

<b>Institution:</b> University of Cambridge		
<b>Unit of Assessment:</b> UoA 21		
<b>Title of case study:</b> Shaping appraisal of the implications of infant disorganised attachment		
<b>Period when the underpinning research was undertaken:</b> 2012-2020		
<b>Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:</b>		
<b>Name(s):</b>	<b>Role(s) (e.g. job title):</b>	<b>Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:</b>
Dr Robbie Duschinsky	University Senior Lecturer in Social Sciences	01.10.2015-present
<b>Period when the claimed impact occurred:</b> 2017-present		
<b>Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014?</b> No		
<p><b>1. Summary of the impact</b> (indicative maximum 100 words)</p> <p>Robbie Duschinsky initiated and led a research programme from October 2015 at the Department of Sociology, University of Cambridge that explored an influential assessment of infant and toddler mental health: the disorganised attachment classification. Funded by the Wellcome Trust, Duschinsky's research has explored the limitations of this assessment and highlighted how its misuse can have profound impact on children and their families. By convening a series of interdisciplinary collaborations with social workers, clinicians, researchers and professional bodies, Duschinsky has helped to transform understanding of this assessment, with direct impacts on international and national clinical guidelines and guidance, international guidance for family court practice, and public outreach. His work has influenced thinking and practice in England, the USA, Sweden, and Canada.</p>		
<p><b>2. Underpinning research</b> (indicative maximum 500 words)</p> <p>Disorganised attachment is an assessment of infant and toddler mental health, based on observations in a standardised laboratory procedure of fearful, confused or conflicted behaviour shown by young children towards their caregivers during reunions. In community samples in England and internationally around 15% of children receive this classification. In samples drawn from populations known to social services, prevalence increases to around 66%. Based on published descriptions of the classification, Shemmings and colleagues (2014) trained over 5,000 English social workers to use disorganised attachment in assessing children for maltreatment in naturalistic settings, to inform decisions about whether children were safe, what interventions they needed, and whether child removal was necessary. The National Institute for Health &amp; Care Excellence (NICE) Guidelines on Child Attachment (2015) have emphasised the long-term risks associated with disorganised attachment, including longitudinal associations with later conduct problems. In 2015 they conducted a cost feasibility assessment for yearly screenings of all English infants for disorganised attachment.</p> <p>The present research was undertaken between 2012 and 2020, with Duschinsky as principal investigator (Northumbria 2012-15; Cambridge 2015-present). Duschinsky set out to examine the emergence of the disorganised attachment classification, its meaning, and its implications for clinical and child welfare practice.</p> <p>The research utilised five methods: archival research, oral histories with developmental psychologists, focus groups with clinicians and social workers, ethnographic observation of training courses for coding the classification, and collaboration with developmental scientists in conducting secondary analyses of existing data. This research has revealed significant discrepancies between the goals of the developmental psychologists who introduced the disorganised attachment classification and the way that the classification has subsequently been widely understood – for instance whether infants showing disorganised attachment are necessarily afraid of their parent(s). This led to collaborations with the original authors of the classification, Main and Solomon, to further specify and clarify the concept of disorganised attachment [R1, 2017], [R2, 2018].</p>		

Focus group research with clinicians and social workers helped Duschinsky and colleagues understand the hopes that had been invested in the classification as an indicator of maltreatment. Yet these hopes appeared to be false. Archival work found that Main and Solomon's own research suggested that disorganised infant attachment behaviours seen in naturalistic settings such as the home do not have the same meaning as the same behaviours seen in the laboratory. Social work assessments of disorganised attachment at home as an indicator of child maltreatment were likely contributing to both false positives and false negatives in these high-stakes matters [R3, 2018], [R4, 2020].

Furthermore, ethnographic observation of training courses in 2015 and 2017 revealed that published discussions of the classification differed from how the disorganised classification was actually operationalised and coded by researchers [R5, 2018]. This meant that social workers and clinicians working only from published descriptions of the classification would actually not be making assessments that resembled those in the research literature. The findings of Duschinsky and colleagues were circulated to trainers, who have implemented changes to improve the transparency of the training delivered to researchers and practitioners learning to code disorganised attachment.

The impact on clinical and court assessment described here is the result of Duschinsky mobilising international academic colleagues in a range of disciplines to work together on the practical implications of this clinical assessment. In addition to practical impact on guidelines for practice, the work has led to further research collaborations, including interdisciplinary clinical research. Duschinsky and colleagues' study of the concept of disorganised attachment has informed and led to co-authorship of research on how clinicians should distinguish disorganised attachment and autism [R2, 2018]. He has been included in international consortia of developmental scientists, where his sociological and historical knowledge is drawn upon to inform future research. For instance, Duschinsky has contributed to agenda-setting work for the use of big data for the study of attachment [R6, 2020].

