

The social nature of the mother's tie to her child: John Bowlby's theory of attachment in post-war America

MARGA VICEDO *

Abstract. This paper examines the development of British psychiatrist and psychoanalyst John Bowlby's views and their scientific and social reception in the United States during the 1950s. In a 1951 report for the World Health Organization Bowlby contended that the mother is the child's psychic organizer, as observational studies of children worldwide showed that absence of mother love had disastrous consequences for children's emotional health. By the end of the decade Bowlby had moved from observational studies of children in hospitals to animal research in order to support his thesis that mother love is a biological need. I examine the development of Bowlby's views and their scientific and social reception in the United States during the 1950s, a central period in the evolution of his views and in debates about the social implications of his work. I argue that Bowlby's view that mother love was a biological need for children influenced discussions about the desirability of mothers working outside the home during the early Cold War. By claiming that the future of a child's mind is determined by her mother's heart, Bowlby's argument exerted an unusually strong emotional demand on mothers and had powerful implications for the moral valuation of maternal care and love.

It is fortunate for their survival that babies are so designed by Nature that they beguile and enslave mothers.¹

Who should care for children? Historically, this question has been at the centre of important social debates about gender roles that continue to this day. Although the answer to the question is prescriptive, the range of possible alternatives depends on the answer to an empirical question: what do children need? This last question has also been a matter of continuous scientific debate. Since views about child development help to ground decisions about child rearing, the terms of the public debate about childcare have been shaped by scientific pronouncements. From the mid-twentieth century to the present, the work of British psychiatrist John Bowlby has been tremendously important.

In the 1950s, Bowlby postulated that infants have an instinctual need for maternal love and that disruption of their attachment to mother has disastrous consequences for

* Institute for the History and Philosophy of Science and Technology, 314 Victoria College, University of Toronto, Toronto, M5S 1K7, Canada. Email: marga.vicedo@utoronto.ca.

I am grateful to Mark Solovey and two anonymous reviewers for useful comments to improve this paper, and to Juan Ilerbaig for help finishing it. I thank Peter Galison, Ellen Herman and Mark Solovey for continuous support for my work, and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for financial support.

¹ John Bowlby, 'The nature of the child's tie to his mother', *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* (1958) 39, pp. 350–373, 367.

their emotional development. Important works on the history of child rearing, the history of the family and the history of changing conceptions of motherhood have noted the impact of Bowlby's work. In particular, American historians have identified Bowlby as the most important figure in post-Second World War debates about maternal deprivation and have noted his influence on discussions about child development and parental care.²

However, we do not have a full historical account of the development of Bowlby's ideas, their scientific reception, and their social impact. Since Bowlby was British and spent his career in England, most historical research focuses on the English context. In addition, much of the literature on Bowlby combines a historical presentation with a defence of his scientific views. There are contradictory accounts of what Bowlby claimed and of how his views influenced several areas of social thought and practice in different countries.

I examine the development of Bowlby's views and their scientific and social reception in the United States during the 1950s, a central period in the evolution of his views and in debates about the social implications of his work. I argue that Bowlby's view that mother love was a biological need for children influenced discussions about the desirability of mothers working outside the home and supported a gendered distribution of parental roles. By the end of the decade Bowlby had moved from observational studies of children in hospitals to animal research in order to support his thesis that mother love is a biological need. This argument exerted an unusually strong emotional and moral demand on mothers.

The paper is divided into five sections. I first examine and clarify Bowlby's views expressed in his 1951 report for the World Health Organization. In the second section, I analyse the reception of his views by the scientific community in the United States, focusing on psychoanalytic discussions about mother love. In the third and largest section I show that Bowlby became a major reference point in discussions – in academic circles, national conferences and the mass media – about whether mothers should work outside the home. Bowlby's influence, I propose, can be explained by the social interest in his views about the effects of maternal deprivation at a crucial juncture in debates about women's role in modern society, and by the emotional appeal of his position. In

2 On Bowlby's influence in the United States see Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English, *For Her Own Good: 150 Years of the Expert's Advice to Women*, New York: Anchor Books, 1978, p. 229; Mari Jo Buhle, *Feminism and Its Discontents: A Century of Struggle with Psychoanalysis*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998, p. 162; Ann Hulbert, *Raising America: Experts, Parents, and a Century of Advice about Children*, New York: Vintage Books, 2003, p. 205; Julia Grant, *Raising Baby by the Book: The Education of American Mothers*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998, p. 211; Maxine L. Margolis, *Mothers and Such: Views of American Women and Why They Changed*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984, p. 70; Molly Ladd-Taylor and Lauri Umansky, 'Introduction', in Molly Ladd-Taylor and Lauri Umansky (eds.), *'Bad' Mothers: The Politics of Blame in Twentieth-Century America*, New York: New York University Press, 1998, pp. 1–28, 14; John Byng-Hall, 'An appreciation of John Bowlby: his significance for family therapy', *Journal of Family Therapy* (1991) 13, pp. 5–16; Barbara Melosh, *Strangers and Kin: The American Way of Adoption*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002, p. 75; Ellen Herman, *Kinship by Design: A History of Adoption in the Modern United States*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008, p. 133.

the following section I examine psychological research on child separation that did not support Bowlby's views. The final section focuses on Bowlby's development of his ethological theory of attachment behaviour, as he turned to animal research in order to support his claim that the relation between mother and child is instinctual. Here, I also reflect on the implications of his views for mothers.

The 1951 WHO report: the mother as psychic organizer

At the end of the Second World War the United Nations commissioned a study about the needs of homeless children, a major concern in post-war Europe. G. Ronald Hargreaves, chief of the Mental Health Section of the World Health Organization (WHO), gave the task to British psychoanalyst and psychiatrist Edward John Mostyn Bowlby (1907–1990).

