

## A SOCIAL SCIENTIST'S APPROACH TO MATERNAL DEPRIVATION

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Since publication of my *Social Science and Social Pathology*<sup>23</sup> I have not undertaken substantial further research into theories of the effects of maternal separation or deprivation. Most of the later studies that have come to my notice do not appear to have advanced the argument very significantly either in one direction or in the other. Many of them deal only with very small samples, or concentrate upon the experience of children who have been hospitalized, which for reasons given later in this chapter is not a very good basis for generalizations regarding the effects of maternal separation as such. Criticisms of Bowlby's handling of the evidence in his follow-up study<sup>7</sup> have been made in a correspondence in the *Lancet*,<sup>12, 22</sup> but neither these nor Dr Bowlby's reply<sup>5</sup> take us very far. Hence, although I have added references to a few studies of major importance which were not available at the time that my book went to press, this chapter is in the main an abbreviated reproduction of what I have already said in the relevant chapter of that book.\*\*

The maternal deprivation theories propounded by Dr Bowlby in his monograph<sup>4</sup> seem to have been criticized on several distinct grounds. First it is said that Dr Bowlby in his comparisons between separated and non-separated children paid too little attention to the findings of studies which run counter to his theory as to the damaging effects of separation. He mentions in fact only three of these — namely, Orgel's study of only 16 children, Brown's comparison of 200 children from orphanages and 100 boys of low socio-economic status with a group of 200 children drawn at random from the general population, and the study made by Bodman and others of 51 institutionalized children with 52 brought up in their own homes. On these Bowlby comments, not unfairly, that "none of them is of high scientific quality".

Too much must not, I think, be made of this particular criticism — for the reason that, at the time that Bowlby wrote his monograph,

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little serious evidence could be found against the hypothesis that institutionalized children tend to be backward in development. In fact if the hypothesis is stated in these terms (a point on which more will be said presently) the weight of evidence is clearly on Bowlby's side, at least up to the date of his monograph; though, as Bowlby has himself since acknowledged, some of the authors upon whose work he relied, such as Bender, Goldfarb and Spitz, did on occasion overstate their case.

Since that date, however, fresh doubts have been raised by further studies — notably in England by Dr Hilda Lewis's study of 500 children admitted to a reception centre. Lewis found that

“ Unless separation of child from mother had occurred before the age of two years and had been lasting, it bore no statistically significant relation to the normality or otherwise of the child's mental state at the time of admission. No clear connexion was evident between separation from the mother and a particular pattern of disturbed behaviour. Neither delinquency nor incapacity for affectionate relationships was significantly more frequent in the separated children ”.<sup>15</sup>

It was, moreover, the mildly, rather than the violently, disturbed children who accounted for the statistical significance even of lasting separation from the mother; whereas according to the Bowlby hypothesis “ the cases of most serious harm should be found among those children who had been separated from their mothers for long periods or permanently before the age of two years ”.<sup>15</sup> As judged by the criteria used by Lewis, at any rate, early or lasting separation appears to have had no such disastrous consequences as are predicted by the Bowlby school — an observation which does not surprise its author in view of the fact that the mere physical presence or absence of the child's own mother is no true index of the quality of mothering which the child may have enjoyed. “ Unduly dogmatic statements about ill-effects of maternal deprivation ”, she comments, “ often leave out of account the emotional hazards and harms children may suffer from bad mothers and indifferent mother-substitutes, or the variety of sources (including the father) from whom children may draw the love and support necessary for their happiness ”.<sup>15</sup> Although separation from the mother before the age of five years was found to be “ a prognostically adverse feature ”, yet “ nearly a third of the children who were separated from their mothers [were] in a satisfactory condition at the end of the follow-up period ” (i.e., from two to three and a half years after admission to the centre); “ and permanent separation before the age of two had not been the prelude to a particularly unsatisfactory condition of the child at the end of the period ”.<sup>15</sup>

