

**The role of aggressiveness
in the work of John Bowlby**

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Summary

This paper attempts to integrate **Bowlby's** various contributions to the subject of **aggressiveness**. His early views, the role of aggressiveness in attachment theory and his more recent work on **violence** in the family are reported. Both in his early and in his later work, Bowlby distinguishes between a primary form of aggressiveness which is reactive to frustration - in **particular** to separation - and a secondary form which arises **from** the first as a result of adverse parental **reactions**. His more recent work stresses the importance of redirected parental hostility, due to role **reversal**, in eliciting dysfunctional anger in **children**. It is suggested that this component was already implicit in much of the previous work on **separation**. It is further suggested that **Scott's** model of agonistic behaviour is relevant in these **situations**.

Introduction

Bowlby has dealt at length with the subject of **aggressiveness** in various phases of his work.

I« Aggressiveness was the main focus of an early work of his, Personal **Aggressiveness** and War (Durbin and Bowlby, **1939**), which

he co-authored before the war.

2. **Aggressiveness** plays an important part in Bowlby's major achievement, attachment theory, which is set forth in his three-volume work, Attachment and Loss (Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980).

3. **Finally**, in a more recent paper, Bowlby (1984) has turned his attention to violent **behaviour** between family members, and especially the violence of parents towards children»

Since his early book, however, Bowlby has not addressed this subject systematically. In the present paper, an attempt will be made to integrate Bowlby's various contributions in this area and to compare his views **with** those of some of the authors who have made a specific study of **aggressiveness**.

Early views

The attribution to Bowlby of ideas from a jointly authored book is **justified** by a personal communication from Dr. Bowlby (1986), stating that all the psychoanalytic contributions in the prewar book came originally from him.

In this book, Bowlby describes a two-phase development of aggression in children: (1) the frustration of basic needs leads to what he calls simple aggression, and (2) the punishment of

simple aggression leads to what he calls transformed aggression«
The causes of simple aggression are possessiveness, **both** towards material objects and the affection of others, and the frustration of activity. Paced **by** punishment, the child has to control the expression of his simple aggression, which then appears in other forms. **Using** psychoanalytic terminology, **Bowlby** describes three kinds of transformation: repression, displacement and projection. In this account of the two-phase vicissitudes of aggressiveness, parental responses determine both phases.

Attachment theory

In attachment theory, stress is laid on the occurrence of aggressiveness in the first and second phases of a **child's** reaction to unwilling separation from the **mother**. **Bowlby** deals specifically with this issue in Chapter **I7** of Separation (**Bowlby, 1973**). A distinction is drawn between functional and dysfunctional anger - also called, respectively, the anger of hope and the anger of despair. **Bowlby** suggests that anger in reaction to separation may have two biological functions (*op. cit.*, p. 247): (1) it may assist in overcoming obstacles to reunion, and (2) it may discourage the loved person from going away again. It thus acts

to promote, and not to **disrupt**, the **bond** (op. cit», p. 248). Dysfunctional anger - the form that is usually met with clinically - occurs when **separation** is prolonged or repeated or constantly threatened. Such threats, in particular, tend to discourage the **expression** of anger, in case the threat is carried out. **Anger** then **usually** becomes repressed, displaced or projected (op. cit., p. 250).

Both anger and anxiety are elicited by separation. "Thus, love, anxiety, and anger, and sometimes hatred, come to be aroused by one and the same person. As a result painful conflicts are inevitable" (op. cit., p. 253). To account for the **connections** between these responses, Bowlby differs from **Melanie Klein's** view of **aggressive** impulses welling up within as a primary cause. His **position** is close to **Fairbairn's**, who holds that the **aggressive** component is reactive to **frustration**.

More recent work

More recently, Bowlby has turned his attention to the aggressive behaviour of parents towards children (Bowlby, 1984). In this paper he reports that the effects of physical abuse on children include a high incidence of avoidance and aggressive behaviour.

Bowlby emphasizes the **occurrence** in abusing mothers of role reversal - a phenomenon he had previously discussed on pp. **265-270** of Separation (Bowlby, 1973). "**Instead** of being ready to mother her **child**, she **looks** to her child to mother **her**. [...] when her **child** fails to oblige and starts crying, demanding care and attention, she gets impatient and angry with the **child**" (Bowlby, 1984, p. 16).

