

# Towards, Away, Against

COPING ROLE STRATEGIES AS ATTACHMENT STYLES

JUDY BROOM

## ABSTRACT

This paper draws parallels between psychodrama role theory and attachment theory. The three coping role strategies of moving towards, moving away and moving against can be understood as attachment styles, developed in the crucible of the original social atom. This view of coping roles provides a sound basis on which to choose appropriate interventions, and builds links between psychodrama and other therapeutic modalities. The material in this paper is adapted from the author's 2008 ANZPA psychodrama accreditation thesis, *Protest, Clinging and Withdrawal: Attachment Theory and the Origins of Coping Strategies*.

## KEYWORDS

attachment theory, concretisation, coping roles, doubling, internal working models, mirroring, Moreno, role, role theory, social atom repair, psychodrama

## Introduction

As a psychodrama practitioner I work to assist people to expand their role repertoires, increasing their options for functioning well in the systems in which they live. Role theory underpins psychodrama practice, and is an effective and enlivening framework. However, its clinical utility has not been widely appreciated outside the psychodrama community. It is a bottom-up approach that views the functioning person and names individual roles as they emerge. In contrast, attachment theory is a top-down perspective developed largely as a research tool, that attempts to classify people into broad categories. The identification of links between role theory and attachment theory broadens our thinking and promotes dialogue between therapeutic modalities. In this paper I draw

parallels between attachment styles and the three coping role strategies of moving towards, moving away from and moving against others. The consideration of coping roles in the light of attachment theory leads to some broad recommendations about the kinds of interventions that are likely to be useful in each case.

## About Role Theory

Moreno defined role as “the functioning form the individual assumes in the specific moment he reacts to a specific situation in which other persons or objects are involved” (Moreno, 1977:175). Roles emerge in response to the systems around us, and also in response to the models of systems within us that have been built up by experiences over a lifetime. A given role can be classified as progressive, coping or fragmenting, following the classification system first published by Lynette Clayton in 1982.

### *Progressive, Fragmenting and Coping Roles*

Progressive roles are marked by an inner sense of spontaneity, integration and wholeness. An individual operating from these roles produces an adequate response to the situation at hand, congruent with their values, with appropriate levels of emotional expressiveness and thinking. These roles are a unique expression of the individual’s functioning, as they bring their inner resources to bear on the situation with fluency and liveliness. To act progressively may at times require moving towards, away from or against others in the system, but the basis of these actions is an inner sense of coherence.

Fragmenting roles are roles in which the functioning of the individual is severely compromised and spontaneity is minimal. In these roles the individual is oriented towards reactive rather than progressive forces (Clayton, 1993). Fragmenting roles are associated with overwhelming feelings and a sense of disintegration, loss of control and distress. They are by their nature difficult to tolerate. There is a strong wish to escape from fragmenting roles, even at the cost of denial of certain aspects of an individual’s own experience or denial of the experience of others.

Coping roles sit between these two modes of functioning. These are roles that are conserved in the personality, having emerged as strategies for avoiding warming up to or for escaping from fragmenting roles. They are conserved responses to earlier experiences that felt like life and death struggles, and are mobilised in order to manage anxiety-provoking situations in the present. They have been learned in the fire and are not given up lightly.

Adapting Karen Horney’s (1945) defence system typology, Lynette Clayton (1982) classified coping roles into three types, moving towards, moving away from and moving against others. Turner (2002) describes these three coping styles as the modes of supplication, flight and fight, noting that a feature of these roles is some restriction of intellectual and emotional functioning. A single individual may enact roles from all three coping strategies, depending on the context. However, one or two strategies usually predominate in the personality. These tendencies are likely to develop early in life, in response to the individual’s original social atom. For example, one person might

react to anxiety by moving towards others from roles such as *placating peacemaker*, *coy seductive playmate* or *soothing nurse* and at other times move away, taking up roles such as *chilly distancer*, *self-sufficient mountaineer* or *lone wolf*, but seldom mobilise moving against roles such as *angry streetfighter* or *righteous critic*.

Let us hold this understanding of roles for a moment, while we consider another framework for understanding early human development.

