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# **Bringing Practice into Theory: Social Workers' Experiences of Bringing Social Work into Attachment Theory**

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## **Abstract**

Attachment theory and social work have sustained an ongoing relationship since the early work of John Bowlby in the 1940s through to the current day. This longstanding relationship provided a frame for this current study which: explored social workers' described experiences of using attachment theory as a social work practice theory and identified patterns of processing attachment theory for social work practice. This qualitative study was methodologically guided by a hermeneutic phenomenological paradigm based on the work of Max van Manen (1990). Data collection involved a review of relevant literature followed by semi-structured in-depth interviews. Data construction included the development and implementation of a "Letter of Understanding Process" in conjunction with the construction of transcripts. Data-analysis processes consistent with hermeneutic phenomenological methods were utilised. Review of the literature suggested that attachment theory, originally developed by Bowlby (1958) and Ainsworth (1963), emphasised a relational perspective inclusive of the attachment-caregiving-exploratory systems. However within the translation process of this theory and its developments over the decades into a social work practice theory, the focus shifted from one of relationships at times of high need to one where the client and their external world of events and happenings was emphasised.

Findings from the interviews found social workers' experiences of the use of attachment theory, reflected identified shifts of focus within the literature. Also found was a theory-practice processing pattern identified as the social worker "bringing practice into theory". In light of these findings, the social worker was foregrounded as one who brings practice into the lived experience of theory. Issues of sustaining the coherence of attachment theory in practice and issues of context were explored as impacting on the lived experience of theory and practice. In response to these findings practice implications were considered resulting in the development of attachment theory informed social work practice principles. Finally based on the conclusions of this study an attachment theory informed model of reflective practice was recommended along with considerations for future research.

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