Role reversal is a special case of distortion in interpersonal relationships» **Another** important case is that of a spouse viewed as a **parent**. The birth of a child may then reactivate sibling rivalry in the disturbed spouse. **This** seems to be the mechanism underlying the cases of wife-battering, also discussed by Bowlby in his paper on violence (Bowlby, 1984, pp. 21-23). All these distortions can be described, in terms of **object-relations** theory, as due to the projection of parts of the self or of internalized objects onto others, or, in **Bowlby's** own terms (Bowlby, 1973, pp. 172-174), **as** due to the assimilation of new persons to existing models of self and others.

In the introduction to his paper on violence, Bowlby (1984) also discusses the relevance of real-life events as causative factors in **psychopathology**. He decries "the concentration in analytic circles on fantasy and the reluctance to examine the

impact of real-life **events** [...] ever since Freud made his famous, and in my view disastrous, volte-face in 1897" (concerning childhood seduction) (op. cit., p. 9). He actually considers all his previous work as conditioned by this issue: "It was, indeed, largely because the adverse behavior of parents toward their children was such a taboo subject in analytic circles when I was starting my professional work that I **decided to** focus my research on the effects on children of real-life events of another sort, namely separation and **loss**" (op. cit., p. 10).

Comparison between early views and later work

In the early book, the first phase of aggressiveness ("simple aggression") is regarded as a reaction to frustration. A dual frustration of basic needs may be discerned as the cause of simple aggression: that of **possessiveness** and that of autonomy needs. Later in the book, the possessiveness towards persons, in particular the mother, is stressed. This may be viewed as a precursor of the concept of attachment.

Bowlby's later work concentrates on unwilling separation as one particular frustration leading to aggressiveness. **Thus**, the later formulation is more limited than the earlier one, but it

adds a definition of the **biological** function of anger: "to achieve **reunion**" (Bowlby, 1979 a, p. 63) or, more generally, "in maintaining **affectional** bonds" (op. cit., p. 69). To conclude, the earlier concept of simple aggression seems to correspond closely to the later concept of functional **anger**.

Turning to the second phase in the development of **aggressiveness**, there is a correspondence between transformed aggression and dysfunctional anger. Actually, as reported above, dysfunctional anger in the later work is described in exactly the same terms as transformed aggression in the earlier work - as the result of **repression**, displacement or **projection**. **Also** the later work stresses the importance of parental responses in leading from one phase to the other (Bowlby, 1973, p. 250; 1979a, p. 12).

Discussion

For purposes of research, Bowlby built up his attachment theory on clear-cut, impersonal events such as separation due to **hospitalization** or loss due to death. However, Bowlby (1973, p. 23) explicitly stated the equivalence of physical absence and emotional unavailability. Less tangible situations

such as emotional unavailability lend **themselves** less readily to verification or **falsification**, **but** on principle they are experimentally testable (Grünbaum, 1984, p. 126). **Thus**, in an **ethological** framework, proximate causes of **psychopathology** may be viewed as a continuum of real-life events, thwarting innate behavioral tendencies and ranging from subtle **forms** of communication at one end to clear-cut events at the other (Bacciagaluppi, 1985a).

When, more recently, Bowlby addressed the issue of violence in the family (Bowlby, 1984), he seemed to be turning his attention to another class of real-life events. Here again, physical assaults are clear-cut events which lend themselves to quantitative study, but may be viewed on a continuum, with more subtle manifestations of hostility at the other end, Bowlby himself states that in many cases "the physical assaults are but the tip of an iceberg" (Bowlby, 1984, p. 18).

The clear-cut extremes of the two ranges - separation and loss on the one hand, physical assaults on the other - can be easily differentiated. When, however, we consider the more subtle extremes of the two ranges of events, the possibility emerges that they may **coincide**. **An** unresponsive parent may provide a child not only with a covert experience of separation but also

with a covert experience of hostility. This is a point made by Pound (1982) in a study of the effects of maternal depression: "the baby is sensitive to the hostility implicit in the mother's unnatural behavior and withdraws from it accordingly" (op. cit., p. 122) o

Bowlby's paper on violence reveals the complexity of clinical situations which was only implicit in his more theoretical work. In clinical situations, separation from the parent and aggression on the parent's part are often combined, both leading - beyond certain limits - to transformed aggression (in Bowlby's earlier terms) or to dysfunctional anger (in his later terms) in the child. The child not only experiences the loss of protection, which gives rise to separation anxiety and anger, but is also directly exposed to a threat, which gives rise to further anxiety and anger. In terms of our prehistoric adaptation, the child finds a predator in the very person who is expected to provide protection from predators.

