

A thematic analysis of the perceived influence of attachment figures upon development, with respect to the persistence of early attachment patterns

by Patricia Karsten

Abstract

In the context of lifespan psychology and attachment theory, this qualitative study explored from a social constructionist perspective how the influence of attachment figures on development was perceived subjectively. A thematic analysis of a semi-structured interview, which was filmed and transcribed, led to the identification of three main themes. These were very much in line with the functional explanation of attachment figures as providing a secure base to explore the world (Wood, Littleton and Oates, 2007). Individual attachment patterns seem to have persisted consistently from childhood and youth into adulthood, a finding which may have been influenced by the retrospective nature of the interviewee's account.

Introduction

Situated in the hermeneutic tradition, the research aimed at exploring subjectivity and was conducted in the social constructionist perspective, which views meaning and understandings as constructed through language (Phoenix, 2007). The research was based on the epistemological and ontological assumptions that people can give reflective accounts of their experiences and, through the use of language, create meanings that are organized in identifiable thematic structures (DSE212 Course team, 2007). A semi-structured interview technique with open questions had therefore been chosen to obtain a rich account of personal experiences, which were then studied using thematic analysis in order to explore the constructed meanings.

Lifespan psychology acknowledges that psychological development continues all our life from infancy, youth, adulthood to old age, and that our relations to 'significant others' have an important influence on our development, especially the relations to peers and parents. In this context, attachment theory explores the way emotional bonds are formed and how patterns developed in early relationships may affect later relationships (Wood, Littleton and Oates, 2007).

Attachment theory centres around the concept of 'internal working model', an idea developed by John Bowlby in the 1940s, based on earlier propositions of psychoanalyst Melanie Klein. Bowlby theorized the importance of a primary attachment relationship with a mother figure, which is supposed to provide an infant with a secure base from which to explore the world. He assumed that children internalize their early experiences with the mother figure to build up an internal working model of themselves, the mother figure and of the relationship between them, and that this early model persistently affects the way in which later relationships are approached (Wood, Littleton and Oates, 2007).

Patterns in early and later attachments can be assessed using specifically designed techniques. In the 1950s, Mary Ainsworth developed the 'Strange Situation' assessment technique for children's attachment types, and distinguished between secure, insecure-avoidant and insecure-ambivalent child attachments. In the 1980s, Mary Main devised the 'Adult Attachment Interview' technique, which focuses on the way adults talk retrospectively about their early relationships, and identified three basic types of adult attachment: secure-autonomous, insecure-dismissing and insecure-preoccupied (Wood, Littleton and Oates, 2007).

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Research based on these and similar techniques supported Bowlby's proposition on the persistence of attachment patterns, if life circumstances remained relatively stable, but less so if significant life events like parental divorce or serious illness occurred. According to the Bielefeld longitudinal study, these life events were better predictors of adolescent attachment types than Ainsworth's Strange Situation Type (SST) classification (Zimmerman et al. 2000, as cited in Wood, Littleton and Oates, 2007). These life events presumably had adverse effects on children's attachment security, but on the other hand, a positive development from insecure child attachment to secure adult attachment is also possible, "often associated with strong and positive marital relationships" (Rutter, Quinton & Hill 1990, as cited in Wood, Littleton and Oates, 2007).

As Ainsworth pointed out, attachment theory should therefore be extended to consider the role of attachments beyond those to a primary mother figure, and include sexual pair-bonds, friendship bonds and kinship bonds. She specifically mentioned older siblings who may assume a caregiving role in the absence of parents, and surrogate attachments at adult age which may compensate for deficiencies in early attachments and thus help to gain 'earned security' later in life (Ainsworth, 1989). The research question addressed these issues by asking *,How do adults perceive that significant others in their lives (i.e. people who are or have been important to them) have affected their development?*, with a specific focus on the persistence of early attachment patterns.

Method

The study was based on a pre-existing, filmed interview of about 12:30 minutes length and its written transcript, both provided by the Open University (2007). The interview was conducted by Julia Willerton, an Open University researcher. The interviewee was a married 35-year-old journalist from the Middle East, who migrated to Britain at the age of 15.

Ethical concerns were addressed in several ways. To protect the interviewee's anonymity, his name was changed to 'Assan' and he was represented by an actor in the published interview. Before the interview, he was informed about the aims of the research and his right to withdraw at any time. Afterwards, he was invited to discuss his feelings to make sure that he was comfortable. He was then reassured about the anonymity of his account, asked to sign a consent form and thanked for his participation (DSE212 Course team, 2007; The Open University, 2007).