Bowlby's interest in mental health began when he spent a year working in a school for maladjusted children following his education in Cambridge. With a medical degree from University College Hospital in London, he specialized in psychiatry at Maudsley Hospital, trained in psychoanalysis at the British Psychoanalytic Institute, and gained experience as a staff psychologist at the London Child Guidance Clinic and Training Centre. After serving as a psychiatrist in the British Army during the Second World War, Bowlby became a deputy director and then the head of the children's department of the Tavistock Clinic, London, where he remained until his retirement.³

Early in his career Bowlby established a link between lack of maternal love and psychopathology. In 1940 he published a discussion of 'about 150 cases' of neurotic children. He reviewed their files at the London Child Guidance Clinic and also met some of them and their mothers a few times. To understand the causation of neurosis from an 'analytic angle', Bowlby confessed that he had 'ignored many aspects of the child's environment such as economic conditions, housing conditions, the school situation, diet, and religious teaching'. Though he recognized that 'some psychiatrists' thought that those factors might influence a child's mental health, Bowlby chose to focus on the '*personal environment* of the child', which for him meant only the mother, as he did not gather information about the fathers or families.⁴

³ On Bowlby see Jeremy Holmes, *John Bowlby and Attachment Theory*, New York: Routledge, 1993; Robert Karen, *Becoming Attached: First Relationships and How They Shape Our Capacity to Love*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1998; Suzan van Dijken, *John Bowlby: His Early Life: A Biographical Journey into the Roots of Attachment Theory*, London: Free Association Books, 1998; Inge Bretherton, 'The origins of attachment theory: John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth', *Developmental Psychology* (1992) 28, pp. 759–775; Ben Mayhew, 'Between love and aggression: the politics of John Bowlby', *History of the Human Sciences* (2006) 19, pp. 19–35. For a more critical discussion of Bowlby's work, see A. Dally, *Inventing Motherhood: The Consequences of an Ideal*, New York: Schocken, 1983; Diane E. Eyer, *Mother–Infant Bonding: A Scientific Fiction*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992; Barbara Tizard, 'Employed mothers and the care of young children', in Ann Phoenix, Anne Woollett and Eva Lloyd (eds.), *Motherhood: Meanings, Practices and Ideologies*, London: Sage, 1991, pp. 178–194.

⁴ John Bowlby, 'The influence of early environment in the development of neurosis and neurotic-character', *International Journal of Psycho-analysis* (1940) 21, pp. 154–178, 154, 155, 156, original emphasis.

Bowlby identified twenty-two children who had experienced a break in the relationship with their mothers. Of those, ‘fourteen had become affectionless thieves and three had become schizophrenic’. This group included children whose mothers had died, children in foster homes or in the care of relatives, and children hospitalized with major illnesses. According to Bowlby, the ‘dramatic interruptions of the child’s emotional development’ that had led to their pathologies resulted from ‘the broken mother–child relation’.⁵

Bowlby then turned to a second group of neurotic children that had ‘never suffered any obvious psychological trauma’ and had ‘remained in a relatively stable home, looked after by their mothers and well cared for according to ordinary standards’. Yet they had ‘developed into neurotic children with great anxiety and guilt and abnormally strong sexual and aggressive impulses’. After investigating the causes of their troubles, Bowlby noted that one factor stood out: the ‘personality of the mother and her emotional attitude towards the child’. In some cases the mother ‘had strong unconscious hostility towards her child’, which could be observed in ‘unnecessary deprivations and frustrations, in impatience over naughtiness, in odd words of bad temper, in a lack of the sympathy and understanding which the usual loving mother intuitively has’.⁶

In sum, for Bowlby, lack of adequate mother love and care was a main factor leading to affectionless criminals; psychopaths; and neurotic, aggressive, oversexed and anxious individuals. He reached similar conclusions in a subsequent study, ‘Forty-four juvenile thieves: their characters and home-life’, where he identified a ‘prolonged separation’ from the mother as the ‘outstanding cause’ of the children’s emotionally unstable character and delinquent behaviour.⁷

Bowlby’s views reached a worldwide audience with the WHO publication. This landmark report appeared in 1951 under the title *Maternal Care and Mental Health*. In 1953 Bowlby published another version, *Child Care and the Growth of Love*, which was reprinted six times in the following ten years and was translated into fourteen languages, and which sold over 400,000 copies in the English paperback edition alone.⁸

The thesis of Bowlby’s report was that maternal care and love are essential for a child’s mental health. Bowlby started by pointing out what he considered to be one of the most important advances in recent psychiatric research: ‘The steady growth of evidence that the quality of the parental care which a child receives in his earliest years is of vital importance for his future mental health’. According to Bowlby, psychiatrists and child-guidance workers believed that it was essential that ‘the infant and young child should experience a warm, intimate, and continuous relationship with his mother

5 Bowlby, op. cit. (4), pp. 162, 163, 158.

6 Bowlby, op. cit. (4), pp. 163, 164.

7 John Bowlby, ‘Forty-four juvenile thieves: their characters and home-life’, *International Journal of Psycho-analysis* (1944) 25, pp. 19–53, 107–128, 113.

8 Bretherton, op. cit. (3), p. 759. John Bowlby, ‘Maternal care and mental health’, *Bulletin of the World Health Organization* (1951) 3, pp. 355–534; *idem*, *Child Care and the Growth of Love* (based on *idem*, *Maternal Care and Mental Health*, abridged and ed. Margery Fry), Harmondsworth: Pelican, 1953. All references are to the 1953 abridged version.

(or permanent mother-substitute – one person who steadily “mothers” him) in which both find satisfaction and enjoyment’.⁹

Could someone substitute for mother? This became the most controversial issue in the discussion about Bowlby’s ideas and their social implications. Bowlby stated that a child needs care from a steady mother, a mother substitute or a mother figure. In the report, however, he focused exclusively on mothers. Thus his thesis about parental care finally translated into the view that ‘*mother-love* in infancy and childhood is as important for mental health as are vitamins and proteins for physical health’. As for father, Bowlby gave him the standard treatment of the time: father was necessary as a provider for the family and supporter of mother.¹⁰ Could a babysitter or another caretaker substitute for mother? Although Bowlby did not deny this openly, the possibility of substituting for the real mother became unlikely after Bowlby clarified what the child needed from mother.

