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John Bowlby and ethology : a study of cross-fertilization

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INTERMEZZO.

**FROM THEORETICAL CLAIMS TO EMPIRICAL
EVIDENCE**

In the previous chapter we have seen how Bowlby from the mid-1950s, “with Robert Hinde's generous and stern guidance” (Bowlby, 1980b, p. 650), was introduced to the theoretical principles of ethology and studies in animal behavior. It became clear that from that point in time it was Bowlby's goal “to rewrite psychoanalysis in the light of ethological principles” (Dinnage, 1979, p. 325), because, according to Bowlby, “the theory was a mess – there was no suitable theory really” (Senn, 1977). At the same time it was Bowlby's “belief that problems of method and theoretical interpretation are best approached from a firm base in empirical data” (Bowlby, 1961d, p. xiii). However, his problem was that the empirical basis to support his new view of the mother-child bond was exactly what he was lacking.

Therefore, Bowlby started collecting evidence that could support his new views. The interdisciplinary approach he took to accomplish this fact is reflected in four symposia held in the late 1950s and early 1960s. For these symposia it was Bowlby's goal to invite a small number of people

who were already engaged in first-hand studies of the behaviour of infants and young children in a social setting, ... representatives of those making similar studies in animals, ... [and] a number of clinicians who could contribute from their experience of what seems pathologically and therapeutically relevant. (Bowlby, 1961d, p. xiv)

During these meetings Bowlby emphasized the need for an exchange of ideas between different fields of study and the fact that “these meetings have been convened in the belief that an understanding of mother-infant interaction in humans will come soonest if the knowledge and skills of several different groups of workers are pooled” (Bowlby, 1965, p. xiii).

During these so-called Ciba-conferences it was important that priority was given to “empirical studies, especially those that utilize first-hand observations of what actually happens between infant and mother. In the past these have been scarce, but an increasing number of investigators are now awakening to their interest and value” (Bowlby, 1963b, p. xi). After the symposia, Bowlby recapitulated that it was interesting to see “how the work... reported had been influenced or even initiated as a result of discussions that had occurred at... previous meetings or as a result of visits or correspondence that had been started at them” (Bowlby, 1969, p. xiv).

In an interview Bowlby once stated that “in 1957 I started tackling theory” (Senn, 1977). In that year he proposed “a new theoretical framework for understanding problems of personality development and pathology,” (Bowlby, 1980b, p. 650) but “because this framework [wa]s radically different to the frameworks adopted by psychoanalysts and learning theorists, it remain[ed] controversial” (ibid.). The controversiality of the theory would diminish though, “thanks in large part to the related studies of rhesus monkeys undertaken by Harry Harlow in the US and Hinde over here” (ibid.). Harlow and Hinde were to carry out the experimental developmental research that Bowlby needed for the empirical validation of his ideas. The cross-fertilization of the work and ideas of Harlow and Bowlby is the subject of

the next chapter: attention will be drawn to what happens “when strangers from strange disciplines first meet” (Bowlby, 1969, p. xiii).