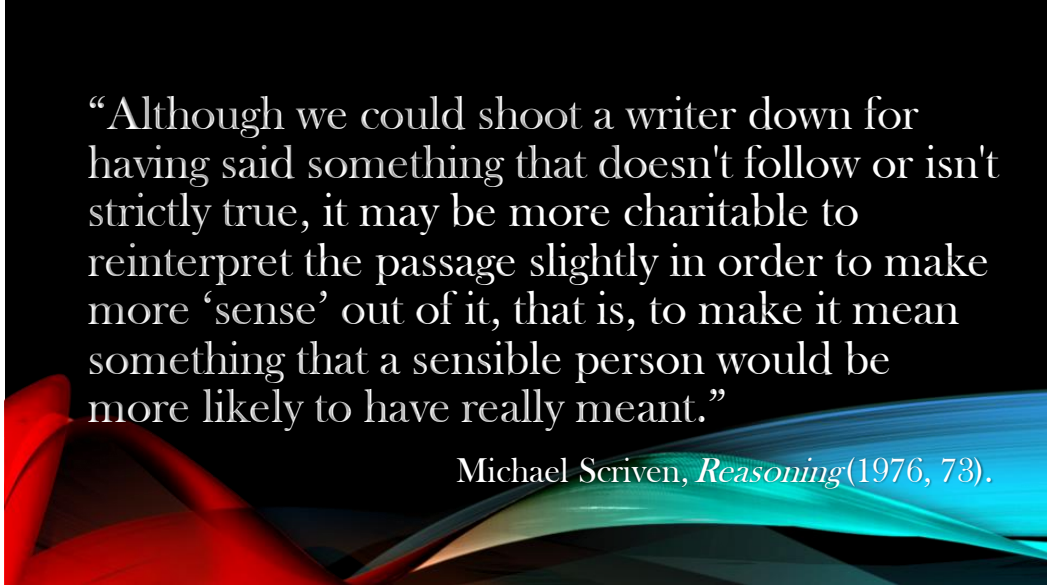
- The traditional approach to criticism among Western academics is adversarial. One seeks to exploit weaknesses in the evidence an adversary has in hand and flaws in their formulation and presentation.
- This approach overlooks the possibility that, notwithstanding the satisfaction of *winning*, there may be



more to gain gained by engaging the critic's issues and evidence *from their point of view*.

## **The Process of Charitable Interpretation**

- Philosophers and legal scholars, especially Donald Davidson, Willard Van Orman Quine, and Ronald Dworkin have formulated an alternative to the traditional thrust and parry of academic debate, widely known as the *Principle Of Charitable Interpretation*. Adopting this stance, we assume a critic is *intelligent, thoughtful, and acting in good faith*. And embrace the rabbinical observation, and hermeneutic principle, that “a person does not say things without a reason”.
- Charitable interpretation replaces competition, which easily falls into gamesmanship, with a search for *the most meaningful formulation* of the critic’s underlying concern.



“Although we could shoot a writer down for having said something that doesn't follow or isn't strictly true, it may be more charitable to reinterpret the passage slightly in order to make more ‘sense’ out of it, that is, to make it mean something that a sensible person would be more likely to have really meant.”

Michael Scriven, *Reasoning*(1976, 73).

- The spirit here is well captured in Michael's Scriven's comment that:
- *"Although we could shoot a writer down for having said something that doesn't follow or isn't strictly true, it may be more charitable to reinterpret the passage slightly in order to make more sense of it. That is to make it mean something that a sensible person would more likely have really meant."*
- Another sense of *charitable*, closer to the one Morris and I are pursuing, highlights the search for a criticism's potential or implicit meanings, as a stimulus to our own thinking.

- This parallels the familiar classroom experience of an insight or new idea popping into mind as we are lecturing on different, utterly familiar material.
- Note that we are not using the term charitable in the sense of being *cooperative* or *generous*. It is not that we have become more willing to compromise on important issues. Indeed we have not. The issue here is *comprehension*, not *compassion*.
- We have found that affording our cross-cultural critics a patient hearing often leads our own thinking in interesting and productive directions. So much so that the original criticisms actually fall away – much less interesting, and less pressing, than the newly discovered avenues.
- This has been a somewhat surprising discovery. It is clearly an important lesson for attachment theorists about missed opportunities and future prospects .

## A TEMPLATE FOR CHARITABLE INTERPRETATION

This is the concept of *Charitable Interpretation*. When it comes to implementation, it is easy to be too casual about all this. It is not as easy as it sounds.

