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

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### Summary

This article 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. In both his early and 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 the displacement of parental hostility on to the children – due to role reversal – in eliciting dysfunctional anger in children. It is suggested that this component was already implicit in much of Bowlby's previous work on separation. It is further suggested that J.P. Scott's model of agonistic behaviour is relevant in these situations.

### Introduction

This overview of Bowlby's contributions to the subject of aggressiveness is part of an effort to define a non-Lorenzian ethological theory of aggressiveness, which can be drawn from the work of authors such as Erich Fromm (1973) and Scott (1977), in addition to that of Bowlby himself. All these authors make a distinction between two forms of aggressiveness: defensive (benign, functional) and destructive (malignant, dysfunctional). This distinction implies a critique of the 'hydraulic' models of aggressiveness, such as that which Fromm (1973) directed [124] both at the notion of a death instinct, held by orthodox Freudian psychoanalysis, and at the notion of the spontaneous arousal of aggressiveness, held by Konrad Lorenz and his school of ethology.

It is important to establish this distinction not only in the interest of scientific truth but also because of its practical consequences. At the level of clinical theory it directs attention to those features of family dynamics – especially the phenomenon of role reversal – which discourage defensive aggressiveness and elicit the destructive form. It thus provides a theoretical justification for a shift from drive-orientated to relations-orientated approaches in psychoanalysis (Greenberg and Mitchell, 1983). At the level of therapy it directs attention to an essential innate resource which can be mobilized in the interests of recovery.

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



1. Aggressiveness was the main focus of an early work, *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 this article an attempt will be made to integrate Bowlby's various contributions in the 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 himself (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 [125] 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, towards both material objects and the affection of others, and the frustration of activity. Faced by punishment, the child has to control the expression of his/her 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 contribute to 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 17 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 (ibid., 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 (p. 248). Dysfunctional anger—the form usually encountered clinically – occurs when separation is prolonged, 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 (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' (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 that of Fairbairn, who holds that the aggressive component is reactive to frustration.



## More Recent Work

More recently, Bowlby (1984) has turned his attention to the aggressive behaviour of parents towards their children. In this paper he reports that [126] the effects of physical abuse on children include a high incidence of detached and aggressive behaviour. Bowlby emphasizes the occurrence in abusing mothers of role reversal, a phenomenon he had previously; discussed on pp. 265-70 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 in this paper on violence (Bowlby, 1984, pp. 21-3). 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 on to others or, in Bowlby's own terms (1973, pp. 172-4), as due to the assimilation of new persons to existing models of self and others.

In the introduction to his paper on violence, Bowlby 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] (1984, p. 9). He actually considers all his previous work as conditioned by this issue:

It was, indeed, largely because the adverse behaviour of parents towards 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. (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 [127] 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, 1979a, p. 63) or, more generally, 'in maintaining affectional bonds' (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, he explicitly stated (1973, p. 23) 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 behavioural tendencies and ranging from subtle forms of communication at one end to clear-cut events at the other (Bacciagaluppi, 1985a).

When, more recently (1984), Bowlby addressed the issue of violence in the family, 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' (1984, p. 18). [128]

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 behaviour and withdraws from it accordingly' (p. 122).

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 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. Thus, the child meets with hostility and violence from the very person who is expected to protect him or her.

The coexistence of these two components in the parents' behaviour was implicit in some of the earlier work. For example, Bowlby states repeatedly that threats of abandonment elicit more anxiety than actual separation (for example 1973, p. 215; pp. 226-36). In the chapter on anger (1973, pp. 250-1) he asserts that an individual can be made literally murderous by repeated threats of desertion. It is suggested in this article 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 (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 conceptualization of



guilt, blame and punishment [129] have not found their proper place in psychoanalytic theory. He defines blame as 'the attribution of causal responsibility for the distress of others' (p. 533) and punishment as 'the infliction of trauma accompanied by blame' (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 detected 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 increases the aggression but also the anxiety: aggression is held in check lest the threat is carried out. Aggression begins to undergo transformation. The third tends to turn the child's anger back on to 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. Finally, a fourth component in a suicide threat is the display of suffering on the parent's part. This elicits altruistic – or prosocial – behaviour in the child and gives rise to remorse based on love, as distinct from guilt feelings caused by blame (Friedman, 1985).

In his paper on violence (1984) Bowlby 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 this article 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 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' (p. 119). Malignant aggression is [130] viewed as a specifically human, biologically maladaptive form (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 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' (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 Freud's and Lorenz's 'hydraulic model' of aggressiveness (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 behaviour results in killing or serious injury' (1977, p. 195). A major cause of maladaptive violence is 'the disaggregation of social systems' (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 unable to escape from his family. The inability to adapt – 'to respond effectively by attacking the source of stimulation' (Scott, 1977, p. 205) – could result from 'repressive training that forbids the expression of overt aggressive behaviour and anger' (ibid.).

Scott does not describe psychoanalytic mechanisms, as Bowlby does, but mentions two other kinds of disorganized individual agonistic behaviour: outbursts of uncontrollable rage, and psychosomatic symptoms such as high blood pressure and constipation. [131]

Many features in Scott's model are in agreement with Bowlby's work. One is the ethological – but non-Lorenzian – approach to aggressiveness, for which Scott provides experimental evidence. Another is the emphasis on the family dimension. In this connection Bowlby has stated (1979a, p. 135) that child psychiatry is 'better termed family psychiatry'. 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.

### **Binding Mechanisms**

In this article it is suggested that the child's inability to escape from the family is ensured 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, role inversion elicits premature parental behaviour in the child.

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 developed an illness, stayed at home, relied mainly on the patient to look after him, was covertly seductive and would reproach her if she was late. When this [132] patient was a little girl she used to enjoy ill-treating animals. She was also afraid that devils would take her away. 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 to be a disappointing subsidiary attachment figure and actually co-operated with the mother to keep the child bound. This situation elicited a great deal of desperate anger, which was at first redirected on to weaker objects and later turned back on to 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 one in which everybody loved one another.

The role reversal was rather obvious in the parental role which she had been asked to perform for her father. What was less obvious was the negative connotation of this role. On the surface it had gratifying aspects. The father, for example, insisted that only the patient cut his toenails, because she did it better than anyone else. Only in the course of therapy did she recall that, in the crouching position required by the task, she had felt like a slave.

The role reversal on the mother's part became explicit in later years, when she would experience anxiety whenever the patient was not available. Yet she persisted in maintaining her overt traditional role, preparing food for the patient and insisting that she eat it.

The transferral to the patient of a negatively connotated maternal role was thus concealed. The patient was exposed to hidden hostility, but the cognitive identification of this distortion and the mobilization of reactive aggressiveness against it were well-nigh impossible. Only an unconscious appraisal of the situation was possible, as in the dreams and in the childhood fear of devils.

## Conclusions

1. Both in his early and in his later work, Bowlby distinguished between a primary form of aggressiveness (simple aggression, or [133] 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 his 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 his relational approach and justifies the inclusion of his work by Greenberg and Mitchell (1983) in the relations-orientated psychoanalytic theories, as opposed to the drive-orientated theories.



Bowlby himself has always emphasized that attachment theory is a version of object-relations theory.

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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