To explain the role of maternal love on a child’s psyche, Bowlby resorted to a biological process, embryological development, and established an analogy between the development of mental health and the embryo’s growth. Biologists, Bowlby noted, had proposed the existence of certain tissues that acted as ‘organizers’, tissues that guide the growth of the embryo. ‘In the same way’, Bowlby argued, ‘if mental development is to proceed smoothly, it would appear to be necessary for the unformed mentality to be exposed, during certain critical periods, to the influence of the psychic organizer – the mother’.¹¹

Furthermore, the mere presence of the mother seemed insufficient for her infant’s good mental health. Bowlby considered the emotional quality of the mothering to be just as important. The sympathetic love that a mother ‘intuitively’ felt for her child and her ‘unconscious feelings’ were crucial for normal development. So good mothering required not only love, but also love with certain characteristics. The lack of such a natural feeling could be expressed in myriad ways, from impatience to unruliness, from unnecessary deprivations to spoiling. For the child, the most important thing was not only to receive maternal care and love, but also to sense that the mother was happy with that love.¹²

In a statement that would become a rallying point for his supporters and detractors worldwide, Bowlby set the standards of good mothering very high:

The provision of constant attention night and day, seven days a week and 365 days in the year, is possible only for a woman who derives profound satisfaction from seeing her child grow from babyhood, through the many phases of childhood, to become an independent man or woman, and knows that it is her care which has made this possible.¹³

It did not seem that a caretaker or even a father could perform that role with the feelings of the real mother.

⁹ Bowlby, op. cit. (8), p. 11.

¹⁰ Bowlby, op. cit. (8), p. 182, emphasis added. On p. 13, Bowlby stated, ‘In what follows . . . little will be said of the father-child relation; his value as the economic and emotional support of the mother will be assumed’.

¹¹ Bowlby, op. cit. (8), pp. 57–58.

¹² Bowlby, op. cit. (4), p. 90.

¹³ Bowlby, op. cit. (8), pp. 75–76.

Bowlby further noted that children's need for mother love had clear implications for the organization of family life. For the mother to provide the happy constant devotion required by her children, she required a close support group, the family. He presented the nuclear family as a natural unit essential for the healthy development of children: 'It is for these reasons that the mother-love which a young child needs is so easily provided within the family, and is so very difficult to provide outside it'.¹⁴

Referring to the family as the 'natural home group', Bowlby saw any breakdown of the group as a disastrous event. He compiled a list of the factors that could prevent a family from caring properly for a child: illegitimacy, chronic illness, economic conditions, war, famine, death of a parent, desertion, imprisonment, divorce and full-time employment of mother. 'Any family suffering from one or more of these conditions must be regarded as a possible source of deprived children,' he declared.¹⁵

Through the WHO report and its coverage by the international press, Bowlby's ideas spread rapidly among scientific and public audiences. When Bowlby titled his piece in *Home Companion* 'Mother is the whole world', the message reverberated across the globe. The *Johannesburg Star* in South Africa reported Bowlby as saying that 'when deprived of a mother's care a child's development is almost always retarded physically, intellectually and socially'. Another South African newspaper, the *Cape Argus*, reported, 'Social behaviour depends on mother love'. 'The importance of a mother's love' was also covered in the *East African Standard* from Nairobi. The French reported that between the attitude of the mother and the future behaviour of her children, there was '*une relation de cause à effet quasi mathématique*' – a relationship of cause and effect almost mathematical. The Italians put it more poetically: '*Solo le mani di una Madre possono plasmare il destino*' – only the hands of a mother can shape destiny.¹⁶

In the United States, the *New York Times* had been reporting on Bowlby's work from its inception. As early as 1949 one article noted that 'British psychiatrists observe effects of missing mothers'. Three years later an article on the WHO report presented Bowlby's claim that 'depriving a child of maternal care can have results so grave for his future that he should no more be deliberately exposed to such risk than to a heavy dose of tubercle infection'.¹⁷ These ideas found a receptive audience among American psychoanalysts who were already researching how mothers shape their children's emotional personality.

The power of mother love

In the United States, several factors after the Second World War led to an increasing concern about the development of emotions and their role in personality formation.

14 Bowlby, op. cit. (8), p. 76.

15 Bowlby, op. cit. (8), p. 84.

16 John Bowlby, 'Mother is the whole world', *Home Companion*, 17 January 1952, pp. 29–30. Newspaper clippings in John Bowlby Papers, Wellcome Library for the History and Understanding of Medicine, London, PP/BOW/A.4/1, press cuttings April 1952–May 1953 and PP/BOW/A.4/2, press cuttings 1953–1954.

17 'British psychiatrists observe effects of missing mothers', *New York Times*, 10 April 1949. Quote from 'Warping of child traced to family', *New York Times*, 12 April 1952. 'Use of knowledge urged in child aid', *New York Times*, 27 March 1953.

There was widespread preoccupation about the children orphaned or otherwise affected by the war. Returning veterans often faced emotional problems in readjusting to civil society. So did women who, after entering the workforce in massive numbers to help the war effort, were prodded to return home to their roles as wives and mothers. Many social scientists focused on the emotional aspects of the problems involved in readjustment and the construction a new post-war order, in the home and in the workplace. In this context, the question of how emotions develop and how one becomes an emotionally healthy individual came to the fore of scientific and public debate. This emphasis, in turn, led to a focus on mothers, since mothers, in raising their children, had a privileged position in moulding their emotional personalities.¹⁸

In the mood of the hour, many American social scientists and intellectuals focused on the damaging effects of too much or not enough mother love. During the war and its aftermath, mothers were blamed for doting too much on their children and thus making them dependent and immature. This was the era of 'momism', when the strident attacks against 'mom' by popular writer Philip Wylie were hardly distinguishable from the equally negative scientific pronouncements of psychiatrist Edward Strecker, psychoanalyst Erik Erikson and sociologist Geoffrey Gorer, among many others. Those authors accused 'moms' of turning their children—especially their boys—into immature individuals by overprotecting them. American historians have paid considerable attention to the literature on momism and overprotection. Most recently, Rebecca Jo Plant has shown how momism contributed to the pathologization of mother love during this period.¹⁹

At the same time, studies exploring the significance of maternal care and love in an infant's early years also commanded increasing attention. Anna Freud and Dorothy Burlingham's writings about children who suffered devastating emotional consequences when separated from their mothers during the war influenced many psychoanalysts and psychiatrists in America, where some analysts had already been studying maternal deprivation. Among the most influential researchers were David M. Levy, professor of psychiatry at Columbia University and chief of staff at the New York Institute for Child Guidance; private psychoanalyst Margaret Ribble; and émigré psychoanalysts René Spitz in New York and Therese Benedek at the Chicago Institute of Psychoanalysis.²⁰

18 On the turn to emotions after the Second World War see Marga Vicedo, *The Nature and Nurture of Love: From Imprinting in Birds to Attachment in Infants* (forthcoming, Chicago: University of Chicago Press).