Inconclusive results have also been obtained both by Rowntree and by Douglas & Blomfield. Rowntree,<sup>19</sup> whose study related to a sample of the children born in Great Britain in a single week during 1946,

found that by the time they were four years old, 6% of the (legitimate) babies in the original sample were living in households in which one parent was no longer present, being dead, divorced, estranged or temporarily absent. After matching each child so deprived with another from "a stable and united family" for sex, birth order and certain family circumstances, she arrived at a total of 277 pairs for whom "complete information on social background, child health and development" was available. In the upshot the children of broken homes "were not exceptionally prone to the grosser forms of emotional disturbance, apart from a rather higher incidence of bed-wetting at four years old, which affected only the better-off families." So far as could be estimated, "the great majority of children in broken homes were as well and as normal in behaviour as those living in more stable circumstances." Similarly Douglas & Blomfield<sup>8</sup> in a survey of 4668 legitimate children found that 52% had been separated between birth and the age of six. Those separated for more than four weeks were matched with others not separated in similar types of family and the same locality. From observation of these children the authors concluded that separation did not affect children "adversely in any way if they remained at home. Among the children sent away from home, more nightmares and bad habits, such as thumb-sucking," were reported for the separated as against the controls. "Rather more of the former also attended Child Guidance and Speech Therapy clinics later. But these differences were relatively small".<sup>9</sup> But the authors add this cautious comment "Although so far we have no records of serious disturbances, and most of the mothers themselves do not appear to be worried, we do not in any way regard this as a final conclusion".<sup>8</sup>

Doubtless further evidence will accumulate in the course of time. In the meantime it must be accepted that the number of institutionalized children who show signs of seriously retarded development is sufficiently large to be disquieting.

A second and more serious criticism relates to the interpretation which is put upon the available evidence. Most of this is derived from crude contrasts between children living in various types of institution and those brought up in their own homes. On this basis theories have been developed in which all the emphasis is laid upon the separation experience itself, without adequate regard to the conditions that a child comes from or goes to. Indeed so obsessed are some investigators with the importance of the separation experience and so convinced that its roots are as much biological as social that they think it worth while to make experiments as to the effects of maternal separation on young animals. In consequence they have been remarkably blind to the dangers of relying upon evidence from institutions, and, in particular, to

the variables introduced by the use of arbitrarily selected institutions. In order to establish that the damaging factor in a child's experience is his separation from home rather than the régime of the particular institution in which he finds himself, it would be necessary to study the development, not only of a sufficient sample of children, but also of children who have lived in a sufficiently representative sample of institutions. An institution is not a standard unit; and there can be good institutions as well as bad ones. Generally speaking the information given by investigators (notably Goldfarb, Spitz, Roudinesco) about the way in which their institutionalized children lived is far from full. One is, however, left with the impression that these children were not as a rule very intelligently or even always very kindly treated. Nor has sufficient weight generally been given to the possibility that communal homes for children may differ from families in other respects beside the opportunity which they offer for intimate affectionate relationships. How, one would like to know, were the institutionalized children fed? Could their backwardness have been due, in any degree, to dietary deficiencies? Little seems to have been done to control such important variables as these; but it is perhaps significant that a Dutch investigation,<sup>14</sup> covering 38 children's homes, some eight or ten years ago found much to be desired in the diet provided. Again, in many cases evidence was drawn from children who had spent considerable periods in hospital. But a hospital is a frightening place (and the illness which gets you there can be a frightening experience too), quite apart from the fact that being in hospital means being away from home and mother. Stott,<sup>20</sup> for instance, in an inquiry into the history of 141 backward children of whom 25 had been separated for at least 10 weeks in the first four years of life came to the conclusion that "in itself the separation certainly does not have the dire consequences that have been supposed"; and he suggests that "the early illnesses more than the separations were responsible for the later unforthcomingness and anxious over-attachment to the mother". Sweeping condemnations of institutional life in general cannot fairly be based upon the anxieties and depression manifested by children in hospitals — even if, as some investigators have shown, sick children cheer up considerably when they are allowed to keep contact with their mothers.