## **Attachment Theory: An Impossibly Brief Summary**

John Bowlby, a British psychoanalyst, initiated attachment theory in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He became convinced that the relational environment of the developing human infant, and in particular the primary care-giving relationship, was critical to the development of personality and mental functioning. Drawing on studies of animal behaviour Bowlby described the Attachment Behavioural System, a biologically determined system developed over the course of evolution that promotes survival by maintaining proximity of parents and offspring (Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980, cited in Wallin, 2007). For those interested in learning more about attachment theory, I recommend Robert Karen's book 'Becoming Attached' (1998) for an excellent summary and David J. Wallin's 2007 book 'Attachment in Psychotherapy', which provides a clear outline of attachment theory and relates it to clinical practice.

## **Attachment Relationships**

The human infant is born with the capacity and the need to be an active member of an emotionally attuned dyad. This is the attachment relationship. The attuned responses of the caregiver, which Moreno called doubling, promote the healthy development of the infant. Attachment relationships are the context in which the baby develops his or her initial understandings of how relationships work, termed Internal Working Models (Wallin, 2007). These are internal maps of how self and others function in relationships, models of how the relational world works. There are obvious parallels with Moreno's (1937) concept of the original social atom.

Attachment relationships constitute a fundamental human need that is present throughout life. We humans are capable of sustaining a number of different attachments at the same time, to parents, siblings, other carers and later to friends, teachers, partners and children. Internal working models that develop early in life tend to persist nonverbally and often unconsciously, and are likely to provide a template for later attachment relationships. They are often reinforced by choices of friends and partners that recreate the original system. Significant relationships throughout life do, however, offer possibilities for updating internal working models with new relationship patterns. In psychodrama this is termed social atom repair. It is also true that both secure and insecure attachment styles can emerge throughout life in response to different relationship systems.

## *Attachment Behaviour*

Attachment behaviour is defined as a set of responses activated to elicit care, protection and emotional attentiveness from an attachment figure. It is particularly evident when a person experiences distress. For a young child, attachment behaviour includes clinging, smiling and vocalising, or protesting, calling and crying. In adults attachment behaviour becomes much more complex but may still be marked by feelings of need and longing, or protest and anger.

Broad trends are apparent in the style of attachment between caregivers and children. Four different categories of infant attachment are currently recognised: secure attachment and three categories of insecure or anxious attachment, ambivalent, avoidant and disorganised. These classifications are based largely on a laboratory procedure called The Strange Situation (Ainsworth et al., 1978). Children are exposed to a series of situations that evoke attachment behaviour, including the absence of the parent and the presence of a stranger. The child's responses are carefully observed in terms of actual behaviour and the duration and intensity of responses. It is the behaviour of the child on *reunion* with the parent that is particularly revealing of attachment style. Attachment figures can be either gender, but I use mother here to denote the primary attachment figure. The patterns of infant attachment parallel four patterns of adult attachment: secure/autonomous, preoccupied, dismissive and unresolved. These patterns are tested by self-report and by the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI) which relies on the scoring of responses during an interview by a trained interviewer. In effect, the AAI seeks to assess the roles that emerge in interviewees in response to attachment-related prompts.

Securely attached children are flexible and resilient in their responses to separation and reunion. They are rapidly reassured by their mother after a separation, and return to play readily. Their mothers function as adequate doubles, responding to their children flexibly and appropriately. These children tend to grow into secure/autonomous adults who are able to tell their attachment stories in a coherent manner, remaining in touch with affect but not overwhelmed by it. They may have had painful experiences in early life but are able to discuss these experiences in a thoughtful way, through roles such as *thoughtful recounter*, *compassionate storyteller* or *realistic analyst*.

Children with an avoidant attachment pattern show little distress on separation from their parent and appear unmoved by her return. However, while outwardly appearing calm their heart rates are as elevated as those of secure children, and cortisol levels, an indicator of stress, are significantly higher than those of secure infants (Wallin, 2007). Avoidant children have defensively accommodated to a parent who is unresponsive or rejecting. They have discovered that the overt seeking of comfort and care does not work, and have therefore learned to suppress these responses in themselves. They effectively 'turn down the volume' of their attachment system, reducing both their attachment behaviour and their experience of attachment-related feelings. The equivalent adult pattern is dismissive. These adults have not actually extinguished their need of others, but they have learned to shut feelings of dependency and need out of their awareness. Experience has taught them that bids for attachment are futile, and it is pointless to turn to others for attunement and emotional support. Relatively blind to possibilities of relationship, they are limited in

their capacity to offer attunement to others. Such an individual might pay close attention to the feelings of others and thus avoid experiencing their own feelings, or they might experience little feeling at all and function in times of stress from roles such as *pragmatic problem-solver* or *emotionally distant workaholic*.

