

Bowlbyism and the Post-War Settlement.

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Executive Summary

- Ideas about the importance of attachment between the mother and young child, particularly associated with John Bowlby, became highly influential in post-war Britain.
- Popularised as Bowlbyism, this theory was integral to the relationship between family and state at the heart of the post-war settlement.
- The influence of Bowlbyism owed much to Britain's experience of the Second World War.
- In the post-war era, Bowlbyism justified early years care as a family responsibility but it also contributed to shaping policy over care of children in institutions.
- By the 1970s, social change, ideological critique, and the emergence from below of alternatives to family care for young children had undermined the basis of Bowlbyism.
- As a result, the 1970s saw stronger calls for state intervention into the family and early-years childcare.
- Economic and ideological factors account for the difficulties in moving in this direction until the 1990s.

Introduction

'Bowlbyism' refers to the influence of British psychologist, John Bowlby (1907-1990). In particular, it is associated with his work on the importance of 'attachment' between the young child and his or her primary carer, and the idea that the anxiety caused by 'separation' or by being 'deprived' of a 'warm, intimate, and continuous relationship with [the child's] mother or permanent mother substitute', as he put it, would lead to significant and irreversible mental health problems. Such ideas have come to be seen as highly influential in the aftermath of the Second World War. There is a case for arguing that Bowlbyism helped to give scientific legitimacy to a policy climate that kept early years childcare largely out of the terrain of state responsibility, and was an important facet of a post-war settlement centred on full (male) employment, but also maternal responsibility for childcare. Such a settlement, however, became increasingly unsustainable as the model of the family that it assumed began to fall apart. The story of Bowlbyism is therefore intimately tied up with the rise and the fall of the post-war settlement.

The Second World War

Why did this theory become so in post-war Britain? In America, there was much less concern about attachment, and worries instead about the overbearing and over-protective mother, known as 'momism'. It is traditionally thought that the war provided a public

laboratory, particularly through the policy of evacuation, that exposed what could go wrong when young children were removed from their mothers. One can add to this the challenges of war in a policy such as evacuation, but also in the management of morale (and prevention of feared mass mental breakdown), and (though harder to tie down) the feeling that the war had exposed the dangers of maladjustment and the necessity of mental health for a peaceable, tolerant, and democratic future. All this opened up a unique moment of opportunity for mental health experts to be listened to seriously by policy makers. Arguably, the only other comparable moment is that which we are now entering, in the context of disillusionment about the welfare state, an economic situation in tension with welfarism, a shift towards 'nudging' people to change behaviour, and excitement about the potential applications of new insights in neuroscience.

Bowlby himself, working alongside the Labour party's rising star of the 1930-40s Evan Durbin and a host of significant left-leaning intellectuals, was involved in discussions about how a new understanding of human nature could be key in the post-war settlement. This moment of domestic opportunity would soon pass, but it did open ears. And when it came to the mental health of children, it could also draw on an appetite for protection that emerged out of the traumatic circumstances of war. While the darker side of the war soon passed over in narratives of the 'good war', it arguably played out in anxiety centring on children. Britain's role in the war also meant that British psychological experts such as Bowlby were well-placed in the emergence of international organisations that hoped to apply the lessons of mental health as a tool to build a peaceable and healthy future.

The post-war national (and international) context helps to explain why the work of someone like Bowlby could have an influence that went far beyond what his own, rather meagre, pre-war research on the backgrounds of a small number of delinquent boys justified (prompting a running joke at the time about 'Ali Bowlby and his forty thieves'!). The way that the door to international influence was opened up is perhaps the most spectacular, with Bowlby being invited to write a major report on the wartime lessons regarding children without homes for the World Health Organisation: *Maternal Care and Mental Health*, published in 1951, which together with a subsequent popularised version, *Child Care and the Growth of Love*, sold some 400,000 copies in English alone. Here, famously, the value of attachment was compared to nutrition of vitamins, both vital to health. In truth, not much of this rested on Bowlby's own research, and surprising little of it depended on wartime examples. The main evidence came from accounts of young children in institutions, much of the research from the United States.

Post-War Childcare Policy

In Britain, wartime state activism and post-war reconstruction presented potentially more concrete opportunities for an influence on policy. Here, it was once assumed that the ideas of Bowlby and other like-minded attachment theorists were crucial in scuppering the post-war continuation of wartime nurseries, set up to enable women with young children to work, for instance in factories. However, in the most substantial study of this subject, Denise Riley's *War and the Nursery*, cold water is poured on this thesis. Riley points instead to a more messy wartime policy-making context of limited resources and inter-departmental tensions.