What these studies of institutionalized children have revealed is not so much that children need dependable love — a truth which surely man has known in theory as long as he has ignored it in practice — as that, as things are, they are more likely to find this in families than in institutions. This, however, is a social, rather than a psychological, fact; it is a commentary upon the way in which many institutions are, or have been, run. By calling attention to the imperfections of many

existing children's institutions, the separationists have undoubtedly rendered a valuable social service; but this does not alter the fact that so far as their own researches are concerned, the inferences which they have drawn are misleading and the emphasis is misplaced. When Elizabeth Fry exposed the insanitary conditions that obtained in 19th century prisons, no one applauded her for the discovery that good sanitary conditions were to be desired: the merit of her work was its demonstration that such conditions were not to be found in prisons. The parallel holds. By a curious misplacement of emphasis, even the best work on maternal deprivation seems to have obscured its own genuine discoveries by highlighting what are little more than platitudes; with the unfortunate result, as Edelston has put it, of "mother separation" becoming an all-embracing cliché every bit as much as the 'broken home' ".<sup>9</sup> In this connexion it is indeed pertinent to recall both Margaret Mead's observation that "cross-cultural studies suggest that adjustment is most facilitated if the child is cared for by many warm, friendly people",<sup>10</sup> and her plea to the WHO Study Group on the Psychological Development of the Child in 1954 that we should restyle our lives so that children can learn that there is more than one person whom they can trust.<sup>11</sup>

Uncritical reliance upon the experience of institutions has resulted further in the separation theorists paying too little attention to the background of the children concerned. Institutionalized children are not a random sample of the population of their age. Factors that may well be important have too often been neglected; and even where these have been recognized, they have in some cases been treated with a levity that is altogether astonishing. Thus Bowlby, commenting in his monograph on a comparative study by Theis, observes that "so far as could be determined the heredity of the two groups was similar... Since heredity is, so far as possible, held constant for these two groups, the difference cannot be explained in this way" (p. 40).<sup>4</sup> Even with the qualification "so far as could be determined", such a light-hearted dismissal of the influence of differential inherited factors is astonishingly naïve. Again Bowlby has himself stated that the main criterion by which the presence of defective hereditary factors in his study of forty-four juvenile thieves was diagnosed was "the presence of neurosis, psychosis, or serious psychopathy in parents or grandparents" (p. 34) <sup>4</sup> — a criterion which implies a degree of confidence, both as to the diagnoses of two generations earlier and as to the conditions governing the inheritance of morbid mental conditions, which can hardly be justified by the evidence on the subject.

A third criticism of Dr Bowlby's theories relates to the hypothesis that the damaging effects of separation are irreversible. On this Bowlby,

along with other investigators such as Aubry and Spitz, has committed himself rather far. "There is", he wrote in his monograph, "abundant evidence that deprivation can have adverse effects on the development of children (a) during the period of separation, (b) during the period immediately after restoration to maternal care, and (c) permanently" (p. 47);<sup>4</sup> and from Goldfarb's work he draws the inference that even good mothering "is almost useless if delayed until after the age of 2½ years" (p. 49).<sup>4</sup> Actually, however, hardly any evidence is available to support such far-reaching conclusions unless indeed we are to accept as axiomatic the view that nobody's personality can change after, at latest, adolescence or early adult life. On any other assumption there can be no justification whatever for speaking of "permanent", "irreparable" or "irreversible" damage unless and until the victims of maternal deprivation have been followed right through life. Up to now, however, few investigations have succeeded in tracing the fortunes of the maternally deprived after adolescence: instances of follow-up beyond marriage are quite exceptional. Even in the follow-up study of Beres & Obers, none of the subjects was over twenty-six, and Theis, who kept track of some of her subjects up to the age of forty, stands practically alone. Rarely, therefore, has it yet been possible to test the — on the face of it not unreasonable — possibility that the injuries of those who may have suffered from infantile deprivation might in later life be healed by a happy choice of spouse. Indeed, we can still congratulate ourselves that no evidence at all has yet been produced that comes near to justifying the depressing claim that to be sent to an institution in infancy is tantamount to being wrecked for life. Whatever the future may show, reference in the present state of knowledge to the "permanent", "irreversible" or "irreparable" damage due to separation is reckless and unjustified.