19 Philip Wylie, *Generation of Vipers*, New York: Farrar and Rinehart, 1942; Geoffrey Gorer, *The American People: A Study in National Character*, New York: Norton, 1948; Edward A. Strecker, *Their Mothers' Sons: The Psychiatrist Examines an American Problem*, Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1946; Erik H. Erikson, *Childhood and Society*, New York: Norton, 1950. On momism see Mari Jo Buhle, *Feminism and Its Discontents: A Century of Struggle with Psychoanalysis*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998; Ruth Feldstein, *Motherhood in Black and White: Race and Sex in American Liberalism, 1930–1965*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000; Rebecca Jo Plant, *Mom: The Transformation of Motherhood in Modern America*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010.

20 Anna Freud and Dorothy T. Burlingham, *War and Children: A Message to American Parents*, New York: International University Press, 1943. On Levy see 'David M. Levy, M.D.', *American Journal of*

These researchers observed infants in nurseries, hospitals and orphanages and came to the same conclusion: without mother love, children become emotional cripples. Levy argued that the child had ‘an emotional hunger for maternal love and those other feelings of protection and care implicit in the mother–child relationship’. According to Spitz, mother provided the emotional sustenance that was the basis of all other aspects of human growth. Spitz used two terms, ‘hospitalism’ and ‘anaclitic depression’, to refer to the debilitating conditions affecting children deprived of maternal care and love. Ribble discussed ‘stimulus hunger’ as the child’s need ‘for a long and uninterrupted period of consistent and skillful psychological mothering’. Benedek claimed that ‘trust in the mother’, or a ‘sense of security in the relationship with the mother’, was necessary for the healthy development of the ego, which could then deal effectively with other relationships.²¹

Thus when Bowlby’s report appeared, his main thesis about the importance of mother love fitted well with the views of some child psychoanalysts in the United States. In fact, Bowlby had already drawn upon the studies of Levy and Spitz to support his views in the WHO report. However, Bowlby’s study cannot be interpreted as simply one more work on maternal deprivation, and for two reasons.

First, Bowlby actively constructed a consensus in his report. He did this by strategically emphasizing the common points between the different researchers working on children. He relied upon studies that covered a range of related but distinct issues: infants separated from their families due to hospitalization of the mother or the infant, separation from mother during short periods, permanent separation from mother or from the whole family, unsatisfactory maternal care, and faulty emotional attitude of mother towards the child. But he included all of those studies under the umbrella of ‘maternal care and love’, thereby obscuring the dissimilarities among the children and situations studied. In addition, he boosted this consensus by appealing to a standard epistemological tenet in science. He noted that one particular study on a topic cannot provide convincing proof of a conclusion, but the convergence of several studies done independently of each other adds evidential support to individual conclusions. Thus his views were proven by the convergence of similar results ‘from many sources’. This convergence, he often repeated, left ‘no doubt that the main proposition is true’.²²

The second reason why Bowlby’s WHO report cannot be seen as just one more report on maternal deprivation is that it came to stand for the authoritative document of the

Orthopsychiatry (1938) 8, pp. 769–770. On Benedek see Thomas G. Benedek, ‘A psychoanalytic career begins: Therese F. Benedek, M.D. – a documentary biography’, *Annual of Psychoanalysis* (1979) 7, pp. 3–15.

21 David M. Levy, ‘Primary affect hunger’, *American Journal of Psychiatry* (1937) 94, pp. 643–652, 643–644. René A. Spitz, ‘Hospitalism: an inquiry into the genesis of psychiatric conditions in early childhood’, *Psychoanalytic Study of the Child* (1945) 1, pp. 53–74; *idem*, ‘Anaclitic depression: an inquiry into the genesis of psychiatric conditions in early childhood, II’, *Psychoanalytic Study of the Child* (1946) 2, pp. 313–342; Margaret A. Ribble, ‘Disorganizing factors of infant personality’, *American Journal of Psychiatry* (1941) 98, pp. 459–463, 461, 460. See also *idem*, *The Rights of Infants: Early Psychological Needs and Their Satisfaction*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1943. Therese Benedek, ‘The psychosomatic implications of the primary unit: mother–child’, *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* (1949) 19, pp. 642–654, 649, 651, 650.

22 Bowlby, *op. cit.* (8), pp. 18, 50; see also pp. 34–35. On the history and significance of objectivity in science see Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, *Objectivity*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007.

consensus within a large field of research. The ideas of Spitz, Levy, Ribble and Benedek were well known among child analysts, but with Bowlby's report they gained greater visibility in psychoanalytic and psychiatric circles. While Bowlby was not the only scientist moving towards a deterministic view of mother love, his views epitomize its strongest instantiation and he became its most visible advocate. The report, as a document backed by a respected international organization, acquired a visibility and respectability that none of the previous studies enjoyed independently.

Some important scientists from other fields like sociology and anthropology appealed as well to Bowlby's work to defend the thesis that the child has a fundamental biological need for mother love. In 'The power of creative love', Harvard sociologist Pitirim A. Sorokin and his student Robert C. Hanson argued that motherly love is a vital necessity for babies. Even anthropologist Ashley Montagu, who is now remembered for his opposition to biological explanations of behaviour, argued that when researchers studied individuals incapable of showing love, it was 'invariably found that something was lacking in their mother's relationship to them'. Though Montagu had not done any research on this topic, he recommended Bowlby's 'admirable analysis' in the WHO report to 'every adult capable of reading'. In another article, Montagu reported that children without love also die, this time noting the investigations of David Levy. As an anthropologist, Montagu pointed out there were a variety of forms of love in different cultures, but he then claimed that they all would be 'traceable to the need for the kind of love which is biologically determined, predetermined, to exist between mother and infant'. The implications for mothers were serious: 'To the extent to which women succeed or do not succeed in adequately loving their children, the boys and girls become inadequately loving men and women'.²³

For Americans, Bowlby's message about the crucial role of mother love and the importance of the 'natural home group' arrived at a time of growing concern about the rising number of women working outside the home.