- In granting that critics are intelligent and acting in good faith, we ask ourselves, “What would an intelligent person mean here?”, “What would they be trying to say?”. Thus, we adopt a stance of flexibility, role playing and patience as we examine potential alternative meanings, trying to understand both the critic's words and perspective.
- Donald Davidson describes this posture in his 1984 book, *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, as follows: .

## Charitable Interpretation

- Understand critic's background beliefs.
- Temporarily suspend our own beliefs.
- Place comprehension before criticism.
- Provisionally tolerate ambiguity.
- Dismiss irrelevancies .
- If possible – Interact with the critic.
- If necessary, restate to most meaning.

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After spending many hours looking into cross-cultural criticisms, Morris and I have developed a 6-step heuristic for implementing the *Principle Of Charitable Interpretation*. Where Davidson emphasizes one's analytic posture, our heuristic

formulates specific goals, each associated with a set of questions.

## A Template for Charitable Interpretation

### 1. Examining Criticisms

#### 1. **Examining Criticisms: Sources and Formulations.**

What has the critic said? Need exact/authoritative phrasing.  
Are there multiple instances/ sources/ formulations we can consult?

“The mere wording of a statement is not necessarily the complete expression of the thought.”

Gottlob Frege, *Thought* (1918).

As the logician Gottlob Frege has emphasized, *"The mere wording of a statement is not necessarily, the complete expression of the thought."* We're looking for the critic's complete thought. We want to identify their point of reference, identify assertions, issues, or content at which the criticism is aimed.

### A Template for Charitable Interpretation

1. Examining Criticisms
2. Identifying the Target of Criticism
3. Misunderstandings and Mistakes in Criticisms.
4. Best-formulating the Criticism
5. Examining Implications
6. Exploring New Directions

2. **Identifying the Target of Criticism: Assertions and Ideas Under Attack.** What is the target of the criticism? What assertion or idea do they think they are criticizing?

We want to probe for the criticisms explicit and implicit content. Is there in fact a disagreement? Why does the critic think the disagreement matters? We want to provide a most

meaningful formulation of the criticism. If when we fully appreciate the criticism, it seems reasonable, fine, but we don't stop there.

### 3. **Correcting Misunderstandings and Mistakes in**

**Criticisms.** Is the criticism based on a misunderstanding or mistake or faulty source that can be usefully clarified, or even resolved? If so, make the correction but don't stop; carry on.

Rutter(1995) "Inevitably, there have been instances in which attachment concepts have been overgeneralized or misinterpreted in a naive and simplistic fashion. That is unavoidable when presented with ideas that are intellectually provocative and so obviously relevant to public policy and clinical practice" (p. 566).

### 4. **Best-Formulating the Criticism: Finding the Core of**

**the Issue.** What is our best formulation of the criticism. (If a misunderstanding was corrected in #3, there may still be some basis for a residual criticism. I.e., correction does not necessarily end the issue.)



Is there a kernel of truth here? Is there something attachment theory can take onboard?

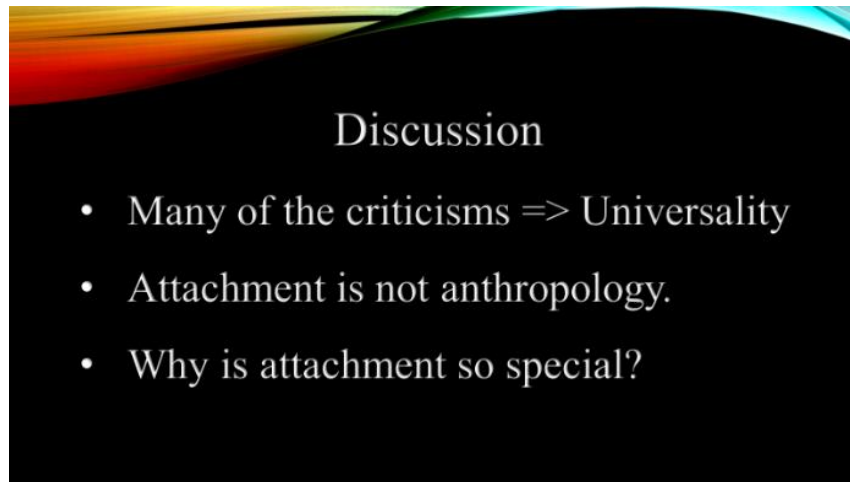
5. **Examining Implications: Intended and Actual Impact on Attachment Theory.** What are the criticism's intended and actual implications for attachment theory. Critics often think implication of their criticism is clear and devastating. In fact, criticisms rarely have the range or impact they think. If attachment theory requires some revision, fine. That is an advance, not a defeat.
  
