

# AISHE Conference 2009 Valuing Complexity: Celebrating Diverse Approaches to Teaching & Learning in Higher Education.

## The influence of the Complexity of Attachment in Adult & Higher Education Learning

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### Abstract

The attachment theory of John Bowlby has had an enduring impact on our understanding of child development. But these ideas are a neglected and forgotten discourse in the education of adults. In this paper secure and insecure attachments, internal attachment models, and the impact of attachment for adult higher education learning are explored. This paper seeks to contextualise the complexity that attachment experience adds to the teaching/learning mix and suggests how facilitators of education can interpret and respond.

## Introduction

Barry Stevens in the foreword to Violet Oaklander's book 'Windows to Our Children: A Gestalt Therapy Approach to Children and Adolescents<sup>1</sup>' writes "Some grown ups have never found themselves". Violet Oaklander says "Many of us are still doing things we did as children ... those things we needed to do to survive, to get through. We may still be doing those things although now they may be inappropriate and may greatly interfere with our living." (Oaklander, 1978, p. 299.)

How profound! Yet adult education has not had a significant conversation about the adult learner need for support, facilitation, even direction on their own attachment experience. Insights into our own attachment that would enable us to understand the influences of the complexity of attachment experience.

This paper specifically explores the implications for how adults may seek to deal with new situations, new ideas; and new challenges arising out of the influence of their own attachment experience. "Attachment between humans is a complex process" (Fahelberg, V. 2003, p.13.2). The models of attachment, experienced and learned, of adults are adopted as strategies for dealing with stress, anxiety, group interaction, and the challenges of working with people in learning environments. The paper notes the impact of our own attachment experience in our transaction/connections and our concept of lifeworld/mind-mindedness. Lastly this paper seeks to name the importance of recognising the attachment issues of adult learners in our understanding of adult education.

Firstly in this AISHE workshop let us look at some of the behavioral issues that arise from damaged attachment (Group task);

Behavioral issues - damaged attachment	Child	Adult
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Aggression</li> <li>• Anger</li> <li>• Hyper...</li> <li>• Withdrawal</li> <li>• Phobias/Fears</li> <li>• Stress</li> <li>• Trauma</li> <li>• Physical challenges</li> <li>• Insecurity</li> <li>• Loneliness</li> <li>• PSchizophrenia</li> <li>• Autism</li> <li>• Guilt</li> <li>• Self esteem issues</li> <li>• Self Image issues</li> </ul>		

(See Workshop exercise sheet following)

<sup>1</sup> Oaklander, Violet. Windows to Our Children: A Gestalt Therapy Approach to Children and Adolescents. Real People Press, 1978. ISBN 0911226168, 9780911226164

<sup>2</sup> Fahelberg, Vera. 2003. A Child's Journey through Placement. Perspectives Press, Inc. ISBN: 0-944934-11-0

**Exercise 1.**

<b>Behavioral issues - damaged attachment</b>	<b>Evident in the Child</b>	<b>Evident in the Learner/Teacher</b>
• Aggression		
• Anger		
• Hyper...		
• Withdrawal		
• Phobias/Fears		
• Stress		
• Trauma		
• Physical challenges		
• Insecurity		
• Loneliness		
• Pschitsophrenia		
• Autism		
• Guilt		
• Self esteem issues		
• Self Image issues		
• other		

Your conclusion??

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## Attachment Theory<sup>3</sup>

### Introduction

This section outlines attachment theory as proposed by John Bowlby and suggest that that part of the missing dimension in it's application is a critical investigation of the import of lived attachment experience for the adult. It may be because this attachment application has a psychoanalytical dimension that it is relatively ignored or it may be that as adults we can more effectively camouflage our behaviours arising from our attachment experience in the busyness and responsibilities of adult life.

Bowlby offers a theory that attempts to integrate biology, a psychoanalytic analysis of early childhood experiences and some aspects of socio-cultural reproduction. This section outlines Bowlby's main ideas.

### John Bowlby and Attachment Theory

John Bowlby's (1907-1991) work as a child psychiatrist with children from poor backgrounds convinced him that family life was important for their emotional development and that the separation of a young child from mother was detrimental to the child's development (Bowlby, 1951<sup>4</sup>). Bowlby (1944<sup>5</sup>), in trying to understand a) the causes of delinquency<sup>6</sup>, b) the nature of the child's ties to mother (1958<sup>7</sup>), c) the meaning of separation anxiety (1960a<sup>8</sup>) and d) the significance of grief and mourning for young children (1960b<sup>9</sup>); outlined a theory in three volumes of *Attachment & Loss* (1969; 1973; 1980<sup>10</sup>).

