

Early attachment  
relationships  
influence  
development  
throughout the  
lifespan



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This study is guided by the Social Constructionist perspective and explores the impact of early attachment experiences upon later development, a paradigm supported by research. The Social constructionist methodology considers that individual experiences are structured by social contexts and that language used is significant to the individual. Thematic Analysis was performed on a pre-existing data extract from semi-structured interview with Assan, a 35 year old man who was born in Yemen, grew up in the middle east and has lived in Britain since he was 15 years old. This data revealed three significant themes (i) ?????? (ii)??????? (iii)..... interpretation of these themes demonstrated that Assan was able to integrate his socially constructed childhood experiences with his later development of attachment relationships, consistent with a variety of attachment research.

## **Introduction:**

It is understood, through lifespan psychology, that the psychological development of an individual is a process that continues throughout an individual's life, this development consists of both internal and external dynamics. The well theorised theme of attachment forms the basis of this study. Attachment focuses on the formation of early relationships and their influence on later developmental outcomes.

The social constructionist perspective explores “ how knowledge about sex and gender has been constructed within particular historical and social contexts” (Wood et al 2007) this perspective assumes that the knowledge comes from social contexts and is evidenced predominately by an individual's use of language. This study explores the paradigm of attachment from the social constructionist perspective.

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The paradigm of attachment is concerned with a “ strong, ongoing emotional bond between two people” (Wood et al 2007) and suggests that attachment is fundamental to emotional, social and cognitive progression.

Bowlby, an attachment theorist purports that attachment is a survival instinct in infancy, and once established it remains relatively fixed throughout life. Positive attachments created in vertical relationships, that is an “ attachment to someone who has greater knowledge or social power – a typical example is a child’s relationship with a parent or a teacher” (Wood et al 2007) forms a secure foundation for which an infant can explore their environment and can return to if the environment becomes too challenging. Bowlby claims that a synchronicity develops between the infant and primary attachment figure and this is significant in the construction of internal working models (IWM) of the individual, the primary attachment figure and the relationship between the two (as cited by Wood et al 2007).

The expectations of the behaviour of others are contained within the IWM and consequently manipulate an individual’s own behaviour. In addition the IWM is extrapolated to new/unfamiliar people and situations; this corresponds with Meads developmental theory of primary and secondary socialisation development (as cited by Wood et al 2007).

The paradigm put forward by Bowlby correlated to normative attachments, variations in IWM’s and individual attachment types were later distinguished. Ainsworth et al (1978), upon performance of the ‘ Strange Situation’ experiments, noted secure and insecure infant behaviour. Main et al (1985)

used the narratives from Adult Attachment interviews to describe secure and insecure styles cited by Wood et al 2007).

A key component of the theory of attachment is security and the categories of infant types do, in certain conditions correlate with Adult attachments (Hamilton 1994, cited by Wood et al 2007). This was found during the 'love quiz' questionnaires, which were studies of romantic relationships (Hazan & Shaver 1987, cited by Wood et al 2007). It is worth noting however, that attachment types developed in infancy is not automatically predictive of the adult attachment type (Main & Goldwin 1984, cited by Wood et al 2007) as it is possible to transform from an insecure child type to a secure adult attachment, termed 'earned security' and vice versa (cited by Wood et al 2007).

Stability and instability can affect adult attachment in addition to security. Major life changes and events occurring during an individual's childhood are influential (Zimmerman et al 2000, Hamilton 1994, both cited by Wood et al 2007) Meta-analysis of attachment studies conducted by Van Ijzendoorn revealed other causations such as the primary attachment figure's own attachment type, which can be predictive of their behaviour towards the infant (cited by Wood et al 200) which inextricably links to attachment, intergenerational, cultural and historical factors.

The researcher, within this study, seeks to answer the question " 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". The researcher's motives are that although there are many diverse methods and

perspectives underpinning the above research, there are none that the researcher is aware of that explore the perspective of the insider in relation to their individual development, early attachment and experiences. This semi-structured interview with Assan provides the subjective data for the researcher to conduct a thematic analysis in order to interpret the intrinsic meanings within the social constructionist perspective.

### **Method:**

Pre-existing data provided by The Open University was analysed by the researcher, a psychology student. The data consisted of an edited video clip of a semi-structured interview with Assan (a 35 year old man who was born in Yemen, grew up in the Middle East and has lived in Britain since he was 15 years old) and a transcript of 8 pages. The participant was given ethical consideration in accordance with the British Psychological Society Guidelines (BPS 2009). He was briefed, given the right to withdraw at any time and informed consent was obtained for the interview to be used in this way. Anonymity was maintained as Assan was played by an actor in the video clip and a pseudonym was used. Debriefing was performed at the end of the interview.

The researcher repeatedly watched the video clip and repeatedly read the transcript before any note-taking. A copy of the transcript was with each line numbered was used to apply first order descriptive coding, second order coding – narrowing down the first order codes to groups with provisional titles, continuing with the iterative process until three key themes were refined and clarified. These three themes depict significant aspects of

Assan's experience which relate to the research question.

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## **Analysis:**

**The purpose of this study was to achieve an understanding of “ how adults perceive that significant others in their lives (i. e. people who are or have been important to them) have affected their development”. With the application of Theamatic analysis to the transcript of the interview the researcher has interpreted the language used by Assan to identify three themes of the interview:-**

**(1) Parental influence and encouragement**

**(2) Cultural influence and understanding**

**(3) Change and stability.**

**(1) Parental influence and encouragement.**

**Assan highlights some positive influences that his relationship with his father had on himself. His father is the first influential person he mentions “ the first would be my father” (line 20). He talks in depth about the encouragement he gained from his father.**

“ encouraged us to not be narrow-minded, to be open-minded, to question, to understand, to create a better relationship” (lines 35 -37)

“ encouraged me to sit down and discuss and question” (line 38)

Assan demonstrates a positive relationship with his father and that he sees his father in a positive way and values the impact he had on Assan’s life.

