

Bowlby, John

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Edward John Mostyn Bowlby (February 27, 1907, London, England – September 2, 1990, Isle of Skye, Scotland) was a child psychologist, psychoanalyst, and psychiatrist renowned for his attachment theory. Bowlby was interested in how the caregiver-child bond impacted the child's personality and emotional bonds formed later in life.

Bowlby was born to an upper-middle class family and raised by a nanny. Bowlby's father, a leading surgeon, was often absent, and Bowlby's mother spent only an hour a day with her six children. At the time, British parents traditionally spent very little time with their children, as it was believed that parental attention spoiled them. Bowlby's nanny, whom he referred to as his primary caretaker, left the family when he was four years old. He would later write that the loss was similar to that of a child losing his mother. When Bowlby was seven years old, his parents sent him to boarding school and his father went to war. Bowlby's upbringing, which was characterized by a lack of connection to his caregivers, largely impacted his resolve to investigate the effect of caregiver-child relationships on children's abilities to create emotional bonds throughout their lives.

To his father's delight, Bowlby entered Trinity College in 1925 to study preclinical sciences. After two years of studying a profession that Bowlby thought was "tedious," he changed his focus to psychology (Coates, 2004, p. 575). Following his graduation in 1928, Bowlby volunteered as a teacher at two schools for delinquent and maladjusted children. Bowlby

recognized that many of the children had lost their mothers early in their lives and would later write about this in his attachment theory. Bowlby was inspired to become a child psychiatrist and pursued the study of medicine at University College Hospital in London in 1929. Bowlby simultaneously studied psychoanalysis at the British Psychoanalytic Institute under Melanie Klein who was the first to apply psychoanalysis to young children. Bowlby was dissatisfied that Klein's approach did not include the importance of a child's environment on behavior. Instead, Klein believed that behavioral problems stemmed from the inner turmoil formed from a child's fantasies. Following his medical qualification, in 1933 Bowlby entered Maudsley Hospital in London to study psychiatry. He graduated from Maudsley in 1937 and immediately began to train as a psychiatrist at the London Child Guidance Clinic. Finally, Bowlby had found an institution that emphasized the importance of past familial experiences, rather than sexual phantasies in early childhood, in the formation of behavioral problems. In 1938, he married Ursula Longstaff, who raised their four children and wrote several articles for popular parenting magazines about her husband's work.

In 1946, Bowlby became the Director of the Tavistock Institute, a non-profit behavioral research organization and was tasked with forming a research unit. Bowlby's team investigated the impact of caregiver-child separation. It was during this time that Bowlby refined what would become his theory of attachment alongside Mary Salter Ainsworth. Later, through her use of the Strange Situation Procedure, Ainsworth would make some of the first empirical findings to support Bowlby's attachment theory. Bowlby's attachment theory (1958) states that children hold an innate and evolutionarily based need for a relationship with their caregivers, and Ainsworth reinforced this notion with her discovery of three attachment styles: secure, insecure avoidant, and insecure ambivalent/resistant.

In 1949, the World Health Organization (WHO) hired Bowlby as a mental health consultant. Bowlby wrote “Maternal Care and Mental Health” in 1951, based on his research with loss and the mental health of homeless children. This report described the importance of an affectionate, attentive, reliable caregiver in the earliest stages of development. Bowlby’s work helped European physicians recognize that keeping mothers and children apart immediately after birth was harmful. Bowlby’s work also led to radical reform in hospital regulations surrounding family visitation for hospitalized children and interventions for orphaned and homeless children. Yet, the psychoanalysts of the time disregarded his work due to Bowlby’s emphasis on the importance of environment as opposed to subconscious desires.

Bowlby later released *Attachment and Loss* (1969, 1973, 1980), a three-volume book on attachment theory. He further defined Ainsworth’s attachment styles and wrote of attachment as a basic drive for humans in *A Secure Base: Clinical Applications of Attachment Theory* (1988). Bowlby’s attachment theory was controversial following its first publications in the 1950s and 1960s, but by the 1980s, it had become the basis for emotional bonding, social, and personality development research. Because of Bowlby’s work, the psychoanalytic belief in the innate need and evolutionary importance of an initial intimate bond became a central focus for many psychologists. Bowlby’s influence can be seen in most child-rearing literature, promoting early bonding and attachment (e.g., through breastfeeding and skin-to-skin contact at birth) as essential to healthy development.

Further Reading

Coates, S. W. (2004). John Bowlby and Margaret S. Mahler: their lives and theories. *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*, 52(2), 571-601.

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