Ambivalently attached children are preoccupied with the whereabouts of their caregiver. They are deeply distressed by separation, and are not easily settled on reunion. Some oscillate between bids for attention and connection, and rejection of the caregiver. Others appear passive, overwhelmed by their helplessness and misery, and are able to make only weak attempts to reconnect. Mothers of ambivalently attached children tend to be unpredictable and unreliable in their availability, and also seem to discourage autonomy in their children. In these children, attachment behaviour is hyper-aroused. Similarly, preoccupied adults experience attachment-related feelings as strong or overwhelming. Early attachment feelings intrude in the present. They learned from early interactions with an unpredictable, unreliable attachment figure that the best way to get their needs met was to make a strong bid for attachment. They have developed a strategy of amplifying their attachment signals, including their own experiences of the feelings associated with their needs, resulting in the development of roles such as *drama queen*, *self-deprecating pleaser* or *raging protester*.

Mary Main and Judith Solomon (1990) defined a further category of infant attachment called disorganised attachment. These infants display bizarre or contradictory behaviours on reunion with their parents, including freezing, backing towards the mother, collapsing to the floor or appearing in a trance-like state. Often these behaviours last for only 10-30 seconds, appearing in a flow of more usual behaviour which fits one of the other classifications, secure, ambivalent or avoidant. Main and Hesse (1990) proposed that disorganised behaviour results from experiences of terror in the attachment relationship. The child is caught in a situation where the person to whom they wish to flee for safety is also the person who is the source of terror. This creates an irresolvable paradox. The child is stricken with conflicting impulses to flee and to approach. The experience of fear and danger can arise not only from frightening behaviour by the parent, but also if the parent themselves is frightened. Disorganised attachment can be understood as a collapse of attachment strategies. Nothing works, no coherent strategy for seeking comfort and safety is possible, which leaves the child struggling to manage fragmenting roles.

The equivalent adult attachment category is unresolved, observed in AAI interviews as lapses in contact with present reality in response to discussions of abuse or loss. Examples include referring to someone who is dead in the present tense, or suddenly falling silent. These responses are thought to indicate unresolved trauma. The person's ability to stay present and engaged is compromised when traumatic memories and the feelings associated with them threaten to surface, and there is a discontinuity in the individual's functioning at that point. Roles such as *absent dreamer*, *blind non-thinker* or *numb disengaged robot* may emerge. Sue Daniel (2007) suggests that roles such as these constitute a fourth category of coping role, which she names frozen roles. However, they differ from the moving away, against and towards roles in that they are not, in themselves, a strategy for maintaining relationship. Frozen roles seem to represent a last ditch effort by the self to avoid fragmentation, and may be better understood as part of the fragmenting gestalt.

## Coping Role Strategies and Attachment Styles

It is clear that coping roles have their beginnings in the original social atom, that is, in early attachment relationships. Coping role strategies can be thought of as attachment styles, as attempts to maintain an essential relationship in the face of an attachment figure who is unresponsive or unreliable. While coping roles, like all roles, can be developed throughout life, a preferred overall strategy of moving towards, moving away from, or moving against others develops early in life and can be directly related to attachment classifications of infants and adults.

To draw parallels between attachment styles and coping role strategies it is necessary to align three coping strategies, moving towards, away and against, with two styles of anxious adult attachment, dismissive and preoccupied. The dismissive attachment style corresponds to a predominance of moving away roles, suggesting that moving towards and against both relate to the preoccupied attachment style. Wallin (2007) notes that preoccupied adults, like ambivalently attached infants, experience hyper-activated attachment feelings and associated behaviours that fall into two patterns, the pattern of helplessness and the pattern of anger and chaos. Moving towards corresponds with clinging in children and helplessness in adults, while moving against can be identified with protest in children and adult anger and chaos.

The relationships between role theory categories, infant attachment styles and adult attachment classifications are summarised below in Table I.