The fourth criticism to be mentioned relates to the weight to be attached to separation experience as a factor in delinquency. It was, apparently, the study of a particular type of delinquent that first aroused Bowlby's interest in a possible connexion between maternal deprivation and antisocial behaviour. But the thieves who were the subject of this investigation, it should not be forgotten, numbered only forty-four. Out of this total seventeen were found to have suffered early or prolonged separation from their mothers or mother-figures during the first five years of their lives, as against only two of the forty-four controls who were drawn from other children attending the same child guidance clinic; while of the fourteen thieves who were specifically labelled affectionless, twelve had been separated, as against five of the remaining thirty. In this group the affectionless children were found to be "significantly more delinquent than the other thieves"; and they

constituted "more than half of the more serious and chronic offenders";<sup>3</sup> and, in additional support of his own conclusions, Bowlby adds that in "the late 1930's, at least six independent workers were struck by the frequency with which children who committed numerous delinquencies, who seemed to have no feelings for anyone and were very difficult to treat, were found to have had grossly disturbed relationships with their mothers in their early years" (p. 30).<sup>4</sup> Of these "delinquencies", however, no evidence is given.

In addition to his own forty-four thieves, Bowlby has quoted both Burt's and the Gluecks' investigations. Yet when the subjects of the latter study were followed up, the question whether they had enjoyed "the affectionate regard of their mothers"<sup>10</sup> turned out to have nothing to do with the persistence of their delinquent behaviour. Clearly this finding (to which no reference is made in the Bowlby monograph) is in direct conflict with Bowlby's own conclusion that the two factors which are especially common among *persistent* delinquents, and which distinguish them from "children suffering from other forms of maladjustment", are separation for six months or more from the mother or mother-figure in the first five years, during which the child is with strangers, and "being more or less unwanted by parents who are themselves unstable and unhappy people and whose attitudes towards him are, on balance, hostile, critical and punishing."<sup>11</sup>

Nor does the experience of the Hawthorne-Cedar Knolls School or Armstrong's study of runaway boys, both of which are quoted by Bowlby, add anything to the evidence of a link between separation and delinquency. For the Hawthorne-Cedar Knolls School, as Bowlby has himself stated, deals primarily with "grave psychiatric disorders"; and its population is, therefore, hardly typical of the delinquent world in general; while runaways, though sometimes delinquent, cannot be identified with those guilty of stealing or other criminal acts.

Undoubtedly the affectionless child with a life-story of unhappy experience of institutional life is one of the classical types of delinquent, and undoubtedly it is one of the most difficult types with which schools, courts and other agencies are called upon to deal. No evidence has, however, been produced to support the view that this type constitutes anything but a small minority of the delinquent population; or that, as Bowlby put it in 1946, "prolonged separation of a child from his mother (or mother-substitute) during the first five years of life stands foremost among the causes of delinquent character development and persistent misbehaviour".<sup>3</sup> Later evidence has, moreover, raised fresh doubts. Thus Edelston reports that he is led by his study of the effects upon children of the "hospitalization trauma" to believe that "the proportion of delinquent reactions is not very large".<sup>9</sup> Again, R. G. Andry

concluded from his examination of eighty delinquents and eighty controls that "separations between a child and one or other or both parents... do not seem to be primary factors in the etiology of delinquency";<sup>3</sup> and Hilda Lewis found that "Neither delinquency nor incapacity for affectionate relationships was significantly more frequent in the separated children".<sup>15</sup> In the Gluecks' latest work, the evidence is also equivocal. On the one hand, this investigation produced considerable concrete detail showing that the delinquents' home and family life was generally less satisfactory than that of the controls; yet at the same time "a considerable likeness" was observed "between the delinquents and non-delinquents in respect to the time at which the physical cohesion of their families first suffered a blow."<sup>11</sup> In the broken families, 56.3% of the delinquents and 46.7% of the controls were under the age of five when the break occurred; while 28.1% and 31.0%, respectively, were between five and nine years old at the time of the break. It follows that the break in the families of 84.4% of the delinquents and 77.7% of the controls occurred before the children concerned were ten years old. The differences are thus not very large. Finally we have Naess's study<sup>17</sup> of delinquent children in Oslo, published since the Bowlby monograph, in which she selected from the files of the Oslo Child Protection Council those cases which showed what she interpreted as a "delinquent character development" in Bowlby's sense. From those in this category who had non-delinquent brothers Naess built up a group of 42 delinquents and 42 controls, matched for age. Among these she found that separations had been less frequent among the delinquents than among the controls; and she therefore concluded that in these cases mother-separation could not be considered to "stand foremost among the causes" of the delinquent character development" and that "Bowlby's unreserved generalization in regard to the problem of delinquency and adult antisociability is too wide"; though at the same time she is careful to point out that there is no contradiction between these findings and Bowlby's general proposition about mother-deprivation and character development.

