With this DVD, Howard Steele illustrates the longitudinal study that he conducted together with his wife and colleague, Miriam Steele over a period of almost twenty years. During this time, Steele worked for eighteen years at the Tavistock Clinic in London where he initially received supervision from Dr John Bowlby.

According to Bowlby, attachment is an essential part of human nature throughout the life span. It is very important during early childhood and remains important later in life. During the twentieth century, Bowlby made an important contribution as a psychiatrist and psychoanalyst. He devoted his life to understanding and promoting mental health. His theory played a crucial role in assisting mothers to raise their children. He sees the origin of such health largely as the ability to rely on others when we are troubled and to be able to share joy with them. This also extends to sharing help and support with others in mutual rewarding and loving relationships later in life.

The film moves between the New York setting where the Steeles worked at the time of the making of this documentary film, and England where the longitudinal study was conducted, and where Bowlby worked and lived with his family.

• The film covers four main aspects:
  • Influences from Bowlby’s personal life on Bowlby’s work
  • Elements of Attachment Theory
  • Psychotherapy from an Attachment perspective
  • Attachment across the life cycle.
The film begins with a visit to London by Howard Steele. Here he attends a conference at the Tavistock Centre honouring the hundredth anniversary of Bowlby’s birth. Speakers Sabastian Kraemer, Peter Fonagyi, Judith Trowell, and Margaret Rustin are shown as they discuss the relevance and importance of the contribution of John Bowlby to the fields of developmental, social, and clinical psychology, as well as psychoanalysis. Steele also pays a visit to the home of Dr Bowlby’s son, Sir Richard Bowlby, where two adult children of John Bowlby relate how the early childhood attachment experiences of their father affected his interest in and development of attachment theory. It is also narrated how John Bowlby managed to break the old patterns of attachment across generations in his family by, together with his wife, initiating a new way of forming attachments with his own children.

A schema, an organised view of how human relationships work, is internalised in every individual. The basis of the schema is the attachment of an individual to a mother figure and a few other individuals during early childhood. This schema is called the Internal Working Model and has an ongoing effect on relationships throughout a person’s life. Although these models are stable once formed, Bowlby at the same time believed that new experiences could provide changes to stable Internal Working Models. Relationships as well as psychotherapy provide opportunities for transformations of these stable models in individuals.

Steele’s research followed the attachments and development of one hundred children over a period of nineteen years. Steele illustrates his narration with film footage of the behaviour of these children during a Strange Situation, a laboratory technique devised by Mary Ainsworth and her colleagues to measure the quality of attachment of a child to his/her parent (especially to the mother). Moving scenes are shown of a little boy “Harry” at the age of one, five, and twenty years of age. Harry provides an illustration of a secure attachment with his mother and other important family members. Similar scenes are shown of one-year-olds with avoidant, resistant, and disorganised attachment patterns. These scenes are quite disturbing to watch. The interaction patterns between the parent and child as well as the unresponsiveness of the parent stood out for us. Steele found in his research that about 55 percent of adults in the general population were organised, secure, and autonomous in their own relationships and could provide their children with secure attachments. About 20 percent of adults had insecure attachments and dealt with negative feelings in a dismissing manner. The children of these parents tend to cope by avoiding expressions of distress. Another 10 percent of adults displayed preoccupation with anger about the past and worry about the future. They showed high levels of personal distress. The children of these adults also showed distress and were resistant in their attachment patterns. The last group of adults, about 15 percent of the general population (and about 60 percent of the emotionally disturbed population) experienced grief over recent or past loss or trauma. Their children show a disorganised attachment pattern to the parent. The film does not make clear
how the relationship between the adult attachment styles were coupled with the child attachment styles, although the adults were interviewed regarding their own attachment styles and their childhood experiences.

Ann Murphy is introduced as a psychotherapist at the Centre of Attachment Research at the New School in New York. Throughout the film, New York therapists are shown as they work with adults and their young children, using the Adult Attachment Interview developed by Mary Main. The Steeles also used this type of interview with young parents expecting their first child, when the researcher couple started their longitudinal study nineteen years before. Young parents and prospective parents are shown as they explain their own attachment histories and it is explained how therapists can assist people to come to see themselves in new ways and as being worthy of receiving love and capable of showing love to others.

Snippets of Bowlby discussing attachment issues are shown during the course of the film. Bowlby can be heard on the topic of the power that lies in joint rather than individual therapy. He explains the task of the therapist as being twofold:

1. to examine the influence of the past upon the present; and
2. to revise and update the Internal Working Models of the adults.

Ann Murphy finds Bowlby’s five point model helpful during therapy. The therapist should:

- provide a secure base of trust from which the possibility of more positive relationships can be explored;
- help the client examine Internal Working Models and what they can expect from others in their present lives;
- examine Internal Working Models of past relationships regarding their effectiveness;
- examine how past relationships influence present functioning; and
- revise and update clients’ Internal Working Models with the hope of establishing more flexible, organised and thoughtful relationships.

No specific information is given on how the interaction of the two parents of one child can be perceived and worked with in therapy to the benefit of the attachment of their child.

Overall, this documentary film of Howard Steele provides an interesting overview of attachment theory and can indeed be used fruitfully for education purposes. The film footage of the behaviour of both children and their parents is not only touching, but it provides a very powerful illustration of attachment theory and its techniques. Although John Bowlby was psychoanalytically trained, his attachment theory relied not only on psychoanalysis, but also on research and real life experiences. Steele’s DVD illustrates the interactional styles of the adults and their children. However, in his narration, Steele focuses on the individual Internal Attachment Models of parents.
and their children. It may be interesting to conduct an interactional process analysis using the original and complete film footage accumulated during the course of the longitudinal study.

**Title:** John Bowlby: Attachment theory across generations  
**Researcher and Narrator:** Howard Steele  
**Publisher:** Davidson Films  
**Running time:** 33 minutes

**BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES**

**Tobie Muller** is currently completing her Master’s degree in Clinical Psychology at Unisa. Her interests are varied and include spiritual dimensions of psychology and therapy, family therapy, developmental psychology, as well as perspectives and experiences of parenting.

**Tshimangadzo Muhadisa** is a clinical psychologist in the Department of Defence. Her research interests include neuropsychology, HIV/AIDS, and child psychotherapy.