

## THE ONTOGENY OF AN IDEA: John Bowlby and Contemporaries on Mother–Child Separation

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In this contribution, the authors situate the development of Bowlby's attachment theory against the background of the social, cultural, and scientific developments in interbellum Britain. It is shown that fairly early in his life Bowlby adopted one fundamental idea—that an infant primarily needs a warm and loving mother, and that separations from the mother are potentially damaging—and never substantially changed that basic notion in later years. Bowlby's first and foremost goal—and his lifelong undertaking—was to convince certain others (e.g., orthodox psychoanalysts, psychiatrists, clinicians, and medical doctors) of the importance of this idea by theorizing and gathering empirical evidence. Bowlby's view of mother love deprivation as the main source of maladjusted behavior was at variance with the views of many practitioners and theorists, but it was by no means fully novel and original. The authors show that Bowlby took inspiration from various persons and groups in British society with whom he shared basically similar views.

*Keywords:* psychoanalysis, attachment theory, infant–mother relations, separation

British child psychiatrist John Bowlby (1907–1990) is famous for the formulation of attachment theory, in which he tried to explain how and why children form bonds with their parents and caregivers. The basic idea underlying his theory is that children need a loving mother or mother substitute to develop into emotionally healthy adults, and that separation experiences (even minor ones) at an early age may jeopardize this development. Although Bowlby only fully elaborated his thinking on attachment in the 1960s and 1970s—in his trilogy *Attachment and Loss* (Bowlby, 1969/1982, 1973, 1980)—these basic notions were present very early in his thinking. In 1939, in a paper he read to the British Psycho-Analytical Society to become a full member, Bowlby (1940a) already stated that it was his “belief that the early environment is of vital importance” (p. 156), and that in his treatment of children he made “careful inquiries into the history of the child's relations to his mother and whether and in what circumstances there have been separations between mother and child” (p. 156). According to Bowlby (Bowlby, Figlio, & Young, 1986), “that was the first statement of [his] position” (p. 39) and in his own view he did not subsequently change it “in any material way” (Bowlby, 1958b, p. 248). Even in the 1970s, after the

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publication of the first and second part of his trilogy, whenever “people preach[ed] to him” (Smuts, 1977, p. 19) about the all-importance of the way parents treat their children, Bowlby used to react, “I thought that 40 years ago but wasn’t allowed to say it” (Smuts, 1977, p. 20). That Bowlby knew he would have to go to great lengths to get his ideas accepted in the psychoanalytic movement becomes clear from a remark he once made to his wife Ursula when she asked him what he would pursue in his further career after his research on separation would be completed: “Separation . . . will keep me busy for the rest of my life” (Dinnage, 1979, p. 323). In all, Bowlby “confess[ed] to a rather one-track, one-problem mind” (Tanner & Inhelder, 1971, p. 27).

The historiography on Bowlby’s ideas has rapidly increased in the past two decades, alongside the ever-growing interest in the clinical applications of attachment theory. In historical accounts, Bowlby’s life and work have been described from different angles. For example, Bretherton (1991, 1992) described the theoretical development of attachment theory with emphasis on its roots and growing points. Newcombe and Lerner (1982) paid attention to the historical and societal context in which Bowlby developed his ideas. Bowlby’s political activities in relation to his theoretical ideas were described by Mayhew (2006). Holmes (1993) contributed to the historiography of attachment theory by describing the implications of Bowlby’s ideas for clinical practice, and Karen (1994) added new biographical information. Van Dijken (1998) has traced the core of attachment theory to Bowlby’s early childhood and advanced the thesis that early separation experiences influenced his further development and thinking. Van Dijken and van der Veer (1997), finally, have described the development of Bowlby’s ideas in his early work and claimed that his early views did not substantially change. However, they stressed the fact that any “definitive historical and theoretical assessment . . . should deal with the life and work of [the] scientist from several interconnected perspectives” (p. 36).

In this article, we add yet another perspective to the historiography of the attachment paradigm by paying attention to the interconnectedness of Bowlby’s ideas with those of his contemporaries. More than Newcombe and Lerner (1982), we focus on specific scientific persons and groups with whom Bowlby shared ideas and to whom he was in intellectual debt and, more than van Dijken (1998), we will pay attention to the so-called “English school” of psychiatry. In this context, special attention is paid to the work of Ian Suttie (1889–1935), who was a leading figure in the English school of psychiatry at the time of his unexpected death. For the sake of simplicity, we restrict ourselves to the primordial kernel of attachment theory as developed by Bowlby and leave out the later sophistications added by, for example, the strange situation procedure (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978) or the Adult Attachment Interview (Main, Kaplan, & Cassidy, 1985). Indeed, it can be argued that despite all the later methodological and theoretical refinements, the basic tenet of attachment theory has remained surprisingly simple: Children need a warm continuous relationship with a mother or mother substitute, and they need to be dependably loved; in the absence of such love, they are likely to feel frightened, lonely, and unhappy. Moreover, if there is no possibility for such an affectionate relationship in infancy and childhood, persons may be crippled for life, may never ever be able to develop emotional relationships, and may develop all sorts of behavioral and mental problems.