The coexistence of these two components in the parent's behaviour was implicit in some of the earlier work. For example, Bowlby states repeatedly that threats of abandonment elicit more anxiety than actual separation (e.g., Bowlby, 1973, p. 215; pp. 226-236). In the chapter on anger (Bowlby, 1973, pp. 250-251) he

asserts that an individual can be **made** literally murderous by repeated threats of desertion. It is suggested in the present paper that in these cases the individual is also reacting to an aggressive component **implicit in** the threats: the threat of a feared outcome is used deliberately with an aggressive intent.

At other points in **his** main work (**Bowlby, 1969, p. 216; 1973, p. 91**) Bowlby also describes situations in which the attachment figure is at the same time the one who elicits fear, causing a conflict between attachment behaviour and withdrawal, but he does not specifically discuss these situations in relation to anger.

A third component emerges from **Bowlby's** early work, in which the importance of punishment in determining the transition from simple to transformed aggression is stressed. As Friedman (**1985**) points out in a recent paper on the **reconceptualization** of guilt, blame and punishment have not found their proper place in psychoanalytic theory. He defines blame as "**the** attribution of causal responsibility for the distress of others" (op. cit., p. **533**), and punishment as "the infliction of trauma accompanied by **blame**" (op. cit., p. **534**). Punitive attitudes may be the expression of hostility seeking its own **justification**. The effect on the recipient is a further check on the expression of defensive aggression.

Thus, in a suicide threat, for example, three components may be described in the **parent's** message: (1) the prospect of separation, (2) anger and (3) blame. The first component, in addition to anxiety, elicits simple aggression. The second component increases the aggression but also **the** anxiety: aggression is held in check lest the threat is carried out. Aggression undergoes transformation. The third component tends to turn the **child's** anger back unto the child itself. If there is separation, the child is made to feel that only he/she is to blame. Furthermore, the child is made to **feel** guilty for the **parent's distress**. Separation is presented as a **just** punishment for the damage inflicted by the child on the parent.

In his paper on violence, **Bowlby (1984) points** to the core of these pathological situations, which seems to be the inverted parent-child relationship. If the parent addresses inappropriate requests to the child, the inevitable outcome is disappointment and hostility on the parent's **part**.

Parental hostility directed to the child as a result of role reversal is the effect of displacement and may be described as transformed aggression in the parent. It is therefore suggested in the present paper that one **basic cause of transformed aggression in the child is** being the object of transformed aggression on the **parent's part**.

Comparison **with** other authors

Bowlby's distinction **between** two forms of **aggressiveness** **seems** to correspond to **Fromm's** (1973) distinction between defensive and malignant **aggression**. Fromm ascribes a very general biological function to defensive aggression, which is defined as "a response to any kind of threat [...] to the vital interests of the **animal**" (op. cit., p. 119). Malignant aggression is viewed **as** a specifically human, biologically **maladaptive** form (op. cit., p. 212).

In the complex clinical situations highlighted by **Bowlby's** more recent work, in which role inversion exposes the child not only to **separation** anxiety but also to hostility, the ethological model suggested by **J.P. Scott** seems to be **relevant**. **Scott (1977)** has suggested a **polysystemic** model of agonistic behaviour. This is defined as behaviour that is adaptive in situations involving conflict between two or more members of the same species. It includes different patterns: attack, defensive fighting, threats, escape and defensive posture. **Scott, like Fromm (1973),** regards the basic general function of agonistic behaviour as the defence against injury or the threat of injury. **This** view is opposed to that of **Lorenz**. **Scott** states that there are "no mechanisms that produce spontaneous

arousal" (Scott, 1977, p. 197). He thus agrees with Bowlby's differentiation, quoted above, from Melanie Klein's view of aggressiveness as welling up within, and with Fromm's critique of the "hydraulic model" of aggressiveness of Freud and Lorenz (Fromm, 1973).

Bowlby's transformed aggression and Fromm's malignant aggression are, in Scott's terms, **maladaptive agonistic behaviour**. "The most **extreme** dysfunction is one in which agonistic behavior results in killing or serious **injury**" (op. cit., p. 195). A **major** cause of maladaptive violence is "the **disaggregation** of social systems" (op. cit., p. 198). A famous example quoted by Scott is **Zuckerman's** study of baboons in the London zoo (also **discussed** both by Bowlby in his early book and by Fromm). On the basis of animal experiments, Scott finds four factors affecting maladaptive agonistic behaviour: (1) the inability to escape from the situation, (2) the impossibility of **adaptation**, (3) a high degree of motivation, and (4) genetic differences.