6. **Exploring New Directions: Moving Beyond the Initial Criticism.** Now that we have a good understanding of the criticism and have contextualized/corrected it, does any interesting new content or direction, or even criticism, come to mind? This is where we might go beyond issues raised in the criticism.

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A major part of our project is to apply this heuristic to key items and to the categories I have just described. It

promises to be quite a task – and unlike Morris, I am allergic to book length presentations.

## DISCUSSION



**Item #1** Many of these criticisms I have outlined can be understood under the rubric of objections to **universality**. This is a long-standing sensitivity among anthropologists, who associate universals with genetics, and genetics with racism.

- John Bowlby clearly assumed that being a product of evolution implies a certain universality. Interestingly, quite a few of the cross-cultural critics agree. Yet it's quite mistaken. *Capacity is not expression*. All attachment theory requires is that every human infant have the *capacity* to put together a

secure base relationship along the lines, Bowlby and Ainsworth described. There's no requirement that this potential be implemented in every culture or that rates of secure attachment are high or consistent across cultures or even that every culture make the tie to primary caregivers the primary locus of socialization.

**Item #2** Sometimes critics seem to argue that attachment theory and research do not meet the standards of “*Good Anthropology*”.

- Such criticisms arise from not distinguishing between their own goals and those of developmentalists.
- Anthropologists have principled reasons for looking at the interconnectedness of the full array of cultural phenomena.
- Suzanne Gaskins (2017 p. 205-207) enumerates the kinds of interests an anthropologist interested in attachment might bring to bear in a field study:
  1. Factors influencing infant survival,

2. Ecology, subsistence/political/institutional resources, and impediments
3. Parental ethno-theories,
4. Community and household structure,
5. Social & caregiving practices, routines/consistency.

- In fact, we could be quite interested in such information. But the data they bring back is not granular enough, and not enough attuned to our methods and goals, to be useful. So they need to meet us halfway. I have talked to several of our critics. I even sent a few copies of a book on attachment measurement, asking whether they or their students would be interested in discussing measurement goals for new research. Not surprisingly, they are quite busy with current projects and they haven't the students and resources to support even consultations.
- To be clear, I do think it would be useful for developmentalists to gain a sense of the history and goals of

Anthropology. For a start, I can recommend two books by Marvin Harris:

*The rise of anthropological theory.* (1968).

*Theories of culture in post-modern* (1998).

**Item #3** Finally, why is attachment so special? Cross-cultural critics are greatly puzzled by our focus on attachment per se, seemingly to the exclusion of viewing it in the context of other facets of lifestyle such as beliefs, goals, roles, kinship, parenting – broadly construed), ecology, economics, division of labor, power relationships, structure and flow of knowledge (which are their bread and butter).

- Here, there is a short answer and a long answer.

**THE SHORT ANSWER: The answer is quite simple.**

It is because study of attachment is a framework for studying how a lot of things develop. That is, very often we're not so much studying attachment as we're studying development. Attachment is an exceptionally good arena for studying development. The behavior is accessible, it comes along at a good pace, and by now it is very well

described. In addition, it is an excellent example of affect, cognition, and behavior working together across diverse contexts.

- You can see this focus on the developmental process very clearly in Alan Sroufe's early work with me and across generations in the *Minnesota Longitudinal Study of Risk and Adaptation*. He is explicitly asking, "Where does the structure in development come from?", "How do cognition, behavior, and emotion become integrated?", "How do we recognize the precursors of later developmental outcomes in their early stages?"
- These are probably more focused issues than anthropologists usually address. And quite different from what, I suspect, they think we have been up to.

## REFLECTIONS

### Reflections

- Charity and self-interest.
- The Principle of Charity cuts both ways – Bowlby deserves a charitable reading too.
- Different paradigms but prospects for coordination.
- Relevance to reviews on other topics.

#### **Item #1 Charity and self-interest**

- Charitable interpretation holds out great benefits for attachment study.
- Understanding our critics on their own terms, as a prompt to our own new thinking, is not a concession; it is a new way of winning.

#### **Item #2 Principle of Charity cuts both ways**

- Bowlby was not a stupid man. He didn't say things without some purpose.

- He deserves a more charitable reading than he often receives.

**Item #3 Anthropology and attachment study are truly different paradigms. However there is plenty of room for coordination.**

- Cooperating on research design. What to observe.

**Item # 5 Relevance to reviews on other topics – nothing specific to attachment study here.**

- Key is finding as much converging information as possible.
- Lacking this, it may be useful to read more widely in the critic's work and references than just the specific criticism.

## **DISCUSSION TIME**

And now, Morris and I would welcome any questions or reactions.