### Attachment Theory

Books on developmental psychology now all provide succinct accounts of the basic tenets of attachment theory (e.g., Bradley, 1989; Crain, 1992; DeHart, Sroufe, & Cooper, 2004; Lightfoot, Cole, & Cole, 2009; P. H. Miller, 1993; Morss, 1990; Smith & Cowie, 1991). For example, Smith and Cowie (1991) quote Bowlby (1953) as saying that “essential for mental health is that the infant and young child should experience a warm, intimate and continuous relationship with his mother (or permanent mother-substitute) in which both find satisfaction and enjoyment” (p. 11). Smith and Cowie mention Bowlby’s repeated warnings against even temporary separations from the mother and claim that his position went against the prevailing current of opinion. They then raise the question as to how Bowlby arrived at this position, which is normally called the *maternal deprivation hypothesis*. Other authors pay more attention to Bowlby’s later evolutionary and ethological argumentations (e.g., Crain, 1992; P. H. Miller, 1993) and rank Bowlby (with Lorenz, Tinbergen, and Hinde) among the authors of ethological theories of development. Thus, attention is paid to Bowlby’s claim that there exist something like attachment behaviors, that such behaviors serve a function, that they are innate, and that they can be understood by imagining an “environment of evolutionary adaptedness” in which the proximity-seeking behaviors of the human infant would have been adaptive (cf. P. H. Miller, 1993). As is well known, the later Bowlby argued that proximity-seeking behaviors, such as smiling or crying, serve the function of creating a bond between the infant and one unique adult individual, notably the mother. Such a bond will protect the child in the case of danger, such as an attack by a predator, as the adult person will keep close to the infant and thereby protect it. Proximity-seeking behaviors would thus have survival value and have become part of the innate pattern of fixed behaviors in the process of natural selection (van der Horst, 2008; see, for a criticism of this evolutionary view, Morgan, 1975; Riley, 1983).

It will be seen that historically, however, Bowlby arrived at these ethological arguments with considerable delay, that is, only after he had done several decades of thinking and research, and that the ethological arguments served to buttress a position that was much older, a position whose embryonic form was first formulated by Bowlby in 1939 and that had its roots in his still earlier thinking. How, then, did Bowlby arrive at the position outlined above? Also, did Bowlby go “against the prevailing current of opinion,” and should he be seen as a pioneer who single-handedly changed the general climate in Britain and elsewhere regarding child care? Or, did his opinion converge with those of others within the intellectual world of interbellum Britain? To retrace the gradual process of the evolution of Bowlby’s ideas, we take a chronological view and discuss elements from Bowlby’s biography and their relevant context.

### Childhood and Upbringing

John Bowlby was born in an upper middle-class family in London in 1907 as the fourth of six children. He was brought up traditionally, in a distant, reserved manner, like most children of his social class. A nanny took over the upbringing from his mother May, and he saw his father only occasionally—owing partly to Anthony Bowlby’s work as a military surgeon. When John’s favorite nursemaid

left when he was 4, he was conceivably hurt by the event. In 1918, at age 11, he was sent to boarding school with his older brother Tony. Bowlby did not have good memories of his time there and later stated that “he would not send a dog to boarding school at that age” (van Dijken, 1998, p. 34). These early experiences may have greatly influenced Bowlby’s career, as well as his personality. Although in public he referred to his childhood as perfectly conventional (Hunter, 1991; cf. Karen, 1994), in private he stated that his childhood had a great effect on him, and that he had been “sufficiently hurt but not sufficiently damaged” (van Dijken, 1998, p. 11). After leaving boarding school, Bowlby started training as a naval cadet at the Royal Navy College in Dartmouth in 1921. It was here that he was first introduced to the writings of Freud (Newcombe & Lerner, 1982). What influence reading Freud had on him at that point is unclear, but soon Bowlby decided that he wanted to pursue a career that “would improve the community as a whole” (van Dijken, 1998, p. 46).

The experiences in Bowlby’s early childhood—a distant upbringing, the frequent absence of his father, the departure of his favorite nursemaid, attending boarding school—arguably had an influence on his later development. The young Bowlby had become convinced that separation from the principal attachment figure matters to a child, and when later experiences suggested that such separations might be downright detrimental to the mental health and moral behavior of children, he set out to explore the issue of mother–child separation (cf. van Dijken, 1998; van Dijken, van der Veer, van IJzendoorn, & Kuipers, 1998).

### Studying at Cambridge

After leaving the Royal Navy College, Bowlby began studying at Trinity College in Cambridge in 1925. As we know that Bowlby would later turn to psychoanalytic thinking and, given that attachment theory is rooted in Freudian theory, it is of interest to look at possible psychoanalytic influences at the university. These seem to have been scarce, at least they were not evident in the official curriculum, and in later years Bowlby would claim that he had not been quite satisfied with his psychological training at Cambridge. In his opinion, there was too much fuss “about IQ and animals in cages” (van Dijken, 1998, p. 43). However, at Cambridge, Bowlby’s tutor in the natural sciences was Edgar D. Adrian, the expert in the field of nerve conduction (Boring, 1950), who displayed a vivid interest in Freudian theory from its very beginning. Later, in an article published in the *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, Adrian (1946) would claim that psychoanalysis “went far beyond a single range of facts: it showed or tried to show quite unexpected relations between different fields” (p. 1). That fact leaves open the possibility that Bowlby discussed matters of Freudian theory with his tutor. What we know for sure (van Dijken et al., 1998) is that 2 years later, in 1927, Bowlby purchased W. H. R. River’s *Instinct and the Unconscious* (1920), a book that was widely used in medical circles and that contained a moderate (or watered-down, according to some) version of psychoanalysis, that is, psychoanalytic considerations that de-emphasized the dynamic role of the sexual instinct. Shortly thereafter, Bowlby read Freud’s *Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis* (1917/1963), a book that he would afterward rank among the 11 most

important books he ever read (AMWL: PP/BOW/A.1/7).<sup>1</sup> His interest in Freudian theory would be further stimulated when Bowlby volunteered at two progressive schools—schools that were influenced by Freud’s ideas.