Bowlby saw social deprivation as detrimental to the child's psychological development. This social concern runs through his work which found that; "... early separations are recognised as inherently dangerous for children ... (but) his greatest influence is where we would wish it to be, on the social arrangements that are made for children...in hospitals, in nursery schools, in care and...at home". (Gomez, 1997, p. 53)<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The material in this section draws extensively on the work of my colleague Dr. Ted Fleming. The text located at <http://eprints.nuim.ie/1072/>. Fleming, Ted (2008) *A Secure Base for Adult Learning: Attachment Theory and Adult Education*. The Adult Learner, 35 . pp. 33-53. ISSN 978-0-906826-27-0

<sup>4</sup> Bowlby, J., (1951). Maternal health and mental health, Monograph Series No. 2. Geneva: World Health Organisation.

<sup>5</sup> Bowlby, J. (1944). Forty-four juvenile thieves: Their characters and home lives. *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 25, 19-52.

<sup>6</sup> A term widely used in 1944.

<sup>7</sup> Bowlby, J. (1958). The nature of the child's tie to his mother. *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 39, 350-373.

<sup>8</sup> Bowlby, J. (1960a). Separation anxiety. *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 41, 89-113.

<sup>9</sup> Bowlby, J. (1960b). Grief and mourning in infancy and early childhood. *The Psychoanalytic Study of the Child*, 15, 9-52.

<sup>10</sup> Bowlby, J. (1969). *Attachment and Loss Vol 1: Attachment*. Bowlby, J. (1973). *Attachment and Loss Vol 2: Separation, Anxiety and Anger*. Bowlby, J. (1980). *Attachment and Loss Vol 3: Loss, Sadness and Depression*. All from New York: Basic Books.

<sup>11</sup> Gomez, L. (1997). *An introduction to Object Relations*. London: Free Association Press.

Bowlby's attachment theory is based on a number of understandings. First, children in orphanages, who suffered from maternal deprivation, the absence of fathers and a family environment, were liable to negative cognitive and affective consequences. Second, in observing animal behaviour the developmental importance of 'imprinting' was established and this highlighted the importance of early contact between mother and infant in the animal world (Bowlby, 1969, pp. 184-190). The image of Konrad Lorenz (1952<sup>12</sup>) being followed by a line of goslings who had 'imprinted' Lorenz as their surrogate parent comes to mind. These experiments show that early contact between mother and infant has important biological functions that contribute to the enhancement of psychological and social development. Both adults and children have inbuilt biological and evolutionary-based predispositions that contribute to the survival and development of the child (Bowlby, 1979, p. 37<sup>13</sup>).

Attachment is an enduring tie with a person who provides security. Bowlby observed that the child's attachment figure provides a secure base from which the infant can safely explore his/her environment and to which they can return if he/she experiences or perceives danger. The comforting actions of the carer provide security for the infant and interactions involving play, baby talk, making close eye contact and the excitement of these engagements are the initial ventures of the child into the world (Bowlby, 1969, p. 304<sup>14</sup>).

However, this emphasis on poor family relationships is easily and incorrectly interpreted in terms of parental blame, often in relation to the mother. Feminists object that Bowlby using biology to justify what is essentially a cultural product of our own 'patriarchal but father-absent' society (Holmes, 1993, p. 47<sup>15</sup>). This division of labour fits modern society, leaving men free and women fettered. There is little doubt that Bowlby took a dim view of day-care and indeed of anything that kept a mother away from her infant. This lends fuel to the feminist critique. However, Bowlby was clear, even in early work that, "the role of a child's principal attachment-figure can be filled by others (other) than the natural mother" The view that only the natural mother could provide mothering he dismissed by saying, "no such views have been expressed by me" (1969, p. 303-304<sup>16</sup>). Later research has concluded that it need not be the mother, it could be the father, who provides a secure bases for the child. If blame for the insecurity of the child is placed on the mother, this allows society to abdicate its responsibility for its role in shaping the child and also allows fathers to be absent.