Infants' needs and the tragedy of working mothers

After the Second World War, the patriarchal family gained support from numerous measures. As historian Nancy Cott has shown, the social benefits of the 1944 GI Bill of Rights, which assumed responsibility for veterans' economic well-being, helped to enhance 'men's roles as husband-heads of households, as property owners, as job-holders and providers', since women were only about two percent of all military personnel. In addition, after the war there was little interest in continuing the limited support for childcare centres that had been provided during the war, when one and a half million mothers of small children entered the workforce.²⁴ Cold War propaganda also reinforced traditional gender roles within the American family, as historian Elaine Tyler

23 Ashley Montagu (ed.), *The Meaning of Love*, New York: The Julian Press, 1953; *idem*, 'The origins and meaning of love', in *idem*, op. cit., pp. 18, 19. Pitirim A. Sorokin and Robert C. Hanson, 'The power of creative love', in Montagu, op. cit., 1953, p. 125.

24 Nancy Cott, *Public Vows: A History of Marriage and the Nation*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000; Steven Mintz and Susan Kellog, *Domestic Revolutions: A Social History of American Family Life*,

May has documented.²⁵ When mounting domestic conflicts and tensions between countries grew, public and governmental rhetoric encouraged ‘togetherness’ as the key to security. All these measures encouraged the traditional separation of gender roles, with women at home and men in the workforce. A baby boom and sprawling suburbs attest to the impact of these measures of containment, even if, as the Cold War went on, ‘the rush to marry and buy homes, the reinscription of traditional gender roles, and the overinsistence on the pleasures of family life’ revealed less ‘signs of self-satisfaction than defenses against uncertainty’, as historian Gaile McGregor has argued.²⁶

In this anxiety-filled environment, two social indicators raised concern about the malfunctioning of families and resulting harm to children: the rise of divorce and the rise of juvenile delinquency. The numbers showed that post-war men and women were not easily adjusting to each other. While in 1940 one marriage in six ended in divorce, by 1946 one in four did. A million GIs were divorced by 1950.²⁷ The rising divorce rates fuelled social concerns about their impact on children and adolescents.

The Children’s Bureau record of Juvenile Court cases and the FBI compendium of police arrests pointed to a steep rise in juvenile delinquency during the Second World War, followed by a sharp decline, and then another rise during the 1950s. Gallup polls and popular articles revealed increasing alarm about juvenile delinquency, the rise of gangs and the decline of parental guidance. In 1953 the United States Senate began extensive investigations into juvenile delinquency that lasted over a decade. These events helped to sensationalize the issue and turn it into a national crisis. While politicians debated and called for data, models and experts, the young drove the issue out into the open. Marlon Brando riding a motorcycle in *The Wild One* and James Dean cruising a sports car in *Rebel without a Cause* became emblematic figures of reckless American youth. Their unorthodox ways helped to raise fears of impending social and moral decay propelled by emotionally unstable adolescents.²⁸ In turn, heightened concern about juvenile delinquency drew further attention to dysfunctional families.

The fissures appearing in the post-war efforts to reinforce traditional gender roles combined with fears about rising divorce rates and juvenile delinquency to encourage debate about the role of women in the new social order. The extent of this mid-century debate can be appreciated by looking at the rise of studies about women in the mid-1950s. Let us look at 1953, the year of Bowlby’s best-seller on maternal care and the initial Senate hearings on juvenile delinquency. That year alone saw the publication of the following important works: Alfred Kinsey’s *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female*, Mirra Komarovsky’s *Women in the Modern World*, Ashley Montagu’s *The Natural*

New York: The Free Press, 1988. On day care see also Mary Frances Berry, *The Politics of Parenthood: Child Care, Women’s Rights, and the Myth of the Good Mother*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1993.

25 Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*, New York: Basic Books, 1988. See also Feldstein, op. cit. (19).

26 Gaile McGregor, ‘Domestic blitz: a revisionist theory of the fifties’, *American Studies* (1993) 34, pp. 5–33, 8.

27 Cott, op. cit. (24), p. 189. See also Mintz and Kellogg, op. cit. (24), pp. 170–171.

28 On delinquency and family life during the Cold War see James Gilbert, *A Cycle of Outrage: America’s Reaction to the Juvenile Delinquent in the 1950s*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1986; and Mintz and Kellogg, op. cit. (24).

Superiority of Women and the American translation of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*. This selection gives us a sense of the expanding body of work on women's issues, as scientists started to uncover diverse female desires and practices.²⁹ These academic treatises did not, however, provide a uniform answer to questions about women's nature and their functions in modern society.

Some contemporary studies and historical works have underscored the conflicting nature of the messages sent to women during the 1950s. Komarovsky's earlier sociological research showed that women felt internal conflicts, provoked by contradictory social messages to be autonomous, independent and mature on the one hand, and dependent, subordinate and childish on the other. Historian Joanne Meyerowitz has documented the conflicting messages women received in her analysis of women's popular magazines in the period from 1946 to 1958. Some of these glorified domesticity while others advocated individual striving and public service.³⁰ Increasingly, historical research on the 1950s has questioned the common images of domestic bliss and complacency about traditional gender roles. The contrasting positions presented in scholarly studies about the nature and roles of women also reveal the tensions bubbling beneath the superficial image of happy suburban domesticity. If women were 'naturally superior', as Montagu claimed, why were they treated as 'the second sex', as de Beauvoir argued?

As a short analysis of the reactions to *The Second Sex* reveals, at the core of these concerns about women's changing roles were deep anxieties about the devaluation of motherhood and its social consequences. Written by one of France's most important post-war philosophers, this tract offered an encyclopedic review of historical events and ideas that had led to the construction of woman as 'the Other', the opposite of what is male and masculine. The Other is not only different, but also inferior. As in any work of grand scope, many of de Beauvoir's points could be debated. Yet almost all American reviewers, male and female, housewives and scholars, scientists and humanists, focused on de Beauvoir's assertion that 'no maternal "instinct" exists' and on what they saw as her denigration of motherhood.³¹

29 Alfred C. Kinsey *et al.*, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female*, Philadelphia, PA: W.B. Saunders, 1953; Mirra Komarovsky, *Women in the Modern World: Their Education and Their Dilemmas*, Boston: Little, Brown, 1953; Ashley Montagu, *The Natural Superiority of Women*, New York: Macmillan, 1953; Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, New York: Vintage, 1953.