### Bowlby and Progressive Schooling

Freud’s psychoanalytic ideas slowly began to infiltrate the British educational system in the 1920s. Various books on how teaching could benefit from psychoanalytic insights were published around this time (e.g., Green, 1921; MacMunn, 1921; H. C. Miller, 1927; Revel, 1928), and different psychoanalytically oriented “progressive” schools were founded in Britain, following the international examples (e.g., Bernfeld’s Kinderheim Baumgarten in Vienna and Vera Schmidt’s International Solidarity in Moscow; cf. van der Veer & Valsiner, 1991). Among them were Malting House School, founded by Susan Isaacs, and Summerhill, founded by A. S. Neill (van Dijken, 1998). Experts in the field of education claimed that even teachers at ordinary schools could benefit from an acquaintance with psychoanalytic theory as the teacher would be “in a better position to study his pupils with advantage than was his forerunner of the pre-psycho-analytical times” (Adams, 1924, p. 269).

It was at two of such “progressive” schools, in the second half of 1928 and the first half of 1929, that Bowlby spent a year as a teacher. Both schools espoused a philosophy that combined a belief in recapitulation theory (i.e., the children were believed to go through the stages that humankind had gone through) with “progressive” ideas about the need for children’s “free expression” and strict reservations about adult intervention. In the second school, called Priory Gate School (van Dijken et al., 1998), these ideas were mixed with clearly psychoanalytic ideas. The source of inspiration was Homer Lane, an American psychotherapist who was among the first to use psychoanalytical ideas in the education of children. Lane (1928) claimed that deprivation of love in childhood is the source of later delinquency and mental disturbance, a claim that Bowlby would make his own. The psychological problems of the children at Priory Gate School—it was a school for “difficult” children—were as a rule attributed to adverse experiences in the children’s families, notably to inadequate parent–child relationships.

The period spent at these two progressive schools made an unforgettable impression on Bowlby, as did his acquaintance with staff member John Alford (Holmes, 1993; Senn, 1977; Smuts, 1977; van Dijken, 1998). Not only did Bowlby have the opportunity to witness the behavior of these “difficult” children on a daily basis, he was also presented with an explanatory model for their problems: They were pilfering, lying, and so on, *because* they had grown up in a family that did not provide the security and love that normal parents supposedly provide. The cause of mental disturbances and deviant behavior at large is deprivation of love in childhood. More than 50 years later, Bowlby (1981) remembered that “apart from a medical background and an interest in psychology, my choice of career had been determined by what I had seen and heard during the

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<sup>1</sup> AMWL stands for Archives and Manuscripts, Wellcome Library for the History and Understanding of Medicine, 183 Euston Road, London NW1 2BE. The letters PP/BOW stand for Personal Papers Bowlby.



six months that I had spent in a school for disturbed children [that is, Priory Gate School]” (p. 2).

It is clear that Bowlby was now definitely one for the psychoanalytic viewpoint. Psychoanalysis seemed to provide a satisfactory model in which adult mental problems are explained by reference to adverse emotional experiences in childhood. In 1929—at the age of only 22—Bowlby, at the suggestion of Alford, began his psychoanalytical training at the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, the training center of the British Psycho-Analytical Society—and not with the Tavistock group, it being “a bit amateur” (Smuts, 1977, p. 3; cf. Hunter, 1991). His supervisor was Joan Riviere, a friend and follower of Melanie Klein, who by that time had already gained a prominent position in the British Psycho-Analytical Society.

### Different Schools of Psychoanalysis in Britain

Now that Bowlby had decided to engross himself in psychoanalysis, he became more and more familiar with the different schools within British psychoanalysis. In this respect, it is of interest to pay some more attention to the reception of Freudian theory by both scientists and laymen in the British society of that time. As we have seen above, Freud’s ideas were applied to teaching in British schools, but there are other striking examples.

For instance, the authors of baby manuals (e.g., Bennett & Isaacs, 1931; Brereton, 1927; Hartley, 1923; Isaacs, 1929; Thom, 1927), that is, books that advised parents how to take care of infants and young children, now began to picture the infant and young child as little savages who were torn apart by violent emotions, who showed marked preference for the parent of the opposite sex, and who might be strongly jealous of their (newly born) brothers and sisters. The sinister chapter headings of Thom’s (1927) manual—for example, Anger, Fear, Jealousy, Destructiveness, Inferiority, Delinquency, Sex—spelled misery for the unprepared parent. His statement that “children who have vivid sex phantasies often find a certain relief in the excitement associated with stealing” (p. 243) was typical for that period during which common sense notions about child rearing became mixed with the scientific ideas of Freud, Adler, and Jung (Beekman, 1977; Hardyment, 1995).

Meanwhile, the British public press paid increasing attention to psychoanalytic ideas (Rapp, 1988). In the period from 1920 to 1925, the number of publications in newspapers and journals increased considerably. According to the *New Statesman*, it was “as difficult for an educated person to neglect the theories of Freud and his rivals as it would have been for his father to ignore the equally disconcerting discoveries of Darwin” (Hynes, 1990, p. 366). The chances were quite big, then, that “educated persons” were at least partially acquainted with—although not necessarily receptive to—psychoanalytic or semipsychoanalytic ideas.

