

Critical discussion & Evaluation of Bowlby's views on the effects of maternal deprivation

By Kendra Pinder

Bowlby's theory of "Maternal deprivation" was founded on the hypothesis, that if a child is detached on a physical and emotional level from its primary carer. (In this case the mother) that this will have long term affects emotionally for that child. This detachment according to Bowlby would see an increase in disruptive and deviant behaviour, as well as a detachment between themselves and their children in the future, even going as far as to suggest that a child that is affected by the detachment of its mother, could possibly child grow into an "affectionless psychopath" lacking any social conscience.

Bowlby's foundation for his theory was based on the research of a group of children who had been referred to his clinic for stealing (juvenile thieves), according to Bowlby's research of this group, he found that 32% of them were indeed lacking any conscious understanding or empathy towards the society in which they inhabited and was part of. 86% apparently had indeed experienced early separation (if only for a week before the age of 5) and in contrast only 17% of these children had not been deprived during their early years.

On this basis Bowlby claimed that maternal deprivation would have the following consequences on the child emotionally and physically-Aggressiveness, Depression, Delinquency, Dependency anxiety (clinging), Dwarfism (retarded growth), Affectionless psychopathy (showing no feelings for others), Intellectual retardation and Social maladjustment.

Shumaker echoes Bowlby's findings He states that "The structure of the family and home environments are very important in the development of the child" He believed that within early childhood if detachment happens from the main caregiver of that child. They do not have the same security within their known environment, nor the same emotional support. This then will have long term developmental and social affects on that child's later years. These children will become young delinquents and in adult years criminals.

Glueck and Glueck have also researched the possible causes of delinquency and through their findings found supportive evidence to confirm Bowlby's theory. Like Shumaker they too found that the individuals they studied had suffered detachment in various forms from an early age. These amongst other aspects were, Ineffective child rearing, lack of strict discipline, lack of love, lack of supervision, family disruption e.g. divorce ,Parental characteristics e.g. mental problems and so on. .

Moving on from when Bowlby first put forward this theory, it has a huge impact on society as we know it today. Bowlby has indeed done much to aid better child care within institutions, such as orphanages, children's homes and hospitals. Hospital administrators finding and implementing ways to allow parents more contact with their children during the separation period of their stay whilst receiving treatment etc. Also attempting to bring touch of home into the wards, such as décor, toys and so on.

Orphanages and children homes also followed suit downsizing the amount of children in one home and increasing the staff to child ratio.

The judicial system and children's welfare also took on board much of Bowlby's theory, when deliberating on a child's welfare when in an abusive home. Not only was the child's physical health taken on board but also emotional health also. In some cases children would be allowed to stay within the home, but the families would work with the children's welfare to encourage better parenting, and to find ways to work with the abusers to halt the abuse.

Apart from the latter, Bowlby's theory added to his research did hold much weight, and certainly seemed to have changed things for the better for child care within this country and across the globe in many respects.

Bowlby's theory of maternal deprivation though has had many criticisms from many academics, academics such as Sir Michael Rutter suggested that separation was in fact a very complex and diverse subject, and through research and study of children who were separated from their main primary carer, but had alternative caregivers such as fathers and extended families etc, were able to function and emotionally grow as well as a non separated child from its mother, if care was given early enough. In many cases, unlike Bowlby's suggestion that the harm is irreversible, Rutter in fact suggests that if not totally avoided, the above suggested traits put forward by Bowlby's theory could in fact be reversed.

Rutter suggests that in fact fathers can be equally as important as mothers, also that a multitude of individuals can give to a child all that it needs to grow healthily on an emotional and psychological level. The primary focus should be on the care given to the child, rather than who is giving it.

Gerhard Andersson's Swedish study echoes Rutter's belief. He studied a group of over 100 children in Sweden. He found that academically and socially the children, whose development and performance was highest, were the children that had started day care before their first birthday. The results from this study then suggest that day care improves children's cognitive development. In fact the earlier the better it would appear from this research. But of course this also depends on the quality of care given within that nursery. Overall this study does show that unlike Bowlby's theory a child becoming detached from their main care giver at an early age has its advantages, as long as the correct care that is needed is given, regardless if it is by the main care giver or not.

When evaluating both Bowlby's and Rutter's theories, though indeed it does seem that the maternal deprivation theory holds much weight, so does the theory of Rutter's book & theory "Maternal deprivation reassessed". Bowlby's research was focused very much on children who were already showing deviant behaviour etc, yet his research did not take into account that of children who had also undergone maternal deprivation from the mother but had no deviant or anti social attributes. To Bowlby, just the same as Freud, it certainly does seem as though what is broken can never be fixed. Research since then done by academics such as Rutter have been able to refute Bowlby's theory to varying degrees. Bowlby very much focuses on the mother within a child's life, and does not seem

to take into consideration other family members and caregivers. This it would seem also leads to much criticism of his theory.

The conclusion it would seem, would be to certainly take on board Bowlby's theory, but also to apply others' thoughts and findings within the child's psychology. We as a society could very easily be dismissing the strengths and advantages that others within a child's life. Also by understanding what the primary carer for a child would normally provide, this allows us to gauge what a child does in fact need in its life. Whether the mother is there or not, by understanding what another ideally should be providing for a child, an individual or many individuals can take on the role as wholly the primary carer, or segments of that role.

Bibliography

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