

# **A qualitative analysis of John Bowlby's final interview on attachment theory.**

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## **Summary**

John Bowlby gave his final interview on attachment theory over twenty five years ago to psychoanalyst Virginia Hunter, just a few months before his death. A qualitative analysis, specifically an inductive thematic analysis, has been applied to Bowlby's last interview so as to gain some insight in a systematic and rigorous manner as to what the main issues in attachment theory were for Bowlby at that stage of his life and career. A main theme 'Real Life Events' emerged, comprised of three subthemes 'Dismissal,' 'Recognition,' and 'Supporting Patients;' each of these findings are discussed in turn. Although attachment theory has developed enormously over the past twenty five years since Bowlby's death, his main concern on the significance of real life events remains salient; Bowlby's legacy continues to live on strongly.

## **Key Words**

John Bowlby, attachment theory, real life events, psychoanalysis, thematic analysis, interview

## **Introduction**

Over twenty five years ago, psychoanalyst Virginia Hunter (Hunter, 1994) interviewed John Bowlby at the Tavistock Institute and Clinic in London, 15<sup>th</sup> February, 1990, eleven days before his eighty-third birthday. This was to be the final interview Bowlby gave before his

death on 2<sup>nd</sup> September, 1990. The focus of this paper is a qualitative analysis carried out on Bowlby's last interview, so that it may provide some insight, in a systematic and rigorous manner, into what the main issues in attachment theory were for Bowlby at this stage of his life and career.

## **Method**

Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) seeks provide a rich description of the data through the identification of patterns. This method of analysis was applied to the interview transcript. The thematic analysis undertaken was underpinned by a social constructionist approach, which understands that the social world is constructed by social processes and relational practices (Young & Collin, 2004), and that meaning and experience are socially formulated through talk and interaction (Burr, 1995). Despite my familiarity with John Bowlby's work, an inductive approach was employed so as to code the data in avoidance with any of my preconceptions, and so as to not to make it fit into a pre-existing coding frame (Braun and Clarke, 2006), such as the key principles of attachment theory. It was important to allow the patterns to emerge from the data, and therefore to give space for the key issues Bowlby raised in his final interview to emerge. Due to my in-progress-doctoral studies exploring couple relationships and their attachment behaviours across the real life event of second-time parenthood, I am currently immersed in attachment theory, and so it was important for me to be reflexive about my particular positionality in relation to this interview. In line with the inductive approach to thematic analysis applied, the specific research question evolved through the coding process, to ask: 'What were the key issues for John Bowlby in his final interview on his work on attachment theory?'

## **Findings**

One of the main concepts of John Bowlby’s work on attachment theory is that of real life events and their significance on a person’s life. During his final interview about his work on attachment theory with Virginia Hunter, real life events emerge as a main theme. Bowlby advocates for the “importance of real life events” and says “I was plugging real life events” and “their adverse influence.” This main theme is comprised of three subthemes: ‘Dismissal,’ ‘Recognition,’ and ‘Supporting Patients.’ Each of these subthemes are discussed in turn.

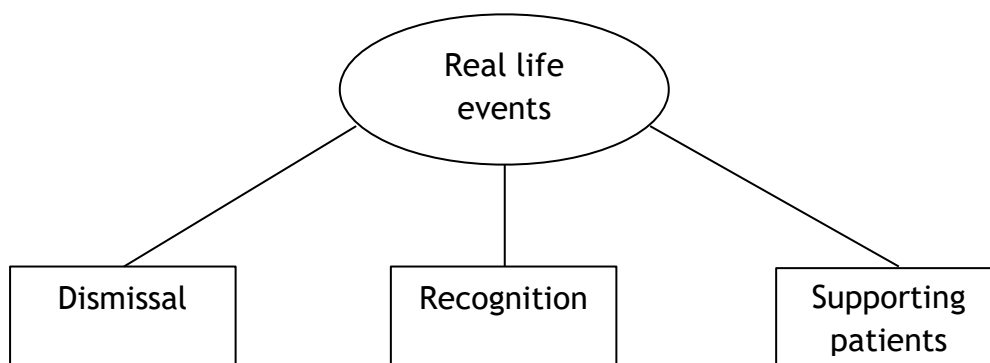


Figure 1: Thematic map showing the main theme ‘Real life events’ and its three subthemes.

