

Effects of breaking attachment bonds



The attachment theory is the joint work of John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth. John Bowlby formulated the basic view of the theory, he has thereby revolutionised our thinking about a child's bond to its mother and its disruption through separation and deprivation. Mary Ainsworth made it possible to test some of Bowlby's ideas and expand the theory. She has been responsible for some of the new directions. Ainsworth contributed to the concept of the attachment figure being a secure base where an infant can explore the world. She also formulated the concept of how maternal sensitivity towards an infant has an effect in the development of infant-mother attachment patterns. Attachment can take different forms as secure and insecure. I am going to discuss various studies of attachments, where Bowlby's theory has inspired new ideas and studies by others who both test and support his theory and other who criticise these studies. I will include what effect this has on an infant in future life if disruptions occur, breaking parent-child attachment bonds.

Firstly it is important to understand why babies form attachments? According to behaviourists, behaviour is not natural but learnt. This suggests that we learn by watching others. Dollard and Miller (1950) suggested that attachment forms when a child is hungry or cold which motivates them to be satisfy its needs by eating or seeking warmth. Therefore the attachment occurs because the child wants the person providing the food and warmth. The behaviourist theories of attachments (and Freud's psychodynamic) are sometimes referred to as 'Cupboard Love' theories because of their emphasis on food and feeding. It does not consider or seek to explain the emotional nature of attachment, just simply how they arise as behaviours.

There have been many studies around the attachment theory which suggest that food is not the main requirement for forming attachments.

John Bowlby was a psychoanalyst who believed that mental health and behavioural problems could be connected to early childhood. Bowlby's theory is evolutionary and suggests children are biologically programmed to form attachments with others to help them to survive. He was very much influenced by the ethological theory of Lorenz's study of imprinting. Lorenz found that attachment was instinctive in young ducklings and was vital for their survival. He believed that attachment behaviours are natural and are activated by many conditions especially ones that cause fear.

Bowlby found that a long lasting emotional bond is essential for the survival and development in infants. He also noted that the fear of strangers represents an important survival mechanism, which is built in by nature. It is important for a baby to form a close bond to someone, as is the need for warmth, safety and food. These are all things any living beings need to survive. Babies are born with the tendency to display certain natural behaviours to ensure contact with the mother figure or caregiver by crying, smiling, babbling etc. Bowlby said that this was a two way relationship and that both infant and mother have a need to stay in contact with each other. These attachment behaviours all share the same function for example a baby cries and this gets the attention of the caregiver to respond to its needs. However, the attachment is not food but the care and responsiveness. Bowlby suggested that a child would form only one attachment and that attachment figure acted as a secure base for exploring the world. This attachment relationship acts as a model for all future social

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relationships and disruptions can have severe consequences on its intellectual, social and emotional development. He referred to this disruption of the bond with the mother as ‘ Maternal Deprivation’ or a disturbed emotional attachment between mother and child. He stated that this could cause ‘ irreparable damage’, not only to the child but to society as a whole. He felt that there was a ‘ Critical Period’ of the formation of attachments; he believed if children experienced maternal deprivation below the age of five years, they will suffer permanent damage. He claimed maternal deprivation has the following consequences on the child, aggressiveness, depression, delinquency, dwarfism, affectionless psychopathy, intellectual retardation and dependency anxiety.

In 1946, Bowlby looked at the life histories of eight-eight children who had been referred to his psychiatric clinic; half had a criminal record for theft, this study was known at the ‘ Forty-Four Thieves’. He found that 32% of the thieves displayed ‘ Affectionless Psychopathy’ where a person displays lack of affection or sense of responsibility. 86% of these thieves who were diagnosed as affectionless psychopaths had suffered early separation for at least a week before the age of five. This evidence appears to be strong to support Bowlby’s hypothesis, but the data was retrospective and correlational. So it is difficult to say that separation and affectionless psychopathy are linked. However, studies by Harlow and Harlow (1959) added some weight to Bowlby’s theories; they were able to demonstrate severe behavioural abnormalities in rhesus monkeys that had been deprived of contact with their mothers. It also demonstrated their own behaviour when they became parents which were similar to that shown by parents who