Duschinsky and colleagues are also working to help bridge the research-practice divide around disorganised attachment. They are presently conducting three empirical projects responding to the needs of clinicians and welfare practitioners for knowledge around infant attachment:

1. A mixed-methods study using routine health records of 400,000 patients from South London and Maudsley NHS Foundation Trust to examine the role of attachment assessments and concepts in child and adolescent mental health cases. This work has been further supported recently by a Wellcome Trust Collaborative Award of GBP1,500,000 running 2020-2025.
2. Secondary analysis of data from a Dutch cohort study (around 800 families) to explore which parts of disorganised attachment predict later risk, to further specify the clinical relevance of the classification.
3. An Individual Participant Data meta-analysis, with raw data from 22 randomised control trials of attachment-based interventions that have altered rates of disorganised attachment, to explore the processes and contexts relevant to changes in infant attachment.

As the next section will describe, Duschinsky's highly collaborative way of working facilitated knowledge exchange and opportunities for impact that ran closely alongside the research process.

### 3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

**R1:** Duschinsky, R. & Solomon, J. (2017). Infant disorganized attachment: Clarifying levels of analysis. *Clinical Child Psychology & Psychiatry*, 22(4), 524-538. [\[DOI\]](#)

**R2:** Rozga, A., Hesse, E., Main, M., Duschinsky, R., Beckwith, L., & Sigman, M. (2018). A short-term longitudinal study of correlates and sequelae of attachment security in autism. *Attachment & Human Development*, 20(2), 160-180. [\[DOI\]](#)

**R3:** Duschinsky, R. (2018). Disorganisation, fear and attachment. *Infant Mental Health Journal*, 39(1), 17-29. [\[DOI\]](#)

**R4:** Duschinsky, R. (2020). *Cornerstones of attachment research*. Oxford University Press. [\[Link\]](#)

**R5:** Reijman, S., Foster, S., & Duschinsky, R. (2018). The infant disorganised attachment classification: "Patterning within the disturbance of coherence". *Social Science & Medicine*, 200, 52-58. [\[DOI\]](#)

**R6:** Verhage, M. L., Schuengel, C., Duschinsky, R., van IJzendoorn, M. H., Fearon, R. P., Madigan, S., ... & Collaboration on Attachment Transmission Synthesis. (2020). The Collaboration on Attachment Transmission Synthesis (CATS): A move to the level of individual-participant-data meta-analysis. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 29(2), 199-206. [\[DOI\]](#)

This research has been published in peer-reviewed and reputable publications and therefore meets the 2\* minimum REF requirement. This research has been supported by six grants (five won competitively; three of those from Wellcome) worth a total of GBP1,931,753.

#### 4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

The accumulated knowledge generated by the research by Duschinsky and colleagues at the University of Cambridge has resulted in four areas of impact: national clinical guidelines; international clinical guidance; international guidance for family court practice; and public outreach.

##### Contributing to National Clinical Guidelines

In 2015, the National Collaborating Centre for Mental Health released the NICE-commissioned *Clinical guidelines for attachment in children and young people who are adopted from care, in care or at high risk of going into care* draft for consultation. The draft guidelines included a proposal suggesting that children suspected of experiencing maltreatment should be screened by clinicians using assessment for disorganised attachment. However, research by Duschinsky and colleagues had indicated that such guidelines would likely misdirect clinicians and social workers. Working with an international group of collaborators from the University of California, Berkeley and the Harvard Medical School, as well as former colleagues from Northumbria, Duschinsky led a response to the draft guidelines from Cambridge. The response addressed the characterisation of disorganised attachment at theoretical and observational levels, updated the use of empirical research on antecedents to disorganised attachment, and made proposals for the more appropriate use of attachment assessments in cases of suspected maltreatment.

As a consequence (and thanking Duschinsky for the consultation feedback), the Guideline Committee substantially amended the account of the nature of disorganised attachment, of relevant assessment measures, and of the available evidence. "[Duschinsky's] intervention ... was instrumental in steering the guideline ... and is now firmly written into the published document. That guideline has been in place now since 2015 and ... has substantially changed the way services are supporting some of the most vulnerable children in society in the UK" **[E1, member of the NICE Guideline Development Group for Children's Attachment]**. Based on the response of Duschinsky and colleagues, the guidelines now state: "Neither the behaviour described by the Main and Solomon indices, nor a classification of disorganised attachment in the SSP [Strange Situation Procedure], can be used in any valid way to assess a child for maltreatment. Although correlated with it, maltreatment cannot be inferred from infant

disorganised attachment” [E2, pp. 18-19]. The proposal for yearly screenings of all English infants for disorganised attachment was not pursued further.

Duschinsky and colleagues have subsequently supplemented the NICE guidelines with written guidance for General Practitioner trainees, published and circulated by the Royal College of General Practitioners clarifying the implications for this group of clinicians, since this was unclear in the NICE guidelines. [E3, 2019]

#### Developing International Clinical Guidelines

Duschinsky and colleagues were keen to find effective means of communicating to practitioners what researchers know and do not know about disorganised attachment, and how attachment theory might best be put to practical use with children’s best interests in mind. This was a time-critical exercise in order to prevent the accumulation of cases where attachment theory and measures were misused. Duschinsky’s impact on developments at the research-practice interface in this area have been described as unparalleled: “Dr. Duschinsky has had a transformative influence on how I have come to work as an academic. More importantly, without his influence, the attachment research community had probably continued to be unable to re-steer the practical applications of attachment theory in a direction that actually helps children and their families. It is both humbling and inspiring to see how one person, junior in age but senior in wisdom, can have such tremendous, rapid impact on how an entire research-practice field develops” [E4, Professor of Psychology, University of Stockholm].

