

Outline and evaluate Bowlby's maternal deprivation hypothesis

The first model of attachment that John Bowlby created was called the maternal deprivation hypothesis. It claimed that it was essential for a child's psychological health to form an attachment to its mother figure. He said that 'the young child's hunger for his mother's love and presence is as great as his hunger for food'. Bowlby held the view that if a child lacked an attachment to a mother figure it could have major effects on its development. It was a model which focused on the negative consequences. Bowlby argued that there is a critical period for the formation of attachments. This led him to claim that the attachment to the mother could not be broken in the first few years of life without serious and permanent damage to social, emotional and intellectual development. This is the maternal deprivation hypothesis (1951) which was based largely on studies during the 1930's and 1940's of children brought up in orphanages, residential nurseries and other large institutions. Bowlby proposed that young children who experience early 'bond disruption' will experience permanent emotional damage and may subsequently become 'affectionless psychopaths' – this means individuals who lack empathy for others. However, Bowlby thought that these effects would be reduced by the return of an absent mother or the introduction of a substitute mother figure. According to Bowlby, fostering or adoption could also give a child adequate care as they involve a single mother figure with whom a primary attachment can possibly be made. It is unlikely that institutional care e.g. orphanages, would provide a replacement as there is no single mother figure present.

Spitz (1945, 1946) carried out studies that concentrated more on the emotional effects of institutionalisation. Spitz visited some very poor orphanages in South America where infants, who had irregular attention from the staff, were very apathetic and showed high rates of depression e.g. loss of appetite and morbidity. After 3 months of unbroken deprivation, recovery is rarely complete. Bowlby and these types of studies failed to see that the institutions, which were clearly of very poor quality, not only failed to provide adequate maternal care but they were also very unstimulating environments in which to grow up. Therefore we cannot say that it is maternal deprivation that is responsible for lack of development.

Bowlby failed to distinguish between

- a) The effects of being separated from an attachment figure and
- b) The effects of never having formed an attachment to begin with.

Rutter (1981) said that the term deprivation refers to the loss of a mother figure; the effects of this are usually short-term and can be summarized as distress. However, the effects can also be long-term. Bowlby's theory was mainly concerned with deprivation. Privation is another concept, which refers to the absence of any attachment at all and the effects are usually long term. An example of short term separation is when a child goes into a residential nursery whilst its mother is in hospital to have another baby. Bowlby found the term DISTRESS characterised the typical kind of response young children go through when separated from their mother for periods of time. It comprises of three stages:

1. Protest
2. Despair
3. Detachment

Although not every child goes through these stages and the degree of distress is not the same for every child. Separation is more likely to be more distressing between 7 and 8 months as this is when attachment has just developed, and three years (and it reaches a peak between 12 months and 18 months – Maccoby 1980). One of the crucial factors associated with age is the ability to hold in the mind an image of the absent mother or to be able to think about her. The child's ability to understand language is also an added difficulty. This is because they may find it hard to understand words such as 'tomorrow' and 'only a few days away' and so explaining the separation is only temporary is hard and also why the separation has had to occur. In this case, young children may believe they have been

abandoned all together or that they are no longer loved etc. They also may feel that they themselves are to blame in some way – 'because I'm bad'.

There are wide variations between gender groups all around the world; however, boys are generally more distressed and vulnerable than girls. It is true for both genders though, that any existing problem that have occurred before separation become stronger or more apparent afterwards. An example of this is a child who is uncommunicative or socially inhibited is more likely to become distressed by admission to hospital. The more stable the relationship with the mother before separation, the better the child appears to cope. There is less chance that the child will blame itself in any way for the separation taking place. However it is also true that when the child has an extremely close relationship with the mother i.e. it is very protective, where the child is rarely out of its mothers sight and is not used to meeting new people, it may make the child less able to cope with separation. This is because it will seem the separation is more traumatic as it has never experienced anything like it before. There is evidence that shows if a child has 'positive' separations it may help the child become more independent and able to cope with separations in the future. Stacey et al. (1970) studies 4 year olds who went into hospital for short periods. Their stay was 4 nights long and their parents were not able to stay over night. Some coped very well and it was found that these children had experienced separation before. Mostly staying at friends or relatives.

Institutions can provide very high quality care in place of a mother as an attachment figure. An example of this is the Hampstead nursery run by Anna Freud (1942-44), where affection, stability and involvement were encouraged. Some institutions however are run in a way where it is impossible for any sort of attachment to develop an example of this is the nurseries looked at by Tizard and Rees (1974).

Bowlby believed that the importance of a mother figure lies in the model she provides for all future relationships. This develops out of the primary attachment relationship. He called this out internal working model. He argued that there is a link between early and later relationships. Particularly if a child has experienced maternal deprivation then this may well lead to unsatisfactory relationships in later life. For example lacking the ability to form close and long lasting relationships.

There were various reasons to criticise Bowlby's hypothesis. Rutter (1981) said that Bowlby was mixing up different kinds of deprivation and also confusing cause and correlation. Bowlby's maternal deprivation hypothesis possibly came from his Freudian training i.e. the infant may be deprived from certain physical satisfactions during development and this may lead to a long-term fixation. Bowlby's attachment theory (1969) was built on ethologists work and used principles of evolution and natural selection to explain the behaviours they observed. Bowlby argued that infants had one special attachment (monotropy). This is the idea that each child has a kind of hierarchy of attachments with one emotionally distinct relationship at the top). The importance of this relationship lies in the fact that it acts as a model for all future relationships. In this case, it therefore means that infants who are deprived of care of responsive and sensitive carers during their early years will be forever emotionally scarred. A child who is securely attached to their mother is not necessarily securely attached to other attachment figures. This suggests that quality of attachment is lodged in the relationship rather than the individual, and challenges Bowlby's concept of the internal working model.