### ***Secure and Insecure Attachments***

Children intro-ject their experience of being cared for and as a result have a model of themselves as valued, have a greater sense of 'felt security' and more optimistic views of social relationships. Such children are securely attached (Bowlby, 1969, p. 339<sup>17</sup>). The secure child is happy to explore his/her environment whether or not the carer is present. This security is a result of the carer being sensitive and responsive to the needs of the child for security and sensitive/responsive to the child's signals. Insecure attachments

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12 Lorenz, K. (1952). King Solomon's ring. New York: Crowell.

13 Bowlby, J. (1979). The making and breaking of affectional bonds. London: Tavistock.

14 Bowlby, J. (1969).ibid

15 Holmes, J. (1993). John Bowlby and Attachment Theory. London: Routledge.

15 Bowlby, J. (1969).ibid

<sup>16</sup> Bowlby, J. (1969).ibid

<sup>17</sup> Bowlby, J. (1969).ibid

have been categorised as avoidant, anxious and disorganised. These attachments are defensive strategies that are the child's attempt to maintain contact with inconsistent or rejecting carers. See also Ainsworth, et al. 1978<sup>18</sup> for detailed exploration of the strange Situation

### **Internal Working Models**

Attachment operates by each child developing an internal representation of their experience of relationships and social relating, like an architect's model representing the individual's perception of the world of relationships and social interactions (Bowlby, 1969, p. 80; 1973, p. 237<sup>19</sup>). A securely attached child will have internal working models that see the world as a safe place and themselves as responsive, caring and reliable. An insecurely attached child is more likely to be cautious towards others and see themselves as less worthy of attention and love (Holmes, 1993, p. 79<sup>20</sup>).

Although internal working models can be revised in the light of experience, they are not always or easily, accessible to conscious examination and change because they are laid down unconsciously in early life (Bowlby, 1973, p. 367<sup>21</sup>).

Importantly for the purposes of this paper parents' relationships with their children are influenced by their own internal working models and, in this way, working models are transmitted across generations (Bowlby, 1969, p. 348<sup>22</sup>).

### ***Mind-mindedness***

Recent research has developed the important concept of 'mind-mindedness' to describe the ability of a parent to understand and respond not only to the infant's feelings but also to their thinking (Meins et al., 2002<sup>23</sup>). Mind-mindedness is an indicator of a relationship that is more likely to produce secure attachments. Mind-mindedness reframes Bowlby's concept of maternal sensitivity and involves the carer being "willing to change her focus of attention in response to cues from the infant" (Meins et al., 2001, p. 638<sup>24</sup>).

Through this paper I suggest that mind-mindedness may be important in enabling foster parents to be tolerant to the diversity of the range of children entering their care. I suggest that it is the case that the internal resources that carers bring to foster parenting can compromise the attachments they would like to forge with foster children.

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18 Ainsworth, M.D.S., Blehar, M.C., Waters, E. & Wall, S. (1978). Patterns of attachment. Hillsdale: Lawrence Erlbaum.