30 Joanne Meyerowitz, 'Beyond the feminine mystique: a reassessment of postwar mass culture, 1946–1958', *Journal of American History* (1993) 79, pp. 1455–1482. McGregor, *op. cit.* (26). The literature on women and the 1950s is enormous, and has shifted from emphasizing the complacent aspects of the decade to highlighting the tensions and the complexity of women issues. See Joanne Meyerowitz (ed.), *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945–1960*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994. On mothers see Wini Breines, 'Domineering mothers in the 1950s: image and reality', *Women's Studies International Forum* (1985) 8, pp. 601–608; Margolis, *op. cit.* (2), Chapter 3; Mintz and Kellog, *op. cit.* (24); Laura Curran, 'Social work's revised maternalism: mothers, workers, and welfare in early Cold War America, 1946–1963', *Journal of Women's History* (2005) 17, pp. 112–136. On the rise of scientific authority in the realm of child rearing see Rima D. Apple, *Perfect Motherhood: Science and Childrearing in America*, New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2006; Peter N. Stearns, *Anxious Parents: A History of Modern Childrearing in America*, New York: New York University Press, 2003.

31 De Beauvoir, *op. cit.* (29), p. 570. See Therese Benedek, 'Review of *The Second Sex*', *Psychoanalytic Quarterly* (1953) 22, pp. 264–267. See also Marjorie Grene's review in the *New Republic*, 9 March 1953,

The concern about this issue reflected the widespread uneasiness created by the greatest increase in mothers of young children going to work outside the home in American history. By the mid-1950s a 'silent revolution' had occurred, noted sociologists Alva Myrdal and Viola Klein. Increasing numbers of married women of different social classes were entering the labour force. At first, they sought paid work out of economic necessity and to support the war effort. But now, explained Myrdal and Klein, 'the economic motive can no longer be separated from the ideological one; nor can the voluntary element be distinguished from the compulsory one'. Between 1940 and 1960 the number of married women with jobs doubled and working mothers increased by 400 per cent. Over four million married women took jobs, accounting for 60 per cent of all new workers. In 1940 married women holding jobs were mainly working-class; by the end of the 1950s many working wives were educated and middle-class.³²

Because more mothers were joining the workforce, the need for childcare had again reached near crisis proportions even before the Korean War began in 1950, according to historian Sonya Michel. In 1953 the US Department of Labor published *Employed Mothers and Child Care*, a report on 'a subject of vital national interest at a time when married women constitute the largest labor reserve in the country, and therefore may be expected to continue entering the labor force in ever-increasing numbers, and when 5 1/4 million mothers already are employed'. Of those, two million were reported to have children under six years of age.³³

In this context, we can begin to appreciate the attractiveness of research about maternal care and love and specifically of Bowlby's views about the mother being the psychic organizer. In her work on child guidance, Kathleen Jones has shown that in the pre-war period there was already a shift emphasizing the psychology of the individual rather than the social networks and circumstances of 'the troublesome child'. Now, congruent with the post-war American romance with psychology documented by historian Ellen Herman, and the more general turn to social scientists to solve social problems as examined by historians such as Mark Solovey, social and political decisions about day care and child rearing became increasingly framed as empirical questions about the needs of children.³⁴

pp. 22–23; and 'A senior panel takes aim at "The Second Sex"', *Saturday Review*, 21 February 1953, pp. 26–31, 41. The panel of reviewers were: 1. Psychiatrist. Karl Menninger. 2. Writer. Philip Wylie. 3. Educator. Ashley Montagu. 4. Housewife. Phyllis McGinley. 5. Anthropologist. Margaret Mead. 6. Public Official. Olive R. Goldman.

32 Alva Myrdal and Viola Klein, *Women's Two Roles: Home and Work*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1956, p. 79, p. 83.

33 Sonya Michel, *Children's Interests/Mothers' Rights: The Shaping of America's Child Care Policy*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999, p. 151. *Employed Mothers and Child Care*, Bulletin of the Women's Bureau, No. 246. (Washington, DC: GPO, 1953), pp. iii, 1.

34 Kathleen W. Jones, *Taming the Troublesome Child: American Families, Child Guidance, and the Limits of Psychiatric Authority*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999. Ellen Herman, *The Romance of American Psychology: Political Culture in the Age of Experts*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995. Mark Solovey, 'Project Camelot and the 1960s epistemological revolution: rethinking the politics–patronage–social science nexus', *Social Studies of Science* (2001) 31, pp. 171–206; *idem*, *Shaky Foundations* (forthcoming, New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press).

Bowlby was thus addressing one of the major concerns of the post-war period. Backed by a prominent world organization, his views became a point of reference in discussions about the family, personality formation, and parental roles. According to Sonya Michel, the psychological discourse on maternal deprivation, including Bowlby, represented the 'most vehement and explicit opposition to both maternal employment and childcare'.³⁵ Although in the early and mid-1950s Bowlby's views were still pretty similar to those of other researchers, his status as the man behind the WHO report and his willingness to extract social prescriptions from his work made him a central reference in debates about women's work, maternal care and children's emotions. His work was discussed widely, in policy conferences and the public media.

The 1950 Midcentury White House Conference on Children and Youth brought together David Levy, Erik Erikson, Ashley Montagu and other American psychologists, psychiatrists and social scientists to address the issue of how children develop a healthy personality. The fifth in a series of decennial conferences started in 1909, it focused on 'how to rear an emotionally healthy generation' and called attention to the children's 'feelings'. Earlier conferences had focused on the economic and social aspects of the problems encountered by American children. Now, although the report recognized that 'emotional ill health may have economic, sociological, physical, psychological, and spiritual causes', it nevertheless underscored that 'some of the chief ills of the present day are psychological'.³⁶

The conference also aimed to extract the policy implications of research on children's needs. Despite noting the tentative character of this knowledge and recognizing the existence of several competing theories, the report claimed that it was 'well established that loving care is essential for the well-being of children'. Both the discussion during the meetings and the final report focused on Erikson's views about child development, especially the importance of the sense of trust as a basic component of a healthy personality. Erikson, who achieved national prominence with his book *Childhood and Society*, emphasized that maternal love enabled the development of a child's sense of self.³⁷

To support the view that mother love is determinant during infancy, the report referred to Bowlby's WHO report. Later, in the section about 'Effects of deprivation of maternal care', the report also appealed to Bowlby's WHO publication, quoting approvingly and at length his views about the detrimental effects of lack of mother love in infancy.³⁸

The powerful influence of Bowlby's views is also exemplified by Myrdal and Klein's treatment of the topic in *Women's Two Roles*. In the seemingly obligatory chapter about the 'Effects of mother's employment on the mental health of children' they discussed Bowlby's work and argued,

It would be scientifically inadmissible to apply conclusions drawn from cases of deprivation caused by emergency situations, such as death, abandonment or cruelty of the mother, or

35 Michel, op. cit. (33), p. 155.

36 Helen Leland Witmer and Ruth Kotinsky (eds.), *Personality in the Making: The Fact-Finding Report of the Midcentury White House Conference on Children and Youth*, New York: Harper, 1952, p. xvi.