An area where the influence of attachment theorists is easier to trace is in policies for hospital visiting, which were reformed after the war following striking and harrowing exposure on film of the apparent trauma experienced by sick children experiencing restricted visits from their parents. The influence of Bowlbyism (and like-minded psychologists and psychological social workers) was also evident in the Curtis Committee Report on Child Care (where he was one of the witnesses), which led to the 1948 Children Act. Again, this was a

product in part of public exposure of the psychological problems (and indeed abuse) experienced by children in residential child care. In other words, what is easily lost sight of (in our focus on the implications of Bowlbyism for care in the family, and specifically for maternalism) is that it emerged out of, and was originally largely played out on, the subject of children in institutions. It was a response (like many aspects of the 1945 welfare state settlement) to the ongoing legacy of the poor law and a desire to move beyond it.

However, the Children Act could not of course end the problem of 'children without homes' that so scandalised the public in wartime. Instead, it looked to make children's homes more homely, and thereby extended the life of institutional solutions to problems of children in care, their numbers peaking in the 1970s, with around 50,000 of these still in children's homes. Ironically, then, one of the results of Bowlbyism was to offer new life to institutional solutions. When a new critique emerged in the 1970s and after, it paralleled that which would turn on the problems of family care in this period: the homes were too isolated, they resulted in burn-out amongst staff and, ultimately, the mock family often spectacularly failed, sometimes becoming the problem rather than the solution.

Criticism and Decline

By the early 1960s, there was already mounting unease with the scientific basis of Bowlbyism. A second WHO report contained scathing critiques from two female social scientists. The American anthropologist Margaret Mead took Bowlbyism to task for its universalist assumptions about the family. And Barbara Wootton dissected a series of methodological flaws in the research behind attachment theory, pointing out crucially the reliance on data relating to children who had already developed mental problems, and the need for research on normal families. Meanwhile, new research on children in care began to challenge the view that separation necessarily resulted in long term damage. Most important of all, social scientific and psychological research began to focus on the mental health problems of the children, but also crucially of their mothers who, because of social change, the breakdown of community and new types of building such as the high rise flat, were increasingly isolated when left to fend for themselves.

Soon these anxieties were compounded by concern about immigrant groups, particularly from the Caribbean, with suggestions that they may lack the culture of parenting assumed by Bowlbyism. On the one hand, there were those desperately trying to live up to the expectations of Bowlbyism, ending-up desperately miserable and, as a result, depriving their children of necessary affection (the problem of privation). On the other hand there was a resurgence of anxiety about 'problem families' now compounded both by rising levels of post-war immigration and the spectre of families where the primary carer was present, but could not be relied upon to provide proper care for their children: the problem of 'masked deprivation'. By the early 1970s, Bowlby's descendants were lining up around this reconfigured problem, with Michael Rutter arguing that the destabilisation of the family in this period, evident in rising divorce rates, meant that the family was not necessarily a haven for the child and could itself foster anxieties about separation. In short, the family, that had been so clearly the central solution to issues of child care at the end of the Second World War, was by the early 1970s looked upon with rapidly diminishing confidence.

Faced with the challenge of limited state assistance in early years childcare, by the early 1960s women had begun to act for themselves. Middle-class women took a lead in agitating for better nursery provision (a problem that was exacerbated by the rising birth rate). A second movement, the Pre-Schools Playgroup Association, was started in 1961 through such voluntary efforts, and by 1968 it was catering for 83,000 children. Meanwhile, working-class and immigrant families also took their own steps, and social research from the period indicated a burgeoning culture of unregulated child minding.

Not only was the scientific basis of Bowlbyism under attack, and its ideological orientation also under mounting feminist assault by the 1970s, but there was also a route forward via an expansion of early years childcare provision emerging from below. It was at this point that politicians, perhaps unsurprisingly, were drawn in. On the left, there was pressure to extend nursery care as a social right, but also to focus aid on those areas most in need, the concern being that many of the initiatives to date had been developed out of local activism that rested on middle-class shoulders. The political right was also drawn in. As Secretary of State for Social Services, Keith Joseph drew on Bowlby's model of transmitted deprivation from one generation to another, to argue that early years intervention was needed to address cycles of deprivation. His arguments were blown off course by the furore over his linked comments on using birth control to control the fertility of this group. They were also not helped by the rearrangements in the organisation of the social work profession, which weakened a specialist focus on the child (that had been one of the products of the post-war child-protection moment and the Children Act of 1948), or by increasing economic problems after the oil crisis of 1974.

The breakdown of the post-war settlement regarding childcare had thus largely taken place by the 1970s, and the emergence of a more interventionist state approach to early-years childcare was cut short. Arguably, it only fully emerged with the government accepting the need for an early-years policy that assisted the entrance of women into the labour market, which came to fruition in New Labour's Sure Start policy from 1998.

Further Reading

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About the Author

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