19 Bowlby, J. (1969 & 1973) *ibid*

20 Holmes, J. (1993) *ibid*

21 Bowlby, J. (1973) *ibid*

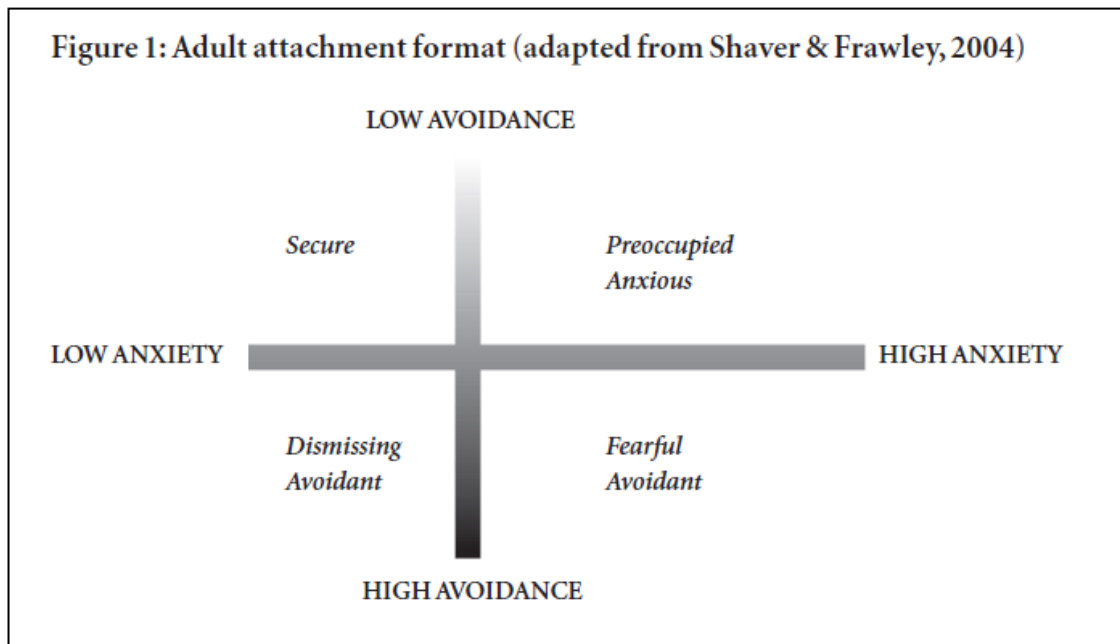
22 Bowlby, J. (1969) *ibid*

23 Meins, E., Ferynhough, C., Wainwright, R., Gupta, M.D., Fradley, E. & Tuckey, M. (2002). Mind-mindedness and attachment security as predictors of theory of mind Understanding. *Child Development*, 73(6), 1715-1726.

24 Meins, E., Ferynhough, C., Wainwright, R., Gupta, M.D., Fradley, E. & Tuckey, M. (2002). Mind-mindedness and attachment security as predictors of theory of mind Understanding. *Child Development*, 73(6), 1715-1726.

## ***Attachment Styles and Engagement***

One's attachment style plays an important role in how one reacts to the interpersonal engagements that are involved in human encounters. Engaging with foster children, adapting to their previous experiences (in or out of care) and tolerating the diversity of their behavioural and attitudinal responses is a great challenge for all foster carers. But the foster parent's or attachment style will strongly influence how each responds to this challenge. Securely attached foster parents are more likely to accept, engage with, and indeed welcome what the fostered child brings to the carer's family. But foster parents with insecure attachment styles may have increased levels of anxiety to such an extent that they may struggle to overcome that anxiety or opt out as a strategy for avoiding the challenges of such situations. See figure 1: Adult Attachment Format (Shaver, & Fraley, 2004<sup>25</sup>) for a tight dramatic representation of the challenges to the foster parent with their attachment insecurity. Low avoidance and low anxiety indicate a secure attachment and the other three possibilities are dismissing avoidant, fearful avoidant and preoccupied anxious attachments.



A note of caution is appropriate here. The claim is not being made that these extrapolations from attachment theory explain all challenges in foster parenting. Other emotional, cognitive and social issues may also contribute such as one's education (especially schooling), one's experience, social class, gender and other factors also contribute. This is an area crying out for research.

Goleman's popular work on Social Intelligence acknowledges the importance of a secure base for human relationships and devotes a chapter to attachment theory (2006, pp. 162-172<sup>26</sup>). In researching the connection between attachment and adult relationships

25 Shaver, P.R. & Fraley, R.C. (2004). Self-report measures of adult attachment. Retrieved 23 April 2008, from <http://www.psych.uiuc.edu/~rcfraley/measures/measures.html>

26 Goleman, D. (2006). Emotional intelligence: The new science of human relationships. New York: Random House.

Goleman (2006, p. 194<sup>27</sup>) found that the secure adult is confident of a partner's love and regularly turns to the partner for support, especially when upset. Secure adults have internalised 'rules' and strategies that allow them be aware of when they are distressed and when to actively seek comfort from others. They are also able to engage with emotions, neither fearing them nor avoiding them. Moreover, they are not preoccupied with them (Goleman, 2006, p. 194<sup>28</sup>).

## Implications

This paper poses that adults with secure attachments will be better able to cope with and embrace new experiences, new ideas and the learning supports offered. Insecure adults tend to be preoccupied with the anxiety brought on by new experiences.

They are more likely to be overwhelmed with feelings, they are more likely to be disoriented and unable to avail of support from colleagues or support workers. Anxious adults are likely to worry and tend to be unable to turn off the worry.

