

John Bowlby and maternal deprivation

Bowlby believed that maternal behaviour was instinctive in humans as it appears to be in animals. Mothers and their babies form an instinctive attachment to each other using genetically inherited skills such as smiling, grasping, crying and so on. If a separation occurs between mother and infant within the first few years of the child's life, Bowlby believed that the bond would be irreversibly broken, leading to severe emotional consequences for the infant in later life. He referred to this as maternal deprivation. Bowlby claimed that maternal deprivation had the following consequences:

Aggressiveness	Depression
Delinquency	Dependency anxiety (being 'clinging')
Dwarfism (retarded growth)	Affectionless psychopathy (showing no feelings for others)
Intellectual retardation	Social maladjustment

(To help you remember these, the first letters of each spell **ADDIDDAS**)

Evidence for these claims comes from a number of research studies including: Spitz, Spitz & Wolf, Goldfarb, Robertson & Robertson

& Reading: Davenport p43 - 46 for detailed accounts of these studies.

As well as the 'evidence' from ethological studies and psychoanalytic theory, Bowlby also conducted his own studies of maternal deprivation, notably his study on 'forty-four juvenile thieves'.

& Reading: Davenport p41-42 'What happens if attachments are insecure?'

Evaluation of Bowlby's contribution

Bowlby's ideas had far-reaching effects, leading to a much more child-centred approach by many institutions and organisations. It became regarded as best to try to avoid the break-up of families if possible because of the claimed consequences of maternal deprivation.

The recent debates about child abuse and the question of whether or not to remove 'at risk' children from their natural parents can be seen to be related to the idea of maternal deprivation. If Bowlby is right, it may be better to leave such children with their parents — the long-term damage which could result from maternal deprivation might be a more important consideration than the risk of abuse. On the other hand, if Bowlby is wrong, children could be left in a potentially dangerous situation. However, one of the major effects of Bowlby's claims was to direct greater attention to the child's emotional and psychological needs, which weren't considered as important in the 1920's and 30's as they are today.

Much of the evidence Bowlby uses to support his views comes from studies carried out in the 1950's and 60's. The nature of the issues being investigated meant that controlled experiments couldn't be carried out. It would not be possible to separate children from their mothers in an experiment! Because control of variables was difficult, clear conclusions were difficult to

draw. Other evidence from psychoanalytic case studies or from animal studies must also be interpreted very carefully.

During the 1970's Bowlby's view came under increasing criticism as a result of other studies of varying degrees of 'maternal deprivation' which showed conflicting evidence. The most important critics of Bowlby were Ann and Alan Clarke in their book 'Early Experience – Myth and Evidence' and Michael Rutter in 'Maternal Deprivation Re-assessed'.

Conclusions

While early studies appeared to support Bowlby's views, later studies showed conflicting results. The problem with Bowlby's view is that the concept of maternal deprivation is just too wide, and his early claims about the effects of maternal deprivation were too extreme, a point Bowlby himself realised by the late 1950's.

Evidence from studies of separation have concluded that Bowlby's concept of maternal deprivation is too vague, and tends to ignore the influence of attachments other than those with the mother. Psychologists now use the term parenting in order to emphasise that 'mothering' can be provided by people other than the natural mother, and even by several people, both male and female.

The main criticisms of Bowlby are:

1. His concept of maternal deprivation is much too broad
2. The effects of maternal deprivation can be reversed later — as shown in the studies of Koluchova and the Robertsons
3. Most studies were poorly controlled
4. He ignores children's ability to form attachments with other adults and/or children
5. His samples were unrepresentative