37 Witmer and Kotinsky, op. cit. (36), pp. 4–5. Erikson, op. cit. (19).

38 Witmer and Kotinsky, op. cit. (36), pp. 93–97.

the separation through illness of mother or child, to cases where the mother is absent at regular intervals for a number of hours yet returns to the child each day and provides it with a home.

They also denied the scientific validity of much research on maternal deprivation and its applicability to normal families with working mothers. Nevertheless, they concluded, 'All we can do at present is to stress the undeniable fact that maternal love is a decisive element in any equation concerning young children'. And, again later: 'We therefore support the view that mothers should, as far as possible, take care of their own children during the first years of their lives'.³⁹

But could mothers of infants working outside their homes really endanger the health of their children and even the whole nation? According to Bowlby, the emotional problems of society had an original cause: children's lack of mother love in their early years. Bowlby claimed that delinquency, among other things, could stem from a lack of maternal care. Was the rise of delinquency in America perhaps not evidence for mother slacking in her role? He included divorce as a problematic disruption of the natural home unit. And was not divorce becoming more prevalent in American society? Even more worrisome, Bowlby had presented 'full-time employment of the mother' as equivalent to famine, war or death of a parent.

Given the increasing number of women going into the workforce, the question acquired social urgency: 'Should a woman with children take a job?' asked the English *News Chronicle*. 'The mother who stays at home gives her children a better chance', answered Bowlby.⁴⁰

In the *New York Times*, Sloan Wilson, author of the best-selling novel *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (later made into a successful movie), contributed to the public debate with his declaration that married women with children should not have business careers. Instead, they should assume a status that he termed 'executive wifehood', helping their husbands' careers. Bernice Fitz-Gibbon, the 1956 Woman of the Year in Business, mother of two and grandmother of three, responded that a career could make women better wives and mothers. So she encouraged women to take the 'gay' rather than the grey flannel suit. In the ensuing debate, Wilson appealed to the fact that psychiatrists were calling for a 'loving mother who has plenty of time to give her sons and daughters'. David R. Mace, a professor of human relations, posed a simple question to Miss Fitz-Gibbon: had she ever heard of 'Dr. John Bowlby, a psychiatrist of international reputation, whose impressive and well-documented report to the world's mental-health experts named maternal deprivation as a major cause of serious personality disorders?'⁴¹

The *Ladies Home Journal* continued the discussion with a panel on 'Should mothers of young children work?' Besides Bowlby himself, the panellists in the forum included the United States secretary of labor James P. Mitchell; the sociologist Mirra

39 Myrdal and Klein, op. cit. (32), pp. 125, 126, 127.

40 Clipping in Bowlby's Papers, PP/BOW/K.11/28.

41 'That woman in gray flannel: a debate', *New York Times*, 12 February 1956. Sloan Wilson, *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1955.

Komarovsky; Dr Lynn White, a Jungian lay analyst; a mother and grandmother named Mrs Florida Scott-Maxwell; a mother of four and a nurse, Mrs Roy Davis; and others. The article reported that while traditionally women had worked only out of economic necessity, at the present time women were going to work 'by choice'. But was this the right choice?

Although Secretary of Labor Mitchell argued that American women needed to be part of the workforce to maintain their current standard of living and contribute to the national defence, he also claimed that 'no nation should ever forget that the very primary, fundamental basis of a free society is the family structure – the home – and the most vital job is there'. Should mothers, then, be denied the choice to work? In the midst of a Cold War in which the United States held up individual freedom as the basis for its superiority, Mitchell was not prepared to deny American women this freedom: 'I think it is very right that we in this country have freedom of choice, unlike the Communist world, where there is no such thing'. Nevertheless, he did hope that women workers would not be mothers, since the mother's place was 'in the home'. Mitchell thus defended the superiority of the American model by the somewhat ironic position that American women were free to do the wrong thing.

The women in the forum presented different viewpoints. Some who worked and had sitters reported that their children were doing fine. Others who stayed home felt that working women looked down upon them. Some said it was not always a matter of choice, for their families could not live well if they did not work. It was not a simple decision between the apron and the gay or grey flannel suit.

As for Bowlby, he repeated the advice he believed followed from his scientific work: 'To deprive a small child of his mother's companionship is as bad as depriving him of vitamins'. Seemingly aware of the boredom of suburban mothers, he recognized that most women 'would like a more varied life than is available in the modern suburb', where 'we have made it almost impossible for them to take care of their children happily and to combine this with some sort of career or job'. His solution, though, was not to change social practices but to change social values, so that the home was given its proper place. To do that, 'we must first ascertain who it is that holds the values we oppose. Personally, and this is pure prejudice, I think it is career women who look down on women who stay home'. He further argued that group care was not mothering. Neither should children under three go to day care – though after that age, he realized, 'part-time day care has its uses'. Still, he insisted that children deprived of mothering would grow up to hate and mistrust, leading to a life of truancy and promiscuity.⁴²

I do not mean to imply that lack of mother love was the only explanation for juvenile delinquency or even the dominant paradigm during the 1950s. Some sociological accounts, like the one provided by Harvard criminologist Sheldon Glueck and his wife Eleanor T. Glueck in their influential 1950 book *Unraveling Juvenile Delinquency*, pointed to mother's work outside the home as a factor contributing to delinquency in young boys because it disrupted the authority of the father at home. Bowlby had, in fact,

⁴² 'Should mothers of young children work?', *Ladies Home Journal* (November 1958) 75, pp. 58–59, 154–156, 158–161.

included their work in his WHO report.⁴³ But other sociologists provided explanations that put greater emphasis on economic or social factors and their concomitant psychological consequences like anomie or stress. In general, with the exception of Bowlby, I have found that sociologists writing on juvenile delinquency, and child psychologists and psychiatrists writing on child deprivation, were not citing each others' work. This could be because their intellectual communities had little overlap. In addition, child psychologists and psychiatrists mentioned here were observing infants or young children while focusing almost exclusively on mother–infant dynamics. In any case, my point here is not that Bowlby provided the most accepted explanation of juvenile delinquency, but that the perception among many social scientists and social commentators that juvenile delinquency was on the rise made studies about the effects of early maternal deprivation in the emotional life of a child more visible.