Secure individuals are optimistic about coping with stress, likely to relate better to others, have greater capacity for concentration and cooperation and are more confident and resilient. They can express emotions openly and appropriately, acknowledge and control the physiological signs of anger (Belsky, 2002<sup>29</sup>). Secure individuals appraise stressful situations as less threatening than do those who are less secure (Belsky, 2002, p. 167<sup>30</sup>). They are optimistic about their ability to cope and are more likely to seek support as a strategy for regulating their feelings. They are more open to compromise in resolving conflict and openly discuss problems. Secure adults integrate cognitive and emotional responses and are not dominated by one or the other. However, insecure attachment experience produce a defensive focus on avoiding negative outcomes.

In sum, research in this area by Eliot and Reis (2003<sup>31</sup>) supports the general view that secure attachments in adulthood assists in achieving one's goals and insecure attachments interfere with exploration and achieving one's goals by evoking avoidance or anxiety.

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<sup>27</sup> Goleman, D. (2006) *ibid*

<sup>28</sup> Goleman, D. (2006) *ibid*

<sup>29</sup> Belsky, J. (2002). Developmental origins of attachment styles. *Attachment and Human Development*, 4(2), 166-170.

<sup>30</sup> Belsky, J. (2002). *ibid*

<sup>31</sup> Eliot, A.J. and Reis, H.T. (2003). Attachment and exploration in adulthood. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 85(2), 317-331.



## Section 5: Mezirow's Transformative Learning

Professor Jack Mezirow's work alerts us to one of the most significant kinds of life learning. He describes it as transformative learning. The theory of transformative learning states that the most significant adult learning involves becoming aware of the ways in which unquestioned assumptions that act as taken-for-granted beliefs constrain and distort the ways in which we make sense of the world. Frequently, he notes, these assumptions originate in childhood experiences. These unquestioned assumptions and frames of reference have two dimensions. One involves habits of expectation (meaning perspectives) that serve as filters or codes to shape, constrain or on occasion distort our meaning making. The other involves our points of view (meaning scheme) or individual beliefs, judgments, attitudes, etc (Mezirow, 2007, p. 1132). Attachment styles and internal working models are good examples of psychological filters or codes that continue to influence ways of feeling and acting in adulthood. These internal working models are an example of the frames of reference described by Mezirow (2007, p.11). A transformed frame of reference is "more inclusive, differentiating, more open to alternative perspectives and more integrative of experience" (Mezirow, 2007, p. 11).

Attachment styles and internal working models get transformed gets transformed in transformative learning and the understanding of transformation theory can be expanded and enhanced in a number of ways. According to Mezirow, the process of transforming a frame of reference commences with a disorienting dilemma and concludes with a reintegration into community with a new set of assumptions. This is suggestive of a process of altering or transforming one's attachment style and internal working models. Mezirow's disorienting dilemma is reminiscent of the strange situation (Ainsworth). They have in common an experience that what was taken for granted does not hold anymore.

By inference, we can further enhance our understanding of transformative learning by proposing that if one has transformed one's frames of reference it is suggested that a better frame of reference, using Mezirow's language, involves the move in one's attachment style towards a style that is more secure or less anxious and less avoidant. This also gives a useful way of framing the by now familiar comment that involvement in adult education enhanced one's self-confidence. It ought to also enhance one's attachment style making one more secure to engage with new situations, new learnings and relationships.

One's attachment style and more importantly one's internal working models are, as previously suggested, psychological dimensions of meaning schemes. In transformation theory it is these meaning schemes or frames of reference that get transformed (Mezirow, 2007). The internal working models are exactly what Mezirow means by psychological filters or codes "that shape and delimit and often distort our experience" (Mezirow, 2007, p. 1133). It is implied in these explorations that we can associate the process of transformation with the development of new internal working models. It is also consistent with attachment theory to see the creation of perplexity as a prompt for transformative learning. In addition, we come to understand how a changed internal working

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32 Mezirow, J. (2007). Adult education and empowerment for individual and community development. In B. Connolly, T. Fleming, A. Ryan & D. McCormack (Eds.), *Radical learning for liberation 2*. Maynooth: MACE.

33 Mezirow, J. (2007). *ibid*.

model may be an improvement on a previous one. We know it is better if it meets Mezirow's criteria that it be more inclusive, more discriminating and more open to future change. This may also be a good set of criteria for judging a 'better' internal working model. It is at least a real possibility that development and growth are best supported by more secure attachment styles.