abuse or neglect their children. But any evidence which is collected from animal's studies must be interpreted carefully when being applied to humans not to mention the ethical issues surrounding this type of study. Other evidence of short-term separation by Robertson & Robertson displayed how children separated from their mothers would follow a characteristic pattern of protest, despair and detachment. They argued that this was evidence of bond disruption; however they do admit that it is sometimes possible that the distress was a possible result of a new environment. Further studies which they carried out proved that children could adapt well to separations if they were familiarised to their new surroundings and were able to form an attachment with their new carer. Rutter accused Bowlby of not distinguishing between deprivation and privation – which is the complete lack of an attachment bond, rather than its loss. He stressed that the quality of the attachment is the most important factor rather than deprivation during the critical period; he also stated that ' Affectionless Psychopathy' probably resulted from privation.

However, there were supporters of Bowlby's theories one being Mary Ainsworth who expanded upon his work during the 1970's, and went a step further with the ' Strange Situation'. This splits attachment up into three types secure, avoidant, and resistant. Children were observed between 12 and 18 months as they responded to a situation which they were left alone for a short period and then reunited with their mothers. Their responses were then observed. Securely attached children display distress when they are separated from caregivers and are happy when they return, as they feel secure and know that the caregiver will return. When they are frightened

children who are securely attached will seek comfort from their caregiver, and they are comfortable that their caregiver will provide them with comfort and reassurance. A children who is resistant in its attachment will become very distressed when their caregiver, this is normal a result of poor maternal availability, and they can't depend on their caregiver. Children with an avoidant attachment tend to avoid their caregivers and have no preference between a caregiver or stranger. This is normally due to having an attachment from an abusive or neglectful caregiver. Ainsworth's strange situation was criticised due to the difference within other cultures on how attachments are formed.

Schaffer and Emerson's study of Glasgow babies (1964) was large scale study carried out over a long period of time to study development of attachment and challenged some of Bowlby's claims. Their aim was to find the age at which attachments start and how intense these were. They measured this in two ways, using separation protest which would measure the distress an infant displayed when they were separated from their main caregiver. Secondly by stranger anxiety which was the distress shown when a child was left alone with an unfamiliar person. They concluded to find that human attachments develop in three stages. First being asocial stage between 0-6 weeks which is a short stage of attention seeking behaviours such as crying which is not directed to a particular person. Then between 6 weeks to 7 months which is known as the indiscriminate attachment a child will seek attention from anyone and is happy to receive attention from anyone, however they start to have preferences to familiar faces. The third stage known as specific attachments is formed at 7-11 months, where a child

primarily becomes attached to their main caregiver, and when they are separated from the caregiver they display distress and become wary of strangers as Mary Ainsworth study of the 'strange situation' suggests. They did however find for many the attachment to the mother was the strongest. They also found that the strength of the attachment was not related to the time spent with the child or its feeding being fulfilled. It was in fact the quality and intensity of interaction that was important. Studies of children raised in a Kibbutz's support this despite multiple mothering you will find their primary attachment was with their parents. Therefore these studies do not support the behaviourists as their theories state that feeding is important for attachment to occur. Bowlby was correct in identifying the importance of a child's attachment, but it appears he was incorrect in stating the single maternal role and the time factor for all children, as every child is different. The validity of this study was the babies were observed in their natural environment and the data can be generalised. However a criticism on the accuracy of the study is questionable as the data was collected by the parent and is prone to them being bias and too busy to keep their daily dairies up to date.

Bowlby may now not dispute that young children form multiple attachments, he still however feels that attachment to the mother is exclusive and will remain the strongest of all. Even though, evidence above suggests otherwise. In conclusion his deprivation hypothesis has been very important in changing people's view of early emotional behaviour. The criticism served to enhance this theory in important ways, to include multiple attachments

and to place less prominence on motherly-love and to distinguish between different kinds of deprivation.