In the analytic process, familiarization with the interview and the transcript was followed by first-order coding to identify and label recurring issues, which were then integrated into larger sets of meaning during second-order coding. In the subsequent thematic analysis, three main themes were identified. Line numbers were added to the transcript for easier reference, and the annotated printout is included in the appendix, accompanied by a code table.

Analysis

I addressed the specific research question *,How does Assan perceive that significant others in his life have affected his development?* with a special focus on repetition of early attachment patterns in later relationships. As main themes, I identified (i) support and guidance, (ii) exposure to the unknown and (iii) encouragement to inquire.

The theme *'support and guidance'* arose immediately when Assan talked about his father as an important early relationship. Assan referred to the idea of receiving guidance from his father as very important for his development, and he related this to his cultural identity:

"... as a man growing up in Yemen [...], the father would be the first person that you would seek guidance from, he'd be your spiritual leader, everything, is very important." [27-30]

Assan explains that due to work-related longer absences of his father, his eldest brother assumed a supportive and guiding role in multiple aspects of his life, such as school achievement [62, 68], or choice of friends [63-66]:

"...similar to father figure [...] he was someone who I looked up to because my father was sometimes not there all the time [...] I felt he was very supportive" [55-61]

As an adult, Assan maintains a relationship to his boss which is characterized by similar features of guidance and support:

"Someone who I, who I quite look up to at present I would say is my boss [...] he's someone who very much encouraged, encouraged me and be very supportive [...] I feel he's someone who has belief in me ..." [127-137]

The theme *'exposure to the unknown'* also permeates Assan's account. His father's profession as a merchandiser caused the family to move home often. As a consequence, Assan was repeatedly required to adapt to unknown cultures and people [75-76], which habituated him to making new friends quickly [38-39]. Assan recognized that it created superficiality in his friendships [90-92, 96-97] and mentioned feelings of loss.

"... where is home for me?" [101-2]

At the same time, this sharpened his sense of cultural identity and differences, evident in frequent references, for example to his country of origin [27], his Muslim culture, religion [38] and upbringing in a comparably large family [53], and in questioning whether he is able to understand these differences:

"... do I really have an understanding because I'm not from that culture or country." [104-5]

His profession as a journalist and his relationship to his boss continue to cause exposure to unknown situations and people, and Assan acknowledged how his early experiences help him to achieve.

"I feel I have this because we move around so much and able to make relationships fast. [88-89]

"And always he say to me: you do very good job for me ... bring me something that really you think you won't be able to do. [...] [134-7]

The third identified theme *'encouragement to inquire'* also relates early and current relationships. Assan very much emphasised and appreciated the encouragement he had received from his father from very early on to be open minded and to discuss and question everything he might not fully understand, in order build up relationships [41], to achieve at school [43], and to understand new cultures and people [45].

"... my father always encouraged us not to be narrow-minded, to be open-minded, to question, to understand, to create a better relationship." [39-41]

"I really valued that and enjoyed that relationship with him..." [48-9]

Assan proposed that, based on this encouragement, he developed the ability to quickly build up positive relationships and gain an understanding of different cultures, and that it also helped him in his job where he constantly needs to make new contacts.

"And because of how I was brought up to ask people questions to get to understand them ... people could relate to me quickly" [77-80]

In a similar way, Assan emphasized the encouragement he now receives from his boss to gain deeper understanding of relevant issues. The nature of the relationship seems to be a strong motivating factor for Assan.

"... encourage my, he said my inquisitive nature, [...] to really get under and understand, and this helped me to be better within my job... [129-132]

"... I push myself more for him." [139]

Discussion

The analysis showed how the three themes of 'support and guidance', 'exposure to the unknown' and 'encouragement to inquire' were important not only in Assan's early significant relationships to his father and his brother, but were repeated in the current relationship to his boss. Together and inextricably linked, they seem to have constituted the factors through which Assan's attachment figures affected his development. They provided Assan with a sense of security and guidance, as well as constant encouragement to inquire, and thus enabled him to meet challenges arising from constant exposure to changing environments by developing successful coping strategies. Assan identified his open-mindedness towards other cultures and people, his ability to question and discuss, and to make new friends quickly as main effects of these influences. From his discourse, a heightened awareness for cultural identity and differences also became evident.