“ So these things are all, all part and parcel of growing up with a father who was open minded, allowed us to question and encourage us to question. I really valued that and enjoyed that relationship with him”. (lines 42 -45).

Assan also links a relationship to his brother as influential in life, It seems that the main day to day attachment figure was his brother rather than his father. Assan gained acceptance from his brother.

“ My brother was the eldest. He was a... in some respects similar to father figure in that he was quite a bit older than me, but he was someone who I looked up to..”(line 51-53)

“ because my father was sometime not there all the time, you know, sometimes my older brother would take up the role of the head of family” (line 53-55)

“ I felt he was very supportive of me.” (line 57)

Assan discusses his boss as someone who is influential to him now, his boss is almost a figure like his brother and his father, his boss is someone who offers encouragement to Assan.

“ Someone who I, who I quite look up to at present I would say is my boss, and he’s someone who has encouraged me a lot to try to do better in my job (line 123-125)

“ and this helped me to be better within my job and also better for him. But he, he’s someone who very much encouraged, encouraged me and be very supportive”(lines 127-129)

## **(2) Cultural influence and understanding**

Assan, due to his upbringing has developed an understanding of different cultures as well as his own and has had the opportunity to mix with lots of

different people from different walks of life and this has stood him in good stead for his current job as a journalist.

“.. encouraged us to mix with people and get to know other cultures as well.”

(lines 33 -34)

“ We come from a Muslim background but I had friends from all different backgrounds, different religions” (line 34-35.)

### **(3) Change and stability.**

Due to the job of Assan’s father, Assan was never able to settle anywhere for long and he was constantly getting to know different people, Assan has never really forged any deep relationships other than that with his wife as he has never been in one place long enough.

“ we never stayed in one place for very long.” (lines 27-28)

“ Because we move very much from place to place and country to country, I was very fast at making friends very quickly at school because I was constantly being the new, new boy in the classroom”. (lines 70-72)

Assan feels that the support from his father in the way he was brought up has enabled him to integrate into different societies very quickly.

“ because of how I was brought up to ask people questions to get to understand them” (line 73)



By me being myself and being open and asking them questions, they feel they get to know me and they feel that this person is not so bad after all.”

(lines 78-79)

Although Assan talks in a positive way in relation to his upbringing and travelling around, he does seem to be hesitant to have children as he does not want to be absent from his family for long periods like his father was. He does still however, want to be a father to his children like his own was to him.

“ I think I would like family” (line 107)

“ It’s just a question of my job it’s a little difficult at present because it will be difficult for me to leave Alya with children” (line109-111)

“ And so I want to support her in this” (line 112)

“ want to be a father who, who is there and supportive of my children” (line 115-116)

“ even though my father not there long time, he very, he spent very long time with children and with me” (lines 116-118)

Assan also briefly mentions an insecurity stemming from his constant travelling.

Sometimes I feel really, with regards to myself, because I move around so much, I feel who is, where am I really from, what is my own, own background, where is home for me? (lines 95-98)

## **Discussion:**

The purpose behind this research was to provide insight from an insider's perspective when answering the question "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". Three key terms were identified in relation to Assan's attachment experiences and consequential development. This report was aimed at highlighting some of the significant issues that have arisen in relation to literature, the report however is not intended to give an exhaustive account of the themes.

### 1. Parental Influence

A particularly significant theme within the interview with Assan was that of parental influence, Assan's father had a positive influence upon Assan, however Assan's primary attachment figure would have been his brother. Despite continuity in his relationship with his brother, Assan's father was unable to commit to a normative parenting process and this has led to instability, Assan still even now seems to need constant praise and encouragement in order to feel secure. Instability in vertical relationships during infancy was found to influence attachment type and adult relationships (Zimmerman et al, as cited by Wood et al 2007). I therefore, infer that the father being absent for long periods of time, although when he was around he offered encouragement has contributed to Assan's development of an insecure attachment type as described by Ainsworth et al.

### 2. Cultural influence and understanding.

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It is clear to see that cultural understanding and the influence of Assan's own culture has given him good grounding for his career and development as an adult. By travelling he has been able to integrate into different societies with ease. Thus reflecting the theory of contextual development.

### 3. Change and Stability

Assan demonstrates that his constant moving around in his childhood would influence his parenting style as it has affected his own security and stability. Assan still lacks security in due to not really understanding who he is or where he comes from. I infer that he wishes to provide a different upbringing for his children whilst still incorporating the encouragement gained from his primary attachment figures.

### **Reflexive Analysis:**

My Open University Studies DSE212 required me to carry out this thematic analysis. I have found it challenging and frustrating. I was able to link the research already gathered on the theory of attachment to my own life and had preconceived ideas regarding the significance of attachment as a result. After watching the interview with Chloe, I felt that I was more able to relate to her life and experiences and would have enjoyed the self exploration I feel I would have gained had I have been required to analyse Chole's interview.

However, I was unable to identify with anything raised by Assan, I think this made it more difficult to conduct a thematic analysis of his interview. The only thing I had in common with Assan was that I have an older brother however the role his older brother played in his life was significant to his development for entirely different reasons to my own.

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Within this research my role was limited to the thematic analysis of the video clip and transcript, I also understand that to have carried out the whole of the research process would have been too time consuming and labour intensive, therefore I am pleased that I was only required to interpret the data gathered for me.

**Word Count: 2471**