As for the reception of Freud’s work in scientific circles, Newcombe and Lerner (1982) have argued that among those who were not totally unreceptive to Freudian theory, one can distinguish two currents: the “eclectics” and the

“orthodox.”<sup>2</sup> The “eclectics” used Freudian concepts such as unconscious motivation and repression—albeit sometimes in modified forms—but rejected the search for infantile sexual trauma. This movement ultimately evolved into a school centered around the Tavistock Clinic (with Ian Suttie as the central figure; cf. Gerson, 2009). The “eclectics” were led to their “heresy” because in many cases of war traumata (the cases of “shell shock” that were so prevalent in the First World War), it was impossible to retrace these traumata to unresolved mental (sexual) conflicts in childhood or infancy. Rivers, for example, argued that soldiers fall ill because they *consciously* try to repress traumatic memories from their field of attention. His therapy consisted of encouraging the soldiers to remember their war experiences and to reinterpret them. Rivers further posited that there is an instinct for self-preservation side-by-side with the sexual instinct (Rivers, 1920). This led Bernard Hart, another “eclectic,” to explain what was later to be called *shell shock* as an unconscious conflict in which the instinct for self-preservation clashed with the conscious sense of duty to be a brave soldier (Southborough, 1922, p. 77; cf. Hart, 1910, 1912).<sup>3</sup>

The “orthodox” Freudians in principle faced the same problem. Freud (1920/1961) himself, in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, was led to posit such concepts as “repetition compulsion,” the “death instinct” (*Thanatos*), and a “life instinct” (*Eros*) in a complicated attempt to explain the symptoms of “shell shock.” Not everybody was convinced of the clinical relevance of this hypothetical construction. Klein developed the position that adult mourning (one of the factors supposedly causing “shell shock”) is conditioned by the way infants and young children manage separation experiences (e.g., in weaning). It is interesting to note that Bowlby began his involvement with Freudian theory among the “orthodox” group (picking up Klein’s idea of the connectedness of childhood separation experiences and adult reactions to loss) but gradually moved on to the “eclectic” group of the Tavistock Clinic (cf. Hinshelwood, 1991; Pines, 1991).

We have seen that Bowlby, at the suggestion of Alford, pursued training in psychoanalysis with the British Psycho-Analytical Society, instead of with the “amateur” Tavistock Clinic. But the fact of the matter is that the people who were at the prewar Tavistock Clinic (e.g., Jack Rees, Henry Dicks, Wilfred Bion, Ronald Hargreaves, John Rickman, Jock Sutherland, Eric Trist) would become Bowlby’s colleagues in army psychiatry or after the war at the Tavistock Clinic. Their “eclectic” ideas about children’s needs were much more in accordance with Bowlby’s. The English school of psychiatry, centered around the Tavistock Clinic and Ian Suttie as its main prophet, emphasized the emergent object relations approach in psychoanalysis, emphasizing relationships rather than instinctual drives and psychic energy (Gerson, 2009; Trist & Murray, 1990; see also below). The English school emphasized the importance of a primitive need for security and thought “that a child begins life completely helpless and dependent, and that it responds with every expression of terror to . . . loss of mother” and therefore has

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<sup>2</sup> The value of such labels is, of course, limited. They were sometimes used to discredit theoretical opponents and were at any rate dependent on one’s point of view. Moreover, researchers labeled “orthodox” would often become more “eclectic” or vice versa.

<sup>3</sup> The phrase *shell shock* was coined by army psychologist C. S. Myers in a series of papers in *The Lancet* (Myers, 1915, 1916a, 1916b, 1916c).

“a tendency to seek love and security as such” (Dicks, 1939, p. 20). This was, of course, all grist for the mill for Bowlby, who found support for his idea of a primary need for mother.

Although the Tavistock Clinic was known to be “eclectic,” the Kleinian approach to clinical practice was still very much around when Bowlby became head of the Children’s Department of the Tavistock Clinic after the Second World War—too much according to Bowlby, which made him remark once, “So in certain respects I have been a stranger in my own department” (Senn, 1977, p. 16).

### **Bowlby’s Medical Career**

It was in these societal circumstances that Bowlby turned to psychoanalysis, but meanwhile he continued his normal medical career. He worked as a clinical assistant at the Maudsley Hospital under Aubrey Lewis, a critic of the psychoanalytic movement. In 1933, encouraged by his close friend Evan Durbin, Bowlby registered as a doctoral-level student at University College London under the formal supervision of Sir Cyril Burt. In practice, his supervisor was Susan Isaacs, the psychoanalytic psychologist and writer of the baby manuals mentioned above. Bowlby never finished his PhD—taking his MD degree instead—but his formal involvement with Burt is still of interest. By that time, Burt was investigating the psychological causes of delinquency (e.g., Burt, 1925). He professed as his belief that “nearly every tragedy of crime is in its origin a drama of domestic life” (as cited in Wooldridge, 1994, p. 99), arguing that it is frequently parents rather than children who require treatment, and warned that removing children from their home should only be undertaken as a last resort (Hearnshaw, 1979; Wooldridge, 1994). By the end of the 1930s and in the 1940s, Bowlby would express the same views (see below). Burt had been one of the founding members of the London Psycho-Analytical Society and became a member of the British Psycho-Analytical Society. He also was a member of the Council of the Tavistock Clinic and thus might be reckoned to be a member of the “eclectic” group mentioned above.

From 1934 to 1938, Bowlby worked part-time at the Institute for the Scientific Treatment of Delinquency (ISTD). Staff members of the ISTD carried out scientific research into the causes and prevention of crime and gave therapy to young offenders. The basic philosophy of the ISTD was that juvenile crime was caused by mental problems. The ISTD recruited its members from both the “orthodox” British Psycho-Analytical Society and the “eclectic” Tavistock Clinic.