In 2017, together with the originators of the classification, Duschinsky organised a meeting at UC Berkeley that drew together 32 of the major scholars and clinician-researchers in the field from Canada, Germany, Netherlands, Sweden, UK, and US to discuss disorganised attachment and its practical implications. From this meeting came an international Consensus Statement on the Clinical and Social Welfare Implications of Disorganised Attachment, with more than forty co-authors. This was published with Duschinsky as lead author [E5, 2017]. The statement is listed as the “most read” article in the journal’s 20-year history, with ca. 28,000 views (to mid-December 2020) [E5].

The Consensus Statement has been described as a “historic publication” and has led to intense discussion about whether or how assessments of disorganised attachment should be used in the family courts [E6].

#### Developing International Guidance for Family Court Practice

In July 2019, Duschinsky organised a symposium at the International Attachment Conference in Vancouver on the use of attachment theory and assessments in the family courts. Speakers included senior clinician-researchers and researchers from England, the US, the Netherlands, Israel and Sweden. Out of this has come a second international Consensus Statement on the use of attachment theory, research and assessments in court practice, developed by over sixty co-authors from around the world between July 2019 and July 2020. This has been published in *Attachment & Human Development*, with Duschinsky as lead author [E7].

#### Public Outreach

Throughout their research, Duschinsky and colleagues have engaged in public outreach. One strand has been engagement with social work professionals, clinical practitioners, foster carers, teachers and other members of the public interested in parenting and child development [E4], [E8, Head of Policy and Research, British Association of Social Workers]. Led with Sarah Foster (Northumbria 2014-present), the group have run 30 seminars to date, with an average attendance of 24 participants; and eight public lectures, with an average attendance of 120 attendees. One of the most prominent practitioner-researchers previously advocating for the use of disorganised attachment for screening for child

maltreatment has now publicly retracted these claims, citing the work of Duschinsky and colleagues [E9].

Another strand of activity has been outreach to a wider public. Duschinsky and colleagues have released an infographic [E9] on the contribution of socio-economic deprivation to disorganised attachment, which reduces its viability in screening for maltreatment. They have also established a YouTube channel featuring interviews with attachment researchers about the clinical implications of attachment research. The headline film on the clinical implications of disorganised attachment has received over 18,200 views, February 2017-December 2020 [E10]. Duschinsky's book *Cornerstones of Attachment Research*, published open access by Oxford University Press, draws together the underpinning research discussed in this case study and was written for a crossover general audience as well as for researchers. It has been downloaded over 157,000 times in its first seven weeks since publication [E11].

## 5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

**E1:** Testimonial: Chair in Developmental Psychopathology, Clinical, Educational & Health Psychology, Division of Psychology & Language Sciences, University College London

**E2:** National Institute for Health and Care Excellence. (2015). *Children's attachment: Attachment in children and young people who are adopted from care, in care or at high risk of going into care*, Para. 2.3.1.1.4, pp. 18-19. (NICE Guideline 26). Final draft.

**E3:** Attachment and Human Development: Turner, M., Beckwith, H., Duschinsky, R. et al. (2019). Attachment difficulties and disorders. *InnovAiT: Education and Inspiration for General Practice*, 12(4), 173-179. [\[DOI\]](#)

**E4:** Testimonial: Professor Pehr Granqvist, Department of Psychology, Stockholm University.

**E5i:** Attachment and Human Development: Granqvist, P. ... [40 authors] & Duschinsky, R. (2017). Disorganized attachment in infancy: A review of the phenomenon and its implications for clinicians and policy-makers, 19(6), 534-558. [\[DOI\]](#)

**ii:** Most read articles from *Attachment & Human Development* [\[Link\]](#)

**E6:** Spieker, S., & Crittenden, P. M. (2018). Can attachment inform decision-making in child protection and forensic settings? *Infant Mental Health Journal*, 39(6), 625-641. [\[DOI\]](#)

**E7:** Forslund, T..... [60 authors] & Duschinsky, R. (2021). Attachment goes to court: child protection and custody issues. *Attachment & Human Development*. [\[DOI\]](#)

**E8:** Testimonial: Head of Policy and Research, British Association of Social Workers

**E9i:** Wilkins, D. (2020). Disorganised attachment does not indicate child maltreatment. *Journal of Social Work Practice*, Early view. [\[DOI\]](#)

**ii:** Blog post: Primary Care Unit, University of Cambridge. (11 October 2017). *Experts express concerns over infant mental health assessment*. [\[Link\]](#)

**E10:** YouTube video: Infant disorganised attachment: The key questions. (Minutes 15-17) [\[Link\]](#)

**E11:** Oxford University Press sales and download figures. Permission given to cite these figures by Martin Baum, Senior Commissioning Editor, *Psychology & Neuroscience*.