Northumbria University NEWCASTLE

Apr 30, 2014 00:00 BST

Focus on child development

A Northumbria University researcher will investigate childhood attachment in a study that could influence the decisions being made in child care proceedings or custody battles.

Dr Robbie Duschinsky, a Reader in Psychology and Society, has secured a £370,000 Medical Humanities New Investigator Award from the Wellcome Trust to investigate the different theories and concepts surrounding 'disorganised attachment' – a term used to describe an infant's contradictory behaviour when reunited with their carer, suggesting a disruption in the child-parent relationship.

The four-year project will look at the way disorganised attachment is understood by psychologists as well as social workers and other childcare professionals who are responsible for assessing children for custody battles or care proceedings.

One explanation for disorganised attachment is that it occurs when an infant is afraid of their own caregiver. On the basis of this account, when an infant is believed to show disorganised attachment it can lead to intense scrutiny of the parents or primary caregivers from social workers, doctors and other child specialists.

However, there are wide debates between psychologists about what causes disorganised attachment. Some researchers have found that these behaviours can show up in otherwise well-treated infants if the parent has unresolved grief from a bereavement, suffers with an anxiety disorder, or is dealing with social and economic difficulties.

Other psychologists have argued that disorganised attachment can be caused purely by extended separation from a caregiver – which might occur when a family is under scrutiny by social services.

These debates have led to some confusion in what 'disorganised attachment' means to social workers and people who work with young children, and could have serious implications in assessments made by childcare professionals.

Deeper understanding is also important because psychologists have found that disorganised attachment in infancy predicts dissociative symptoms or suicidal thoughts in adulthood.

By clearing up the terms used by psychologists, Dr Duschinsky's research will be an important step towards improving the understanding of this area of child development and mental health.

It will help psychologists to produce better research and provide clearer guidance for making mental health assessments to the professionals who work directly with infants and parents.

"Infants are evolutionarily hardwired to go to someone – usually their primary care giver – who can look after them if they are hurt or in a situation

causing anxiety," said Dr Duschinsky. "This tendency can be disrupted and may show up as 'disorganised' behaviours but this doesn't necessarily point to neglect on the parent's part.

"Clarifying the terms of debate around disorganised attachment will help maximise the benefits of psychology for professionals and parents on matters that we care a great deal about. This research has potential to stimulate the uptake of child mental health research in policy and practice, support the education of young people, and potentially inform the parenting practice of the general public."

Once complete, Dr Duschinsky's research will be presented at an international conference bringing together researchers from the US, UK, and Europe. It will be publicised through public lectures and a blog linked to the research project.

Northumbria is a research-rich, business-focussed, professional university with a global reputation for academic excellence. To find out more about our courses go towww.northumbria.ac.uk

If you have a media enquiry please contact our Media and Communications team at media.communications@northumbria.ac.uk or call 0191 227 4571.

Contacts

Rik Kendall
Press Contact
PR and Media Manager
Business and Law / Arts, Design & Social Sciences
rik.kendall@northumbria.ac.uk
07923 382339

Andrea Slowey
Press Contact
PR and Media Manager
Engineering and Environment / Health and Life Sciences
andrea.slowey@northumbria.ac.uk
07708 509436

James Fox
Press Contact
Student Communications Manager
james2.fox@northumbria.ac.uk

Kelly Elliott
Press Contact
PR and Media Officer
kelly2.elliott@northumbria.ac.uk

Rachael Barwick
Press Contact
PR and Media Manager
rachael.barwick@northumbria.ac.uk
07377422415

Ruth Lognonne
Press Contact
PR and Media Officer
ruth.lognonne@northumbria.ac.uk
07971274253

Gemma Brown
Press Contact
PR and Media Officer
gemma6.brown@northumbria.ac.uk