In 1936, Bowlby began working at the London Child Guidance Clinic. Child guidance clinics—an originally American phenomenon that had been imported to Britain by (again) Cyril Burt—treated “difficult” children in multidisciplinary teams consisting of a psychiatrist, a psychologist, and a social worker. The general conviction at these clinics was that the children’s problems might result from an inadequate relationship with their parents (e.g., unresolved conflicts from the parents’ own childhood might cause or perpetuate the problems of their children). It was while working at this clinic that Bowlby first came across two cases of the so-called “psychopathic personality type,” that is, he identified two children who seemed unaffected by praise or blame and did whatever they wanted. Both children had suffered a major separation experience in their infancy (i.e., being



sent to a hospital for many months without any visiting from the parents), and Bowlby hypothesized that it was the separation from their mother that had caused their characters to deviate (van Dijken et al., 1998).

While working at these various institutions—which all belonged largely to the “eclectic” current in British psychiatry, that is, they used psychoanalytic therapy but did not follow the “orthodox” therapy model (of five therapy sessions per week), nor did they accept all of Freud’s ideas (e.g., his heavy emphasis on childhood sexuality)—Bowlby simultaneously followed the more “orthodox” track within the British Psycho-Analytical Society. His analysis with Riviere lasted for more than 7 years and finally ended in the summer of 1937. It had been full of frictions, partly because Riviere (1927) espoused the Kleinian view that “analysis . . . is not concerned with the real world. . . . It is concerned simply and solely with the imaginings of the childish mind” (pp. 376–377). Through his work at the Maudsley Hospital, at the ISTD, and at the London Child Guidance Clinic, Bowlby had arrived at the opinion that “the real world” (in the form of mentally disturbed or neglective parents, etc.) does matter in causing problematic child behavior, and that neglect, emotional, and physical deprivation, and so forth do not just exist in the “imaginings of the childish mind.” Small wonder, then, that when Bowlby started his training in child analysis under the supervision of no less than Melanie Klein herself, this led to immediate conflict (van Dijken et al., 1998). However, Bowlby stuck to his views, and when he had to submit a paper to qualify as a full member of the British Psycho-Analytical Society, he deliberately focused on the importance of real-life experiences in causing neurosis and neurotic character (Bowlby, 1940a; see below).

### **Bowlby’s Prewar View on Maternal Deprivation**

Once belonging to the psychoanalytic movement, Bowlby started to publish his ideas on a more structural basis. These papers were preceded, however, by his prewar publications (Bowlby, 1938, 1939a, 1939b, 1939c, 1940a, 1940b, 1940c, 1940d; Bowlby, Miller, & Winnicott, 1939) that have been somewhat neglected to date, although it is quite clear that they formed the basis for much of his subsequent work on the origin of delinquency (Bowlby, 1944, 1946) and the causative role of maternal deprivation (cf. van Dijken & van der Veer, 1997).

In his article “Substitute Homes,” for example, Bowlby (1939c) discussed the origins of deviant behavior in children on the basis of his work as a psychiatrist at the London Child Guidance Clinic. He argued that any substitute home was “an exceedingly poor substitute for a child’s real home” (p. 3), and that even bad homes provide for “the vital emotional background of security” (p. 3). Substitute homes were to be avoided at all costs because “the emotional bond between child and mother is the basis for all further social development” (p. 3). The feeling of security that a loving mother provides gradually generalizes to other adults and children and allows the child to develop gratifying and lasting relationships with them.

What goes awry if there is no such emotional bond between mother and child? Here, Bowlby relied heavily on the cases of children he had seen in the London Child Guidance Clinic. He described the typical syndrome of children who show an apparent lack of affection and a deep indifference to what others think of them.

These children have no relationships at all or just very superficial ones. On inspection of their personal histories, it turned out, said Bowlby, that many of them had had “no permanent emotional relationship with a mother or mother substitute” (Bowlby, 1939c, p. 4). Often, they had suffered prolonged separations (e.g., hospitalization) from their mother and subsequently appeared to be little strangers to their relatives. Bowlby explained their lack of affection on the grounds that “the one person whom they really trusted has deserted and betrayed them. The result is a lack of trust and disregard for other people and a profound unwillingness to risk having their hearts broken again” (Bowlby, 1939c, p. 5). He claimed that the most critical period is between 4 months and 3 years of age but added that even older children can be quite vulnerable to such separation experiences. This led him to warn against the evacuation of young children (without their mothers) when the Second World War had begun because the “evacuation of small children without their mothers can lead to very serious and widespread psychological disorder. For instance, it can lead to a big increase in juvenile delinquency in the next decade” (Bowlby et al., 1939, p. 1203; cf. Bowlby, 1940d; van der Horst & van der Veer, 2008).

Bowlby suggested several practical measures to be taken to mitigate the effects of separations. First, if transfer to a foster mother is necessary, it should take place as early as possible and certainly before the child is 9 months old as “even one change during the critical period of the second year may have a serious effect on a child” (Bowlby, 1939c, p. 7). Second, if the child needs to be in a hospital or other institution, it is of paramount importance that one single person takes care of the child because, otherwise, “the children have no opportunity of forming solid emotional ties to any one person. This, more than any other single thing, accounts, I believe, for the withdrawn impersonality of the institutional child” (Bowlby, 1939c, p. 6). Third, one should try at all costs to prevent the necessity of placing the child in a substitute home. Even obviously bad homes may provide the emotional relationships and the resulting feelings of security that children need so badly. Fourth, foster parents should be assisted as these face a very hard task. Bowlby expressed his surprise that there were so many reported successes in these cases. In fact, he was inclined not to believe them and claimed that “for all their apparent gayness [adopted children] suffer from a sense of inner emptiness and gloom” (Bowlby, 1939c, p. 7; cf. Morgan, 1975; Wootton, 1959).

