

# Maternal Deprivation

By Don Corrington

*Maternal Deprivation* is a phrase that John Bowlby, introduced to describe certain situations in which an infant is deprived of the contact with his or her mother, or permanent mother substitute. He used this phrase in a report he was commissioned to do in 1951 for the World Health Organization.

Preparatory to compiling the report Bowlby visited several countries in Europe, the United Kingdom and the United States. He had discussions with individuals involved child care and child guidance and reviewed their work and research.

Bowlby relied on data and facts garnered from psycho-analytic treatment of adults and children, as gathered by psychologists and psychiatrists working in the child guidance fields as well as research he himself conducted. The evidence fell into three main classes. *Direct Studies* by direct observation of the mental health and development of children in institutions, hospitals and foster home, *Retrospective Studies* which investigated the early histories of adolescents or adults who had developed psychological illnesses and *Follow up Studies* which followed up on groups of children who suffered deprivation in their early years with the purpose to determine their state of mental health.

He postulated that the origins of mental health and mental illness could be found in the relationship experienced between an infant or young child and their mother, or permanent mother substitute. He identified the father's role as usually providing economic and emotional support of the mother. This was in contrast to some prevailing theories, especially those that stemmed from the German school of psychiatry, which focused on inherited factors.

Bowlby's theory has had far reaching impacts, including social and political ramifications. For example, women were encouraged to stay at home to allow returning soldiers to resume jobs women had done in the war. Also, some social workers became reluctant to take children, that were subject to abuse, into care feeling that "A bad home was better than the best institution".

Care of children was moved from large facilities to smaller family-based units. Children in institutions were provided psychological care. Mothers and babies were allowed to be together in maternity wards. Children in foster homes were not moved without psychological consideration.

Bowlby predicted that the long term consequences of maternal deprivation might result in delinquency, reduced intelligence, increased aggression, depression, or affectionless psychopathy. He also felt that the child's attachment relationship with their primary caregiver lead to the development of an internal working model. This internal working model was the cognitive framework comprising mental representations for understanding the world, self and others.

Some of the aspects of Bowlby's research methodology and conclusions have been challenged by other researchers. Some have accused Bowlby of not distinguishing between deprivation and privation. With privation being the complete lack of an attachment bond, rather than its loss. Sir Michael Rutter stressed that the quality of the attachment bond is the most important factor, rather than just deprivation in the critical period.

Bowlby's Maternal Deprivation is however, supported by the later work of Harlow's research with monkeys which demonstrated that monkeys reared in isolation from their mother suffered emotional and social problems in older age. The monkeys were prevented from forming an attachment to their mother and grew up to be aggressive and had problems interacting with other monkeys.

While it might appear that Bowlby's hypothesis regarding Maternal Deprivation proved to not to be completely accurate, continuing research in the fields of neurobiology and psychology would suggest that many of the concepts and conclusions still hold true.

Today's Attachment Theory and treatment modalities for of Affectionless Psychopathy, which has been reframed as Reactive Attachment Disorder, continue to look to his work.