As one's attachment style informs one's way of relating to others it is suggested here that a significant kind of adult learning involves the developmental task of moving toward more secure attachments. Human development is being redefined here as the transformation of attachment styles and internal working models. Bowlby (1973, p. 368; 1988, p. 126<sup>34</sup>) did envisage attachment as a lifelong learning project.

The work of Daloz on mentoring is positive about the possibilities offered by mentoring and he is also aware that some may not be easily supported. For example, the aptly titled article 'Gladys who refused to grow' (Daloz, 1988<sup>35</sup>) shows that every learner may not be in a position to avail of the mentor's support. In any classroom of adults or in a mentoring situation it is useful to understand that one's attachment style enhances or hinders, frees or constrains one to learn and engage with the opportunities provided.

Our ability to 'go it alone' or be a self-directed learner may also be influenced by our attachment style as a preference for a particular way of learning is likely to be consistent with one's attachment style.

## **Section 6: Conclusion**

So attachment Transactional analysis, phenomenology and lifework are relevant. All seek the most development in holist way. "many foster parents ... are very committed to providing the foster children in their care with a family experience similar to the way they provided their children ... (but) ... results are not always the same" (Hughes. 2004, p.4036)

Mind-mindedness for adults too is what is being proposed. The reflexive practice model using experiential practice is a learning opportunity available to foster parents and cares. Building on exercises like life storybook and therapeutic practices for carers (as proposed in Oaklander, 1988, it offers highly valuable insights on the longer term fostering and caring process related to lifelong, learning, and pheomology.

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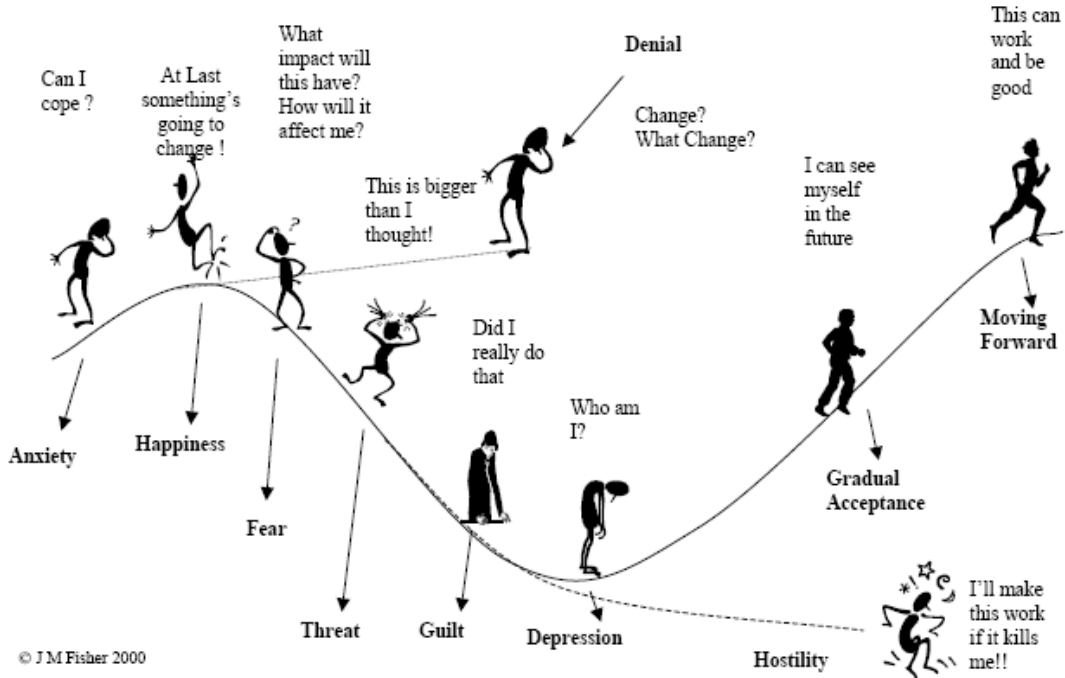
<sup>34</sup> ibid

<sup>35</sup> Daloz, L. (1988). The story of Gladys who refused to grow: A morality tale for mentors. *Lifelong Learning: An Omnibus of Practice and Research*, 11(4), 4-7.

<sup>36</sup> Hughes Daniel, *Building the Bonds of Attachment*", 2004

Exercise

### The Process of Transition



(Source <http://humanourb.tripod.com/sitebuildercontent/sitebuilderpictures/transition.jpg>)

How can you relate this to Adult Learners:

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