The studies carried out in the early 1900's are not necessarily relevant in today's society as things have changed a lot since then, also as the sample was quite restricted i.e. specific area and children of specific background, this decreases the validity. Bowlby may have been incorrect to generalise his findings to the whole population of children. Bowlby did not acknowledge the role of the father in his study. He talked of maternal deprivation – there was no mention of the paternal role involved in a child's development. It is quite common now for a child's father to have an active role in their upbringing and so this is another reason why this hypothesis is not so reflective of today's society. For Bowlby, the mother-child relationship was central to the attachment process. The mother was the primary caregiver and the primary attachment figure. He saw the father's role to be that of supporting the mother. He was to financially support her and also emotionally, and give her companionship. Evidence shows that children have no preference for mothers or fathers in unstressful situations. However, in stressful situations, children tend to favour their mother (Lamb 1976). However this preference disappears with age. Some boys may grow to favour their father. One study by Lamb in 1977 showed that boys between 14 and 24 months favoured their father. This shows that the father may play a very active role – unlike the role Bowlby painted for him.

Bowlby's work was done after the war, it was commissioned by the government and so it would not have been looked very positive on if he were to have said more was needed in our institutional care systems. After the war women had become empowered and this had upset social order. This was because whilst the men were away fighting, the women had to get jobs and provide for their families. Once the war was over, the women chose to stay in these occupations as they now were aware they were capable of working. There had been a huge raise of female awareness of their position in society. Feminists were against Bowlby's work as they saw it as a way of trying to get them back into the home.

There was concern – especially in 1950's and 60's the temporary separations from the main caregiver in infancy could lead to insecure attachments. And that this insecurity can lead to long term psychological harm. However many researchers believe that good quality care has no negative effects on attachments. Some psychologists believed that separation from the caregiver weakens the bond however, Schaffer disagrees and says as long as certain conditions i.e. quality of care stay the same, then sufficient attachment styles will remain. Belsky claimed that for children under the age of 1, day care over 20 hours a week increased the risk of insecure attachments. After the age of 1, day care appeared to have no risk on the child's attachment. This supports Bowlby's work as he talked of the same critical period.

Bowlby's maternal deprivation hypothesis was based on his own research. He worked as a psychiatrist at the London Child Guidance Clinic during the 1930's. He recorded cases of some of the boys which then formed the basis of his research. Bowlby selected a sample of 44 'thieves' and compared them to 44 boys with no criminal record who had also attended the clinic. He classed 14 of these thieves as 'affectionless psychopaths'. He believed that affectionless psychopathy often results from maternal deprivation. 12 out of 14 of these boys had 'early and prolonged separations from their mothers'. Of the remaining 74 boys, only 7 had experienced early separations. This appears to support his theory. However, Bowlby may have created 'affectionless psychopathy' through bias towards his study – as he wanted to gain results. It may have resulted from experimental bias by looking hard for what he hoped and expected to happen. Bowlby had coined the term and as it was not a classified label it was he who then labelled these boys. A correlation between two things does not necessarily mean that one has caused the other. Rutter (1981) questioned Bowlby's view that separation in itself produced harmful effects for the child. He said it was the events and experiences that came before the separation that were more important than the separation itself. He said that if a child is separated from its mother due to a psychological disorder, drug addiction or divorce, then it is more likely to produce harmful effects than if the separation was due to death or a long-standing illness. This is 'not because of the separation involved but rather because of the discord and disharmony which led to the break'. A study of 2000 boys between the ages of 9 and 12 living on the Isle of Wight and in London (1976) looked at the relationship between separation and delinquency. It was found that it is conflict and stress which precedes separation rather than separation itself that is the likely underlying cause of anti-social behaviour. However, this data was collected retrospectively and so may not be reliable, the sample was not entirely representative and the evidence is correlation – so no cause and effect can be established.

Bowlby used other studies to collect his research as well as his own. Goldfarb (1943) looked at the effects of children being raised in institutions. He compared 2 groups of 15 children. The 1st group was directly from their natural mothers to foster parents before the age of one. The 2nd group were raised in a residential nursery and then later fostered. The 2 groups were assessed between the ages of 10 and 14. The group from institutional care had not developed as much as the others. They had lower IQ's, lower language skills, were less likely to behave and follow social norms and make relationships. The main difference seemed to be the presence or absence of a mother figure during infancy. This Goldfarb suggested explains the difference between the 2 groups. Although this seems to support Bowlby's work, his research was not random and not entirely representative. The problems of the children raised in the nursery were due to a failure to form attachments during infancy. But in part these problems may have been due to the conditions and the children not having the opportunity to form attachments. Babies under 9 months were kept in single cubicles and their only human contact was to be fed and changed. It is not surprising then that they had poor language skills later on.

Rutter (1981) makes the point that Bowlby's use of the term deprivation was not precise and was also quite vague. He felt that there needed to be a distinction made between deprivation and privation. **Privation** is a lack of attachment due to a failure to form attachment between infant and caregiver, and **deprivation** is the loss of an attachment which has already been made. The distinction between the two is important as each may have different effects. Despite this, Rutter accepted Bowlby's major argument, that early attachment between adult and child is essential for a child to have a healthy psychological development.