Subtheme: Dismissal

Bowlby had an extremely hard time in convincing others about his theory of the significance of real life events in a person’s life. Contextually, this was during an era where conventional psychoanalytic concepts, such as the importance of the role of fantasy, were privileged. This can clearly be seen when Bowlby says “there’s been a very strong tradition in psychoanalysis to emphasise fantasy and to underplay the importance of real life events.” This posed an immense obstacle for Bowlby in persuading others about what he deems to be a crucial concept of attachment theory. His emphasis on the word *underplay* is revealing of the extent of his perception of psychoanalysis’ rejection of the role that real life events play. Bowlby divulges “I was told in no uncertain terms that... it was not an analyst’s job to play attention to real life

*events. As explicit as that.*” Although Bowlby doesn’t state who said this to him, we can make a safe supposition that this likely stemmed from a psychoanalyst who believed without a doubt in the role of fantasy and dismissed the notion of real life events, and confidently conveyed this to Bowlby. Bowlby pauses before he tells us what he was told, and finishes it off by telling us that it was that explicit, indicative of the unyielding authority that psychoanalysis presumed to hold. The manner in which Bowlby says this suggests his incredulity towards this belief and the absolute manner in which this belief was expressed to him. From the psychoanalytic perspective, there was no room for the consideration of the significance of real life events. In considering the positionalities of those engaged with this dialogue, it appears as though other psychoanalysts located themselves in a position of expertise and unswerving knowledge, serving to both dismiss Bowlby’s ideas and position him as being less knowledgeable in this field, thereby questioning his credibility. Considering that the significance of real life events was a central concept of attachment theory and that dismissal of this notion is a theme of his final interview, Bowlby seems to have been strongly affected by the powerful influence of psychoanalysis and its rejecting stance towards the importance of real life events.

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Bowlby also discusses the powerful influence of existing theories and the impact these had in dismissing the concept of real life events. He says *“the theory that you teach becomes such an integral part of you that you cannot get away from it and you cannot think in any other terms”* and *“What they’ve imbibed, they practice, they teach and they have great difficulty in changing. It’s the nature of the animal.”* These quotes illustrate Bowlby’s understanding of the reason his concept of real life events received dismissal: such is the power of existing theories that others cannot view the world from theoretical perspectives other than what they have been taught; Bowlby perceived this to be an unchangeable phenomenon. His use of the words *imbibe* and *nature of the animal* help to construct a picture of Bowlby’s perception of others’ resolute

lack of acceptance towards his theory. He is understanding of the reasons for their perceived dismissing viewpoint, and perhaps this is not surprising considering that Bowlby believed that deterministic phenomena such as ethology and instincts had a place in helping to explain human behaviour.

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The dismissal of the significance of real life events is further stressed by particular disagreement on theory with Melanie Klein and Anna Freud, two people who had their own prominent and recognised theoretical frameworks. When Virginia asks “*Did she ever hear you at all?*” with regards to Klein, Bowlby responds with “*No, I think she was entirely bound in her own theoretical framework.*” Further, Bowlby says with regards to Freud “*when we came to talking theory, she had no use for my ideas at all.*” This suggests Bowlby felt that Klein was completely caught up in her own theory and that Freud discarded his theoretical perspective. These quotes further illustrate Bowlby’s perception of the powerful influence of existing theories and it appears as though in this domain of competing theories, there is an absence of recognition or space for his own theory, including the concept of real life events.

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Overall, one of the key issues that emerged from Bowlby’s last interview on his work on attachment theory was the dismissal of the significance of real life events, which was one of the fundamental concepts of his theoretical framework. The dismissal of Bowlby’s theory emanated from several angles, such as the role that psychoanalysts played in emphasising the importance of fantasy and diminishing the importance of real life events. Dismissal of Bowlby’s theoretical concept also came from the powerful weight of existing theories, and disagreements from influential theorists such as Melanie Klein and Anna Freud during that era.

### Subtheme: Recognition

In tension with the previous theme, Bowlby's concept of the significance of real life events received support and recognition from others, from both within and outside the psychoanalytic field. It is interesting to note that recognition of his theory was offered by some within the psychoanalytic field who emerge from an object relations perspective. In relation to this, Bowlby says "*I mean the object relationship tradition has had a number of people who've paid attention to real life events: Michael Balint, Ronald Fairburn and Donald Winnicott, notably.*" Bowlby points out that some of the leading and prominent psychoanalysts who were informed by one of the most influential existing theories of the time, object relations, understood and acknowledged the significance of real life events. It seems that by naming and pointing out that these particular psychoanalysts gave recognition to real life events, Bowlby is indicating that his theoretical concepts were valid and good enough. Further, if we consider his plight with regards to the powerful influence of existing theory and the role this played in dismissing his theoretical concepts, it further enhances Bowlby's proposition of the significance of real life events.

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Bowlby's theoretical concepts also received recognition by those outside of the psychoanalytic field. For example, with regards to social workers, Bowlby says "*I was training to be a child psychiatrist and I was working with two social workers, who each both had had an analysis. They were very alive to the importance of real life events.*" While Bowlby was being trained to give more emphasis to fantasy and less emphasis to real life events in his training, he worked with social workers who were receptive and alert to the importance of real life events, in all probability due to the nature of their work. It is interesting that Bowlby makes a point of letting

Virginia know that the social workers had both undergone analysis. It may have been his intention to stress their support of his theoretical concept *in spite* of having undergone an analysis which gave importance to fantasy.