The fifth criticism of the theories of Dr Bowlby and his fellow workers which seems to me to carry substantial weight relates to failure to evaluate the results obtained against the experience of the population at large. The prominence of neurotic or delinquent traits in the children investigated is to some extent explained by the fact that in many cases the subjects were drawn from those attending child guidance or psychiatric clinics. Naturally those who are found in these clinics tend to suffer from psychological troubles; and if, on investigation, it turns out that a fair proportion of such cases have a history of maternal deprivation or

separation, this history readily becomes suspect as a possible "etiological factor".

In order to estimate the weight of such an etiological factor, it is obviously necessary to know the incidence in the population at large of comparable infantile experiences. It is therefore much to be regretted that Dr Bowlby has apparently decided to give up as hopeless any attempt to get light on this essential quantitative aspect of his problem. To survey an adequate sample of the general population in order to discover both the incidence of separation experiences and the frequency with which these appear to cause damage that is both serious and lasting would be in Bowlby's view

"an undertaking of such magnitude as to lie outside the limit of feasibility. Whether it would be worth undertaking on a more superficial basis is doubtful... On the other hand, starting with the assumption that separation has already been shown to be a pathogenic factor, it might fruitfully be used to answer certain sociological questions: Where in the population does separation occur most frequently and in connexion with what problems?"<sup>1</sup>

This is certainly a counsel of despair as well as a grave breakdown in logic. The assumption that separation is a pathogenic factor cannot be substantiated unless and until it is demonstrated that the pathological symptoms appear more frequently among the separated than among the non-separated. No matter how intensively we may study the experience of those among the separated who are known to suffer from such symptoms, we can never assess the pathogenic nature of that experience so long as we have no idea how often others with similar histories manage to make out at least as well as the rest of us. To attempt such an assessment in the absence of this vital information is on a par with trying to calculate the insurance premiums to be charged for fire risks by reference only to those houses which have actually caught fire.

Finally there remains the problem of distinguishing between deprivation and separation. For obvious practical reasons separation is a much more tractable subject of investigation than is rejection or deprivation: research therefore tends to concentrate upon the former, thus ignoring the fact that, as Howells has observed, "the greater number of children who are deprived of mothering are in fact living with the mother and are not separated from her."<sup>18</sup> Bowlby is himself well aware of the importance of this distinction. Nevertheless in one of the most recent statements of his position he maintains that, although were he now to revise his monograph he would need to take account of various subsequent criticisms, the practical recommendations would stand. "In my judgment the separation of a young child from his mother-figure is not to be undertaken without weighty reasons, and then only provided there is a suitable and stable substitute available to care for him."<sup>6</sup>

To sum up, therefore, I can only repeat, in the words of the conclusion reached in my book, that up to the present research into effects of maternal deprivation is to be valued chiefly for its incidental exposure of the prevalence of deplorable patterns of institutional upbringing, and of the crass indifference of certain hospitals to childish sensitivities. Without doubt this research has already had excellent practical effects in stimulating many of the authorities responsible for children's homes and hospitals to change their ways for the better. Meanwhile, it is clear that, where the old bad methods survive, the children, as one would expect, suffer according to their temperaments and circumstances in various ways and in various degrees. Now and again their deprivation seems to express itself in a well-marked pattern of indifference to everybody except themselves, of which one of the expressions is repeated stealing. More than this, however, we cannot say. That the damage is life-long or irreversible, or that maternal deprivation is a major factor in criminal behaviour, must be regarded as unproven hypotheses.

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