### **Bowlby and the Origin of Delinquency**

Although it is clear that this gloomy picture was based on his experience at the London Child Guidance Clinic, Bowlby (1939c) hardly provided any empirical details of his investigation in “Substitute Homes.” In the paper that he submitted to qualify as a full member of the British Psycho-Analytical Society, Bowlby (1940a) discussed the data in rather more detail. Bowlby began by challenging his supervisors, Riviere and Klein, by stating that he gathered material concerning the social and personal background of the deviant children he treated, and that he considered that “this type of research is of much more value in solving certain analytic problems than is research limited to analytic sessions” (p. 154). This statement was, of course, directed against a one-sided Kleinian

emphasis on the “imagination” of the child’s mind. Bowlby made clear, however, that he stuck to the psychoanalytical principles.

My own approach to the role of environment in the causation of neurosis has of course been from the analytic angle. For this reason I have ignored many aspects of the child’s environment such as economic conditions, the school situation, diet and religious teaching. (Bowlby, 1940a, p. 155)

Bowlby then explained that he was primarily interested in (a) the history of mother–child relationship and the possible separations between them; (b) the mother’s treatment of the child (her unconscious attitude included); and (c) illness and death in the family, and how it affected the child. By far, the most important in his view were the actual separations between mother and child. On the basis of an examination of his files, Bowlby concluded that a “broken mother–child relationship” (p. 158) in the first 3 years of life leads to emotionally withdrawn children who do not develop “libidinal ties” (p. 158) with others.

Bowlby’s sample consisted of 31 boys and 13 girls ages 5 to 17 years. The average intelligence of the children was above the average of the population. Unfortunately, Bowlby was unable to provide the economic status of the children, but the “general impression of the cases suggests that there were relatively few who were dependent on support from public funds and many were comfortable” (Bowlby, 1944, p. 23). Of 16 cases of emotionally withdrawn children who were prone to stealing, the so-called “affectionless thieves” (Bowlby, 1940a, p. 161), 14 turned out to have experienced major separations from their mother in the critical age period. In 30 cases of other thieves, Bowlby found another five separations, whereas in 44 cases of nonthieves (his control group), there were only three separations to be found.

On the basis of these findings, Bowlby concluded that a certain clinical syndrome—the affectionless thief—is caused by major separation experiences. The basic idea of the influence of early separation from the mother on later development again becomes clear, although of course netted in the psychoanalytic phrasing of the time (i.e., “emotionally withdrawn children do not develop libidinal ties”). Bowlby did not explain why exactly mother–child separations would lead to stealing, whereas other pathogenic environments would lead to other forms of deviant behavior. But he did find it necessary to warn that in his view the further conclusion followed that minor breaks too might have a damaging effect on the child’s development.

Quite apart from specific pathogenic events, the mother’s emotional attitude may also cause a harmful role. Bowlby discussed several case histories of children whose neurotic parents had an adverse effect on their emotional development. Mothers who at the same time love and (unconsciously) hate their children will tend to have children who show the same ambivalence of feelings. The mother’s hostile attitude will cause the child to experience strong feelings of aggression and frustration. This leads to emotional conflict, repression by the superego, and feelings of guilt. Bowlby emphasized that such ambivalent and neurotic parents do really and objectively exist, and that neurotic symptoms tend to be transmitted from one generation to the other unless measures are taken to treat both the child and the parents. In fact, he suggested that “ideally both mother and child should

be seen at the same time by different workers, and this is a procedure I habitually attempt” (Bowlby, 1940a, p. 176).

Although Bowlby cautiously remarked that a more thorough statistical comparison of the emotional environment of normal and deviant children was needed, he nevertheless drew the following conclusions: (a) Mother and child should be separated only in cases of absolute necessity. In such cases, one should try to arrange for daily visits or replacement of the mother by someone the child knows well and feels comfortable with. (b) Both mother and child should be treated on a weekly basis. (c) In analyzing adults, we may retrospectively get an impression of the real personalities of their parents and the objective events they experienced, and this knowledge may help us in treatment. Bowlby’s procedure and his conclusions (subsequently published in Bowlby, 1944, 1946) were largely in accordance with those of English school psychiatrists and of Ian Suttie and went against the Kleinian variant of psychoanalysis, but they were sufficiently traditional to get him accepted as a full member of the British Psycho-Analytical Society.

### Bowlby and Suttie

As we have seen above, the English school had a major influence on Bowlby’s development as a theoretician in the 1930s. Here, it is of special interest to look at the role Ian Suttie played in this respect. Although the two men never met (Bowlby in Suttie, 1935/1988, p. xxiii), they developed ideas that were quite similar in a number of respects. First, Suttie and Bowlby—with Melanie Klein, Ronald Fairbairn, and Donald Winnicott, for that matter—can be seen as adherents to the object relations version of psychoanalysis. This current in psychoanalysis emphasized the development of the self in relation to real people. In the foreword to Suttie’s *The Origins of Love and Hate*, Bowlby stated that

[w]ith the notable exception of Melanie Klein, all those named [that is, Bowlby, Fairbairn, Klein, Suttie, and Winnicott] have held explicitly that most differences in individual development that are of consequence to mental health are to be traced either to differences in the way children are treated by their parents or else to separations from or losses of parent-figures to whom the children had become attached. (Bowlby in Suttie, 1935/1988, p. xvi)

So, according to object relations theory, real-life experiences of children mattered for their subsequent development. In the early 1930s, Suttie (1935/1988) regarded as a major shortcoming of classical Freudian theory “the Freudians’ obstinate determination to leave out of account social situations” (pp. 39–40). Historically, Suttie’s position owed much to the Budapest or Hungarian school of Sándor Ferenczi, Imre Hermann, and Michael and Alice Balint. Ferenczi’s (1931) statement that real-life experiences matter was clearly in accordance with Suttie’s views. Through Suttie, but also independently, Bowlby was familiar with the ideas of Ferenczi and his colleagues as well (Bacciagaluppi, 1994).

