

Attachment, (Bowlby's viewpoint)

John Bowlby (1907 - 1990) was a psychoanalyst and believed that mental health and behavioural problems could be attributed to early childhood. Bowlby's evolutionary theory of attachment suggests that children come into the world biologically pre-programmed to form attachments with others, because this will help them to survive. Bowlby was very much influenced by ethological theory in general, but especially by Lorenz's (1935) study of imprinting. Lorenz showed that attachment was innate, (in young ducklings), and therefore was a survival value. Bowlby believed that attachment behaviours are instinctive and will be activated by any conditions that seem to threaten the achievement of proximity, such as separation, insecurity and fear. He also postulated that the fear of strangers represents an important survival mechanism, built in by nature. Babies are born with the tendency to display certain innate behaviours (called social releasers) which help ensure proximity and contact with the mother or mother figure (e.g. crying, smiling, crawling, etc.) – these are species-specific behaviours. During the evolution of the human species, it would have been the babies who stayed close to their mothers who would have survived to have children of their own and Bowlby hypothesized that both infants and mothers have evolved a biological need to stay in contact with each other. These attachment behaviours initially function like fixed action patterns and all share the same function. The infant produces innate 'social releaser' behaviours such as crying and smiling that stimulate caregiving from adults. Bowlby suggested that a child would initially form only one attachment and that the attachment figure acted as a secure base for exploring the world. The attachment relationship acts as a prototype for all future social relationships so disrupting it can have severe consequences.

1. A child has an innate (i.e. inborn) need to attach to one main attachment figure, normally the mother.

Although Bowlby did not rule out the possibility of other attachment figures for a child, he did believe that there should be a primary bond which was much more important than any other. Bowlby believed that this attachment is different in kind from any subsequent attachments. Bowlby argued that the relationship with the mother is somehow different altogether from other relationships.

Essentially, Bowlby suggested that the nature of monotropy (attachment conceptualised as being a vital and close bond with just one attachment figure) meant that a failure to initiate, or a breakdown of, the maternal attachment would lead to serious negative consequences, possibly even affectionless psychopathy. Bowlby's theory of monotropy led to the formulation of his maternal deprivation hypothesis.

The child behaves in ways that elicits contact or proximity to the caregiver. When a child experiences heightened arousal, he/she signals their caregiver. Crying, smiling,

and, locomotion, are examples of these signalling behaviours. Instinctively, caregivers respond to their children's behaviour creating a reciprocal pattern of interaction.

2. A child should receive the continuous care of this single most important attachment figure for approximately the first two years of life. Bowlby claimed that mothering is almost useless if delayed until after two and a half to three years and, for most children, if delayed till after 12 months, i.e. there is a critical period. If the attachment figure is broken or disrupted during the critical two year period the child will suffer irreversible long-term consequences of this maternal deprivation. This risk continues until the age of approximately 5. Bowlby used the term maternal deprivation to refer to the separation or loss of the mother as well as failure to develop an attachment.

The underlying assumption of Bowlby's Maternal Deprivation Hypothesis is that continual disruption of the attachment between infant and primary caregiver (i.e. mother) could result in long term cognitive, social, and emotional difficulties for that infant. The implications of this are vast – if this is true, should the primary caregiver leave their child in day care, whilst they continue to work?

3. The long term consequences of maternal deprivation might include the following:

Delinquency,

Reduced intelligence,

Increased aggression,

Depression,

Affectionless psychopathy

Affectionless psychopathy is an inability show affection or concern for others. Such individuals act on impulse with little regard for the consequences of their actions.

For example, showing no guilt for antisocial behaviour.

4. The child's attachment relationship with their primary caregiver leads to the development of an internal working model. This internal working model is a cognitive framework comprising mental representations for understanding the world, self and others.

A person's interaction with others is guided by memories and expectations from their internal model which influence and help evaluate their contact with others, (Bretherton, & Munholland, 1999). Around the age of three these seems to become part of a child's personality and thus affects their understanding of the world and future interactions with others. According to Bowlby the primary caregiver acts as a prototype for future relationships via the internal working model.

There are three main features of the internal working model:

(1) A model of others a being trustworthy,

(2) A model of the self as valuable

(3) A model of the self as effective when interacting with others.

It is this mental representation that guides future social and emotional behaviour as the child's internal working model guides the responsiveness to others in general