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DEPRIVATION OF MATERNAL CARE

A Reassessment of its Effects

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PREFACE

Bowlby's monograph Maternal Care and Mental Health was published by the World Health Organization in 1951,¹ and was at once acclaimed as an unequalled contribution to its subject. Its success is shown by the frequency with which it has been printed and the many languages into which it has been translated.

The conclusion Bowlby reaches in his monograph is that the prolonged deprivation of the young child of maternal care may have grave and far-reaching effects on his character and so on the whole of his future life ; and he draws the corollary that the proper care of children deprived of a normal home life is not merely an act of common humanity, but essential to the mental and social welfare of a community. His indictment on that score of the nurseries, institutions, and hospitals of even the so-called advanced countries has contributed to a remarkable change in outlook that has led to a widespread improvement in the institutional care of children.

While the practical effects of Bowlby's monograph in the realm of child care have been universally acknowledged to be wholly beneficial, his theoretical conclusions have been subjected to a considerable amount of criticism. Some of this criticism is scarcely to the point, for it taxes Bowlby with failing to take into account aspects of deprivation that he himself deliberately omitted, either because he had not space within the limits of a monograph to deal with them or because he did not consider that there was sufficient evidence to pronounce upon them. Some of the criticism is based on misinterpretations of his views, which have been widely publicized in often over-simplified, extreme, or distorted forms. Other criticism, however, disputes the conclusions he has drawn from the evidence, or the value of the evidence itself. Finally, in the ten years that have elapsed since his monograph was published, there has inevitably been further research into the problem of maternal deprivation, and the problem has come to be viewed in a wider perspective—Bowlby has himself incorporated ethological theories into his views of child development.

¹ Bowlby, J. (1951) *Maternal care and mental health*, Geneva (World Health Organization Monograph Series, No. 2); 2nd edition, 1952.

Since there is a certain amount of confusion about the present position of Bowlby's theory about maternal deprivation, the time was considered ripe to attempt a reassessment in the light of advances in the last ten years and criticisms of the theory. A number of distinguished workers in child psychiatry and in allied fields were invited to discuss some of the issues involved. To these authors the World Health Organization owes a debt of gratitude for their contributions.

Because of pressing commitments, Dr Bowlby was unable himself to contribute a paper giving his present views, but this gap has been ably filled by his colleague Dr Ainsworth, with whose paper Dr Bowlby is in full agreement. There can be little doubt that the balanced view Dr Ainsworth takes of the evidence and the cautious conclusions she reaches not only take the issue out of the area of controversy but also present the research worker with a series of fascinating questions whose solution in the future would go far towards settling the problem of maternal deprivation.

For it cannot be said that this publication is the last word on the problem of deprivation. Bowlby's original study was limited to countries of Western Europe and North America, and he was unable to incorporate into it experience of deprivation in Eastern European countries—where the changes in the social role of women have been even more pronounced than in the West. Moreover, knowledge is lacking of deprivation in other countries of the world where the cultural situation and the status of women are totally different. Nor have such factors as paternal deprivation and its interaction with maternal deprivation been fully explored, or the analysis of deprivation itself been carried as far as it could conceivably be. This reassessment does not claim, therefore, to offer a definitive solution to the problem of deprivation. But it is hoped that it will at least provide a stimulus to further research into a problem that is of the greatest importance not only for the care of children but also for the social life of the whole community.