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Another example of the concept of real life events receiving recognition from those outside of the psychoanalytic field came from a school where Bowlby worked, of which he says “*the orientation was that the present problems of children stem from adverse experiences of our families... it was a version of psychoanalysis. It gave emphasis to real life events.*” This school understood the importance of real life events and the impact these had on the children who attended; by adopting this particular worldview, the school was better able to understand their children and the problems they were presenting. I wonder why Bowlby added *it was a version of psychoanalysis* to the statement he was making, and whether, although Bowlby was developing and putting forward his own theoretical framework of attachment theory, it was important for him to remain firmly grounded in the already established discipline of psychoanalysis. This may have been a way of maintaining credibility in light of the difficulties Bowlby faced by those who dismissed his concepts, and an understanding that his concepts may have more readily received recognition by others if they had a solid foundation. Nevertheless, these quotes about the social workers and the school illustrate the recognition given to the concept of real life events by those outside of the psychoanalytic field, further highlighting its significance.

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Overall, another of the key issues that emerged from Bowlby’s last interview on his work on attachment theory was the recognition received by others of the significance of real life events. This recognition stemmed both from reputable psychoanalysts and from those outside of the

psychoanalytic field who worked with children in a more direct capacity and experienced a first-hand appreciation of the significance of Bowlby's concept.

### Subtheme: Supporting Patients

One of the key issues that emerged from Bowlby's final interview is that a fundamental part of a psychoanalyst's job is to assist patients with the effect that real life events has on them. In no uncertain terms, Bowlby says the following, which exemplifies his point: *"And so much of one's work is in fact helping them to discover, well, what did happen to them"* and *"I put it in the form: our job is to help a patient explore his own past, his own thoughts, his own feelings, to discover who he is and what he is."* The emphasis is on helping the patient to explore the real life events that took place for them, and the current impact that these past events may be having. For Bowlby, this is the core function of a psychoanalyst's job, and in order to achieve this, an analyst must recognise and understand the significance of real life events. This is further illustrated when Bowlby says *"the more we know about the kinds of things that can happen and do happen in childhood, the kind of experiences children have, the more we're likely to be able to help patients recover these memories and tell us about things which they feel perhaps very shocked about or ashamed of or they'd much prefer not to think about."* Bowlby understood that events that took place in our past leave their imprint on our current selves, and that sometimes this imprint can have adverse effects for which we need support. He believed that in order for a psychoanalyst to be able to provide a facilitative space for a patient to explore their past, which they may have difficulty recollecting, have feelings of resistance or negative feelings towards, it is valuable for the analyst to have an understanding of the different real life events that may have taken place. With this comprehension of the significance of real life



events and how they may be affecting a patient's present, Bowlby recognised that an analyst is better positioned to help and support their patient.

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Overall, a theme that emerged from Bowlby's final interview was the understanding that a crucial part of a psychoanalyst's responsibility is that of helping their patient to explore the real life events that took place in their past and to understand the significance of these events on the patient's current self.

### **Conclusion**

The key issue for Bowlby in his work on attachment theory was that of real life events, and the significance of these. This main issue was constructed by a dismissal from psychoanalysts, from the power of existing theories and from influential theorists. The recognition received by others working both within and outside of the psychoanalytic field also played a role. Finally, supporting patients to explore and understand the current impact of real life events also comprised part of the key issue for Bowlby in his work on attachment theory.

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Twenty five years after Bowlby's death, his main concerns remain salient, although one hopes that there is no longer any dismissal about the significance of real life events and the role they play in a person's/patient's sense of themselves and sense of others, as well as in their manner of relating with others. Further, Bowlby advocated for attachment theory to be evidenced based so as to have a strong scientific underpinning. Over the past twenty five years, his legacy of scientific research has seen attachment theory develop in leaps and bounds, with research outcomes having an effect on therapeutic practice, for example, the development of Attachment

Narrative Therapy (Dallos, 2006). Furthermore, Bowlby was keen to maintain links between research and therapy, and he advocated for ‘no research without therapy; no therapy without research’ (Holmes, 1993), emphasising the importance of maintaining a dialogue between these two somewhat currently separate worlds.

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It has been an exciting time for attachment theory; twenty five years after Bowlby’s death, it is apparent that his legacy continues to live on strongly. Looking forward, I wonder what the next twenty five years hold for attachment theory, and I am thrilled to be a part of Bowlby’s ongoing legacy.

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### **Author Biography**

Deborah Rodriguez is currently a Psychology doctoral candidate at Middlesex University. Her longitudinal research explores the nuances and changes in attachment behaviours across the transition to second-time parenthood in both partners of heterosexual couples, using multiple methods of data collection which are analysed using qualitative pluralism. Deborah's doctoral research draws and builds upon her undergraduate qualitative exploration of the transition to second-time motherhood, where the second child has a disability. She is also involved in various other research projects and works as a part time lecturer. Prior to this, Deborah graduated with a BSc (Hons) Psychology with Counselling Skills with a First class in 2012, also from Middlesex University. She currently volunteers as a Bereavement Counsellor with a local charity organisation to maintain and further develop her counselling skills.

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