**TABLE 1: RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN INFANT AND ADULT ATTACHMENT CLASSIFICATIONS AND ROLE THEORY CATEGORIES**

<b>Infant Attachment Classification</b>	<b>Adult Attachment Interview Classification (AAI)</b>		<b>Role Theory Category</b>	
secure	secure/autonomous		progressive	
ambivalent	<i>preoccupied</i>	<i>pattern of helplessness</i>	<i>moving towards</i>	<b>coping</b>
		<i>pattern of anger and chaos</i>	<i>moving against</i>	
avoidant	<i>dismissive</i>		<i>moving away</i>	
disorganised	unresolved		fragmenting	

Originally published in Turner (2008), where the moving away and moving against categories were reversed.



## Clinical Implications and Examples

Let us now consider each of these categories in turn, with some examples from psychodramatic individual and group work.

### Moving Away: Dismissive Attachment in Action

A dismissive attachment style develops when the primary caregiver has been emotionally unavailable, that is, where there has been a significant lack of doubling. Thus the protagonist's acceptance of the double will constitute a significant step forward, and is likely to promote progressive functioning. People who have a dominant coping strategy of moving away are likely to be out of touch with their feelings and their bodies. The doubling of unacknowledged feelings, and interventions that put them in touch with their bodies, are likely to be of assistance in expanding their awareness and coaxing them into more open relationship. It is important for the psychodrama producer to be alert to cues of emerging affect, and to double these as they emerge. Significant feelings of grief and anger are often present but unacknowledged, and may need to be accepted and worked through. Thinking is often overdeveloped in people who rely on moving away strategies. For this reason mirroring should be used with caution, as it tends to take people away from affect into a more cognitive experience.

#### *David: Doubling the Unexpressed Affect*

David, a young man in his early twenties, has experienced very limited doubling as a child and has been terrified by his father's rages. In response to questions such as "How do you feel about that?" he will turn his body away, smile apologetically and with a shrug say "I don't know!" He seems unable to experience and verbalise his feelings, whilst also wishing not to antagonise me. David is functioning as a *pleasant distancer*, a moving away role.

Towards the end of one session, I comment that it must have been devastating to grow up with the constant threat of Father's unpredictable rages. David looks away and his face becomes rather expressionless. I enquire what has just happened. He looks very sad and says "It's that word, 'devastating'".

"Is that the wrong word?" I ask.

He suddenly turns, looks me straight in the eyes and says with great feeling "It's exactly the right word. And it really sucks".

At this moment of high feeling, David accepts me as a double. As a double, I express the affect that he is unable to express, and acknowledge the seriousness of his experiences. In response he is able to experience his distress without being overwhelmed. After this session David disengages less, is more in touch with his feelings and is more present with me. His functioning as a *pleasant distancer* diminishes while the progressive role of *trusting companion* expands.

## Moving Towards: Helplessness in Preoccupied Attachment

People with a dominant coping strategy of moving towards have a tendency to perceive the self as weak and others as strong. Faced with inconsistent care in their original social atom, they have learned to amplify their cry for connection in order to get their needs met. They respond to the ever-present threat of abandonment by clinging. Feelings of helplessness, pain and vulnerability are likely to be keenly experienced and openly expressed. Doubling these affects alone, however, is likely to reinforce the existing coping roles. It is more helpful to double emerging affect that arises from the other pole of attachment behaviour, such as protest, anger and moves towards autonomy. Mirroring may be a useful intervention to strengthen reflective functioning. The experience of strong attachment longing leaves little room for reflection and thought, and roles with a strong thinking component such as *realistic self-observer* and *clear-sighted systems analyst* are likely to be underdeveloped. Maximisation of the moving towards roles may be effective in an enactment, as a full expression of this functioning temporarily reduces the act hunger for these roles and makes room for new roles to emerge. It is important not to take up a counter role such as *benevolent expert*.

### Alana: Holding Up the Mirror

Alana and I are both members of a long term group. Alana experiences her own feelings so strongly that it is difficult for her to accurately perceive and respond to the feelings of others. When responding to other group members, she darts covert glances at the group leaders to make sure they are approving of her. She is engaging and playful, and often compliments others. In the group, Alana's fragmenting roles of *despairing raging child* and *terrified orphan* are evoked. She responds by moving towards group members, particularly towards the group leaders and the sociometric stars, enacting roles such as *friendly ally*, *bouncy Tigger*, *playful cutie-pie* or *warm flatterer*. I find that I often move away from her when she functions in this way. During one group session, Alana wonders if I like her.

I reply "I am ambivalent about you. I see you in the group, often so involved with your own feelings that you are unable to get with other people and that frustrates me".