In his work *The Origins of Love and Hate*, Suttie (1935/1988) wondered whether the “attachment-to-mother is merely the sum of the infantile bodily needs and satisfactions which refer to her [that is, a secondary drive], or whether the need for a mother is primarily presented to the child mind as a need for company

*and as a discomfort in isolation*” (p. 16). He explicitly stated that “love of mother is primal in so far as it is the *first formed and directed* emotional relationship” (p. 31). These statements on the primary need for the mother were, of course, all very much similar to Bowlby’s ideas. Also in line with Bowlby’s later theorizing on attachment, Suttie related that in the “ideal state anxiety is at a minimum and resentments are only transient. There is no abiding sense of insecurity or of grievance.” Unfortunately, “the exigencies of life itself . . . interrupt [the] happy symbiotic relationship” between mother and child, which leads “the infant [to] feel insecure.” Now that “the ‘separation anxiety’ is in full force . . . all effort is devoted to . . . remove the *cause* of the anxiety and hate by restoring harmonious social relationships” (pp. 39–40).

Remarkably, Suttie (1935/1988) also highlighted the survival value of the interaction with the caregiver when he introduced “the innate need-for-companionship which is the infant’s only way of self-preservation” (p. 6). Suttie went on by stating that, “instead of an armament of instincts—latent or otherwise—the child is born with a simple attachment-to-mother who is the sole source of food and protection” (p. 15). Of course, the evolutionary view of the mother–infant relationship was to become Bowlby’s pet notion in later years when he made an attempt to rewrite psychoanalysis in the light of ethological principles (cf. van der Horst, 2008). Thus, we can see that Suttie’s terminology was similar to Bowlby’s (e.g., attachment to mother, insecurity, separation anxiety, innate need for companionship), and that Bowlby was neither the first nor the only one to emphasize the potential importance of such real-life events as mother–child separations for child development.

### **Bowlby and Other Contemporaries**

From the above, it becomes clear that Bowlby’s ideas about the needs of young children did not evolve in a societal and scientific vacuum. His conception was in line with those of “eclectic” psychoanalysts, colleagues working at child guidance clinics, and social reformers (cf. Gerson, 2009). This raises the issue of Bowlby’s own unique contribution: Were his ideas new and revolutionary, or did he just express a widely held view, one of the clichés of his time? There is no easy answer to that question because Bowlby’s position was shared by some and resisted by others. It is probably fair to say that in the late 1930s virtually everyone, except for a few followers of Watson’s (1928) tough recipes, believed that children need to be dependably loved, and that if children are not loved or are neglected, this will cause them to feel miserable and unhappy. That lack of love and disharmonious family life may cause children to become “difficult” was probably also widely believed. Bowlby himself was introduced to this view during the period he spent at Priory Gate School. That a lack of love, marital problems, and so forth may cause the child to become a juvenile delinquent was perhaps believed by fewer people, but still by quite a substantial group. As we have seen, this was the conviction of Cyril Burt and Homer Lane, and it was also the philosophy of the majority of the persons who, like Bowlby, worked at the ISTD and at the child guidance clinics. That maternal deprivation or privation may cause “separation anxiety” was accepted by many “eclectic” persons working at the prewar Tavistock Clinic and at the child guidance clinics and by more



“orthodox” Freudians (see below; Edelston, 1958; Fairbairn, 1943a, 1943b). That emotional damage suffered in infancy or childhood is irreparable seemed to follow from Freud, who always claimed that it is “insight” the therapist strives for, not “cure.” That prolonged or repeated physical separation of a child from his mother in a specific age period will result in permanent damage to his character and in delinquency was Bowlby’s specific hypothesis.

We can thus see that although Bowlby’s specific hypothesis went somewhat farther than those of many of his contemporaries, many of his views were shared by his psychoanalytic and (sometimes) medical colleagues. We also can see that this is so when we take a brief look at some of the issues discussed in the medical press during World War II, that is, immediately after Bowlby published his very first papers and before he published his major paper on juvenile delinquency. In the prestigious *British Medical Journal*, Fairbairn (1943a) expressed as his opinion that war neuroses in soldiers—that is, mental breakdown after traumatic experiences at the battlefield—can be understood if we realize that the soldiers are ultimately suffering from “separation anxiety”: Their panic and anxiety is rooted in their desire to return to their mother and ultimately in the infant’s wish to restore intrauterine life. His article called forth mixed reactions (cf. Fairbairn, 1943b; Hamilton, 1943; Hurst, 1943a, 1943b; Mackwood, 1943; Hurst claimed that now he understood why Fairbairn’s therapy was unsuccessful), but the fact that a leading medical journal published this explanation of such an important topic remains significant.<sup>4</sup>

By 1944, at least some of the medical doctors were aware of infants’ supposed emotional needs. An editorial in the *British Medical Journal* that on psychoanalytic grounds seemed critical of war nurseries called forth some debate (Cameron, 1944; Drummond Shiels, 1944; Editorial, 1944), and when one of the doctors read that the new Children’s Hospital in Birmingham was going to use glass cages for ill infants (for fear of contamination), he reacted in the following way:

From this brave new world of deprivation, insecurity, soundlessness, and terrifying sounds the infant victim is expected to draw fresh reserves with which to combat the invading microorganism. How can it? Can the frustration of practically every strong emotional need possibly cure an infant of anything? . . . Already we have with us the “evacuation problem,” product of these same experiences of sudden deprivation, insecurity, and fear in older children. How much worse will be the effect on the still more sensitive 0–1-year olds! (Scott, 1944, pp. 266–267)

In the reactions to Scott’s outcry (e.g., Allen, 1944a, 1944b; Baar, 1944), Allen (1944b) claimed that “separation must be intolerable to a child . . . never again will the child be so sociable as it is in its babyhood. To place it in solitary confinement in a glass cubicle seems contrary to its instinctual reactions and is likely to produce harmful results” (p. 573).