These findings are consistent with what is considered to be characteristic for attachments as stable emotional bonds, providing an individual with a secure base from which to explore the world, as described by Wood, Littleton and Oates (2007). They are also consistent with Bowlby's proposition that early relationship patterns tend to persist into adulthood (Wood, Littleton and Oates, 2007). Assan reported the dislike of his father's absence and pleasure upon reunion, which would be consistent with a 'secure' child attachment type according to Ainsworth's classification (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters and Wall, 1978, as described in Wood, Littleton and Oates, 2007). The open and reflective way in which he talks about aspects of the relationship to his father seems to meet the criteria for a secure adult attachment type according to Main's classification (Main, Kaplan and Cassidy, 1985, as described in Wood, Littleton and Oates, 2007).

Assan's relationship to his eldest brother is in line with Ainsworth's propositions of older siblings assuming caregiving responsibilities in the absence of parents, leading to attachment-like bonds between siblings (Ainsworth, 1989). On the other hand, this relationship as well as the relationship to his boss may be seen as surrogate attachments, which according to Ainsworth are specifically prevalent when secure child attachments to parents are missing (ibid.) It is therefore open to interpretation whether Assan's relationship to his boss compensates him for something he did not have as a child, or whether he repeats a pattern which for him represented a successful relationship model. Assan's own perception was more in line with the view of a successful relationship pattern, and according to the social constructionist perspective which I assumed in the research, Assan's perception is valid. But it is possible that Assan's

retrospective account was influenced by a tendency to produce a consistent story when talking about his personal experiences.

When talking about the persons that significantly affected his development, Assan mentioned his mother only briefly, and when talking about his wife, his discourse emphasized the conflict arising from her wish to have children and his professional ambitions. This presentation seemed to be a reflection of Assan's cultural background and a rather traditional view on women's role in society. Contrasting to this, attachment theory does assume a more prominent impact of the mother on the development of children's attachment style, but tries to include all 'primary caregivers' equally (Wood, Littleton and Oates, 2007). It is noteworthy that attachment theory has been criticized for being overly rooted in western cultural values, and that other cultures may have completely different views on desirable relationship structures (Rothbaum, Weisz, Pott, Miyake and Morelli, 2000).

To address this question, future research might impose slightly more structure upon interviews and specifically ask about attachment to the mother and within sexual pair-bonds, in order to find out more about their perceived influence on development, which would provide a basis to explore possible cultural differences.

Reflexive Analysis

I was surprised that Assan attributed to his mother and wife only a minor influence on his development. This may be related to being a female researcher and originating from a western cultural background. As I approached the research question with attachment theory in mind, where the mother is usually presented as the primary caregiver, I may have unconsciously expected a more prominent role for the mother emerging from Assan's account.

I considered interpersonal dynamics between female interviewer and male interviewee as possible reason for Assan's reluctance to talk about his mother's and wife's influence, but it seemed not very probably that a male interviewer would have elicited more information, as he instead might rather have confirmed a male-dominated view towards personal experiences.

Having been brought up and following a family tradition where women typically exercise a profession, and in taking mutual influence of romantic partners on their personal development for granted, it felt strange to be exposed to Assan's very traditionalist view of women's role in partnership and society. This may have heightened my awareness for the related omissions in Assan's account, and a feeling of disbelief regarding the 'non-existent' influence on his development has informed my proposition for further research.

On the other hand, I had very similar experiences like Assan of having moved home very often in my youth, which may have drawn my attention to the way in which Assan perceived this experience and how it affected his development. My own experiences may have shaped the way in which I constructed my findings in terms of 'coping strategies' and the themes I identified.

References

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Appendix: Codings overview and annotated transcript of the interview

First order codes	Second order codes	Third order codes (themes)	
LDF – father as leader	LD – leadership figures	SPG – support and guidance	
LDB – boss as leader			
LDBR – brother as leader			
GDAC – guidance to achieve			GD – seeking and experiencing guidance
GDFRI – guidance friendships			
GDP - protection			
NEW-PL – new places	NEW – new environment	EXP – exposure to the unknown	
NEW-PE – new people			
CI – cultural identity	CID – cultural identity and differences		
CD – cultural difference			
MVH – move home	MV – continuous movement		
MVT – travel around			
OP – open mindedness	INQ - Inquiry	EIQ – encouragement to inquire	
QU – question reality			
UND – gain understanding			
ENC-FRI – making friends	ENC – Encouragement		
ENC-AC – achievement			
ENC-EXP – exploration			
MOT - motivation			