Alana responds immediately and warmly. "Oh yes, I know! I am like that! I know I am".

Alana responds to the mirror by immediately moving towards me, rather than becoming thoughtful about possibilities of change. Nevertheless, interventions like this hold great potential for her. Mirroring generally tends to increase self-awareness, promoting thinking rather than feeling. With repeated experiences of mirroring while not being rejected, Alana may develop the capacity to reflect more on her experience without simply acting out of old coping strategies. If group members remain consistent in their positive attitude towards her she will gradually learn that it is safe to drop her placating, moving towards functioning. She may then become more aware of the full range of her own feelings towards others in the group, be better able to perceive the feelings of others and reverse roles with them.

This brief interaction alters the relationship between Alana and me. Alana is less apprehensive about my feelings towards her, and more aware of her own ambivalent



responses to me. I feel less frustrated with her, and more able to accept my own ambivalence without feeling I 'should' have a different response. Over time, our relationship shifts to one of mutual warmth.

## **Moving Against: Anger and Protest in Preoccupied Attachment**

Like those who habitually move towards others, people who have developed a moving against strategy have done so against a background of early unreliable and inconsistent attachment. Rather than amplification of clinging behaviour, they have learned to amplify protest. The internal working model learned in the original social atom is an image of oneself fighting for what should be given. There is a sense that the other is bad or withholding. Those with a moving against coping strategy are prone to interpret ambiguous stimuli as signs of injustice or attack and respond accordingly, enacting the old system of an angry child vigorously protesting at an unresponsive parent.

As with all coping roles, the therapist must avoid taking up the complementary role from the original system, which in this case might result in hostility, defensiveness or allowing oneself to be pushed away. Doubling the presenting affect of anger and protest is likely to reinforce the coping roles. Instead, it is essential to double the unexpressed longing for connection and tenderness. If it can be tolerated, mirroring offers a way to enlarge the view of self and relationship. Mirroring also enhances reflective functioning, which can reduce the tendency to act out of coping roles in which the feeling is disproportionately high. Maximisation of the old overdeveloped coping role may promote the emergence of new roles. If the protagonist is to fully experience the role without harm, the safety of all concerned must be an important consideration for the psychodrama producer.

### ***Lily: Doubling Underlying Sadness***

Lily is an angry young woman. Her original social atom included a charismatic but bullying father whom she alternately adored, hated, fought with and feared. In her present life she often experiences turbulent feelings of rage and hostility that result in relationship breakdowns. In one session she enacts the role of *contemptuous rager* at length, complaining bitterly about the people around her. Just as she is about to leave, she mentions that she also feels very disappointed. I seize the last moments of the session to double her disappointment and sadness, feelings that she is usually unaware of. To my surprise, I find myself telling her that her disappointment is much more attractive to me than her anger. In that moment I feel tender and gentle towards her. This has a big impact on Lily, who looks slightly stunned and quietly leaves. In the next session she expresses her great sadness about missing elements in her family, and a new, softer role of *tender griever* emerges. The impact of my continued doubling and explicit valuing of her embryonic expression of grief strengthens the role. I encourage Lily to experience and express her softer, more vulnerable feelings which have been contemptuously rejected in her original social atom.

## Conclusion

The identification of the links between attachment theory and role theory enriches both approaches. By combining the bottom-up approach of role theory with the top-down perspective of attachment theory we can understand the theoretical underpinnings of the categories of moving towards, away from, and against others in attachment terms. From this we can draw broad conclusions about the types of interventions that are likely to be effective in promoting new functioning. None of these interventions are new or surprising, but viewing the process through an attachment lens helps us to understand why they are effective. This synthesis provides a common language with which psychodramatists can confidently engage with professionals from other therapeutic modalities.

*Names and identifying details have been changed throughout this article in order to protect the privacy of the people involved.*

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Judy Broom is a psychodramatist and psychotherapist in private practice, and also works as a research scientist studying New Zealand seaweeds. This unusual combination works well, thanks in large part to great colleagues in both disciplines. She enjoys family, especially her two adult sons, travel, music, reading and photography, and has never wanted an ordinary life. She has lived and worked in Dunedin for many years and is currently looking forward to the joys and challenges of setting up home in Auckland. Judy can be contacted at [judy.broom@richtapestry.co.nz](mailto:judy.broom@richtapestry.co.nz)