These discussions in a major medical journal seem to demonstrate that the idea that infants and young children should not be socially isolated, that separation

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<sup>4</sup> Bowlby participated in a similar discussion on “the treatment of war neuroses” in *The Lancet* a few years earlier (Allen, 1940; Bowlby & Soddy, 1940; Brown, 1940; Burns, 1941; Collier, 1940; Culpin, 1940a, 1940b, 1940c; Debenham, Sargant, Hill, & Slater, 1941; Dillon, 1941; Hurst, 1940; Pegge, 1940a, 1940b; Sargant & Slater, 1940; Slater, 1941; Wilson, 1940; Wright, 1941).

from significant others may result in separation anxiety (in whatever form) and, perhaps, in permanent emotional damage were not uncommon at the time. This does not mean that in practice separations were avoided: It would take years to change the regulations for visiting children in hospital (van der Horst & van der Veer, 2009). In sum, Bowlby's specific claim that major separations result in a specific character (the psychopath), which then causes delinquency (stealing), was new (and mistaken, as he had to admit much later), and his supposed statistical underpinning certainly was lacking in rigor, but his general approach did not differ substantially from that of at least several other psychoanalytically oriented medical doctors and psychologists of that time.

### Conclusions

In this contribution, we have related how experiences in Bowlby's personal and professional life influenced his subsequent thinking and research. His distant, upper class upbringing, the departure of a favorite nanny, and the attendance of a boarding school taught him that children can be hurt by separation experiences. As a student, working at progressive schools, he witnessed that some children may become disturbed or delinquent in the absence of a loving home. The acquaintance with the English school of psychoanalysis taught him that the need for love may be primal. Ian Suttie was a major influence as he voiced criticisms of psychoanalytic theory that Bowlby would come to share, notably the importance of real-life experiences for the development of children. Suttie also anticipated Bowlby's later emphasis on the evolutionary basis of the mother-child relationship. In his professional life, working at a child guidance clinic, Bowlby once again noticed that mental problems and delinquency may be rooted in an inadequate emotional relationship with the principal caregiver. Taken together, these experiences and influences led him to posit that a lack of love and physical mother-child separations are detrimental for the child's health and moral behavior.<sup>5</sup>

It does indeed seem that Bowlby in the period from the late 1930s to 1958—the publication date of his seminal paper on “The Nature of the Child's Tie to His Mother” (Bowlby, 1958a)—had not changed his position “in any material way” (Bowlby, 1958b, p. 248). On the basis of the material presented in

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<sup>5</sup> Although Bowlby was remarkably consistent in defending his ideas on deprivation, there seems to have been a moment of hesitation. On the basis of new evidence, Bowlby admitted that “statements implying that children who are brought up in institutions or who suffer other forms of serious privation and deprivation in early life *commonly* develop psychopathic or affectionless characters . . . are seen to be mistaken” (Bowlby, Ainsworth, Boston, & Rosenbluth, 1956, p. 240). However, 2 years later he sent letters to the *British Journal of Medical Psychology* and *The Lancet* in which he said that he perhaps had been “unduly self-critical” (Bowlby, 1958c, p. 480; 1958b, p. 247), and that maternal deprivation is similar to poliomyelitis: Not *everybody* is seriously harmed but we must do everything to prevent the phenomenon. In the discussion that followed in *The Lancet*, Edelston (1958) remarked that the “separation anxiety” hypothesis was part of the teaching of Suttie and others at the pre-war Tavistock Clinic, and that their views were amply confirmed in the child guidance clinics. He emphasized, however, that although separation and estrangement *can* be traumatic, this is a far cry from Bowlby's thesis “which has laid so much at the door of the *physical* separation of mother and child” (p. 797). He also urged investigation of what kind of children are adversely affected, to what extent, and in what way, and how the possible effects can be reversed.

this paper one gets the impression of a researcher who relentlessly pursued one basic idea: that children need a loving mother or mother substitute to develop into emotionally healthy adults, and that separation experiences (even minor ones) may jeopardize this development. As we have seen, this was an idea that was not original with Bowlby. Throughout his career, various groups and individuals inspired and shared at least part of his convictions. Others, however, for practical or other reasons resisted Bowlby's views. For example, Bowlby's conviction did not square with the government policy during World War II (when millions of children were evacuated without their mothers from the big cities), but harmonized with the government policy followed after the war, when female workers had to return home to make place for the returning soldiers (cf. Kagan, 2009). Another example is that of hospital visiting policies. Pediatricians were initially very reluctant to adopt Bowlby's recommendations to allow unlimited visiting in their wards but would eventually accept them (for a full description, see van der Horst & van der Veer, 2009).

In other words, it took decades to convince hospital boards, policymakers, and others that the forced temporary separation of a child from his mother is potentially damaging to the child's mental health, despite the fact that Bowlby was not the first nor the only one to see its dangers. Wootton (1959) has sighed that "it is indeed a melancholy conclusion that it should have been thought necessary to employ so much costly research, with so pretentious a scientific facade, in order to demonstrate these homely truths" (p. 154). Yet, even simple truths are sometimes difficult to bring home, and it was precisely this ungrateful task that would keep Bowlby busy throughout his life.

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