In the human situation, a child might be repeatedly angered - which leads to a high degree of motivation - but be unable to escape from his family. The inability **to** adapt, namely "to respond effectively by attacking the source of stimulation" (op. cit., p. 205), could result from "repressive training that

forbids the expression of overt aggressive behavior and **anger**" (**ibid.**).

Scott does not describe psychoanalytic mechanisms, as Bowlby does, but mentions two other kinds of disorganized individual agonistic behaviours outbursts of uncontrollable rage, and psychosomatic symptoms **such** as high blood pressure and constipation (**ibid.**).

Binding mechanisms

One feature of **Scott's** model which is in agreement with **Bowlby's** outlook is the emphasis on the family dimension. In this connection Bowlby has stated that child psychiatry is "**better** termed family psychiatry" (Bowlby, 1979a, p. 135). In particular, Scott stresses the importance of the impossibility of escaping from the family. Pathogenic families may be regarded as closed systems, which not only engender simple aggression but also seek to control it, thus giving rise **to** transformed aggression.

In the present paper it is suggested that the **child's** inability to escape from the family is insured not only by his/her realistic dependence but also by multiple binding mechanisms, which **Stierlin** (1978) described in terms of traditional **Freudian** structural theory

and which can be reformulated in **ethological** terms (Bacciagaluppi, 1985b): a detached parent elicits anxious attachment, an aggressive parent elicits submission, a seductive parent elicits inappropriate **sexual attachment**.

A special binding mechanism is of a cognitive nature, and **consists** in the discouragement of awareness. **The** prohibition to see is typical of family situations at the subtle end of the spectrum. Bowlby (1979b) has discussed how adults apply pressure to children to prevent **them** from processing certain information.

Clinical illustration

A **child** exposed to hostility within the family may be likened to a cornered animal. In therapy, this situation may be expressed by the symbol of the concentration camp. One patient who at the beginning of therapy dreamed she was in a concentration camp was the object of role reversal on the part of both parents. The mother, who had been an adopted child, developed depression after giving birth to the patient and was hospitalized for some time. She later became very demanding of the patient and would support her demands by quoting her own **suffering**. **The** father was often away when the patient was small. He later became an invalid,

relied mainly on the patient to look after him, was covertly **seductive** and would reproach her if she was **late**. When this patient was a little girl she used to enjoy ill-treating **animals**. She came into therapy after a suicide attempt.

In the early dream, a concentration-camp doctor showed her many little girls with battered faces and tried to rape **her**. *The* concentration camp may **be** viewed as her relationship with the hostile mother, allowing no escape, and the doctor as the father who proved a disappointing subsidiary attachment figure and actually cooperated with the mother to keep the child bound. **This** situation elicited a great deal of desperate anger, which was at first redirected onto weaker objects and was later turned back onto the patient herself.

In a later concentration-camp dream, the patient was shown some experiments performed on children, then **expected** to be killed for having seen them. Here, the prohibition to see was at work. Overtly, this **patient's** family was supposed to be a very happy family in which everybody loved each other.

Conclusions

1. Both in his early and in his later **work**, Bowlby distinguishes **between** a primary form of **aggressiveness** (simple aggression, or functional **anger**), which is reactive **to** frustration, and a secondary form (transformed aggression, or dysfunctional anger), which arises from the first as a result of adverse parental reactions. **This** distinction is **similar** to the one drawn **by** Fromm between defensive and malignant aggression,

2. In keeping with his evolutionary approach, Bowlby ascribes a biological function to simple aggression. In **Bowlby's** main work, this function is the more limited one of maintaining **affectional bonds**, as compared to the more general definitions of Scott and Fromm.

3. According to Bowlby, both phases in the development of aggressiveness are determined by parental **reactions**. **This** is in keeping with **Bowlby's** relational approach and justifies the inclusion of his work by **Greenberg** and **Mitchell (1983)** in the relations-oriented psychoanalytic theories, as opposed to the drive-oriented theories.

4. **Bowlby's** more recent work throws light on these parental reactions and stresses the importance of redirected parental **hostility**, due to role reversal, in eliciting dysfunctional anger in children. A component **which** was mostly implicit in the previous work on separation is here made **explicit**. In these situations, the relevance of **Scott's** model of agonistic behaviour is suggested.

5» **Scott's** model is in agreement with **Bowlby's** emphasis on the family dimension. In particular, in the causation of dysfunctional anger in children, it lays stress on the importance of the family as a closed system from which escape is **impossible**.

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