In turn, work on the effects of maternal deprivation by Bowlby and others helped support a division of parental and, consequently, gender roles. A staunch supporter of Bowlby's work, Ashley Montagu contended in 'The tragedy of the American woman' that American women mistakenly believed that equality of rights implied equality of function. According to him, things were better in Europe, for a woman's life was focused 'upon the happiness of her husband and children, and this is likely to be satisfying to everyone concerned'. Montagu, who had earlier defended the 'natural superiority of women,' now presented his interpretation of recent research about mother love to a general audience: 'I put it down as an axiom that no woman with a husband and small children can hold a full-time job and be a good homemaker at one and the same time'. For everybody's sake, Montagu hoped that American women would realize that 'being a good wife, a good mother, in short, a good homemaker, is the most important of all the occupations in the world'.⁴⁴

Another early convert to the idea that 'any serious distortion of the mother's emotional attitudes can be seriously disturbing to the child' was the Harvard sociologist Talcott Parsons, who provided a functional justification for gender roles. In 'Family structure and the socialization of the child', he claimed that in the nuclear family the father was the 'instrumental superior' and the mother 'the expressive superior'. The instrumental function concerned the relation of the family system to the situation outside, while the expressive function concerned the internal affairs of the system, such as the 'maintenance of integrative relations between the members, and regulation of the patterns and tension levels of its component units'. Such jargon may have given his view a veneer of scientific precision, but translation into more comprehensible language gives the same ideological meaning. Parsons was saying that for the well-functioning of society, the roles of the man and the woman in the nuclear family had to be different. The man should work outside the home, while the woman had to make sure that the father and children did not get into each other's hair. Thus women needed to devote

43 Sheldon Glueck and Eleanor Glueck, *Unraveling Juvenile Delinquency*, New York: The Commonwealth Fund, 1950.

44 Ashley Montagu, 'The triumph and tragedy of the American woman', *Saturday Review*, 27 September 1958, pp. 13–15, 34–35, 14, 35, 34, 14.

themselves to regulating the interactions between the 'components' of the nuclear family. Parsons noted they could do other things as well. But what else they could do while they remained full-time housewives and mothers was not clear.⁴⁵

Erik Erikson also justified his gendered division of labour by appealing to the role of mothers in the family unit and the significance of mother love. As he put it,

One must work with children who cannot learn to say *I*, although they are otherwise healthy, and beautiful, and even soulful, to know what a triumph that common gift of 'I' is, and how much it depends on the capacity to feel affirmed by maternal recognition.⁴⁶

In these ways, a number of social scientists used the alleged need of children for constant mother love to justify the existence of separate spheres and to reject what Montagu called 'the equality of functions'. It is difficult to gauge to what extent public opinion in general was influenced by studies of maternal deprivation and the WHO report. In the late 1950s, a National Manpower Council report showed that most Americans agreed that women with small children should not be working.⁴⁷ At the very least, it seems safe to assume that the scientific work helped shore up long-standing beliefs about infants' need for mother.

It was, however, not all that clear that science had proven this point. The widespread support and use of Bowlby's work may suggest that scientific opinion was unanimous regarding the influence of mother love on personality formation. But this was not the case.

Scientific criticisms

In the WHO report, Bowlby admitted that there were 'still far too few systematic studies and statistical comparisons in which proper control groups have been used' in support of his views about mother love. But he rejected the studies that did not confirm his position, saying that only 'three' studies presented evidence challenging his conclusions and that they lacked 'high scientific quality'.⁴⁸

Despite Bowlby's quick dismissal, there were diverse interpretations of the data and contrasting views about their social implications. Harvard psychiatrist Abraham Myerson implored scientists to 'quit blaming mom', stressing that there was no scientific proof to consider mothers the cause of their children's neurosis. Based on an empirical study of 162 'farm children of old American stock', University of Wisconsin sociologist William H. Sewell found no correlation between infant training and personality development. And child psychologists were questioning the solidity of Margaret Ribble's

45 Talcott Parsons, 'The social structure of the family,' in Ruth Anshen (ed.), *The Family: Its Function and Destiny*, New York: Harper and Row, 1959, p. 256; *idem*, 'Family structure and the socialization of the child', in Talcott Parsons and Robert F. Bales, *Family, Socialization and Interaction Process*, Glencoe: The Free Press, 1955, pp. 45–49. An insightful analysis of social science on gender relations is Wini Breines, 'The 1950s: gender and some social science', *Sociological Inquiry* (1986) 56, pp. 69–92.

46 Erik H. Erikson, *Young Man Luther*, London: Faber and Faber, 1958, p. 115.

47 Margolis, *op. cit.* (2), p. 219.

48 Bowlby, *op. cit.* (8), pp. 41, 43.

and René Spitz's work. Samuel Pinneau from the University of California presented the most comprehensive critical analysis.⁴⁹

Pinneau dealt first with the physiological evidence Ribble presented to support her thesis that without the mother's emotional involvement, the child would develop gastrointestinal disturbances, tension, respiratory problems, anxiety and neurological functional disorganization. After examining dozens of studies, some of which failed to confirm Ribble's claims while others disconfirmed them, Pinneau agreed with the conclusion of Harold Orlansky, a Yale anthropologist who offered this strongly worded assessment of Ribble: 'It is unfortunate that such an influential writer has not attempted to draw a line between her empirical findings and her personal opinions'.⁵⁰

In his 1953 presidential address to the New York State Psychological Association, child psychologist L. Joseph Stone recognized the effectiveness of Pinneau's critique of Ribble by comparing its power to 'a kind of hydrogen bomb'. Due to its awesome 'destructive' impact, 'not a paragraph is left standing for miles around'.⁵¹ Though Stone agreed with the dismissal of Ribble's work, he still found the studies of Spitz and Bowlby convincing.⁵²

Then Pinneau published a devastating critique of Spitz's work. Spitz had argued that infants separated from their mothers for over six weeks tended to develop psychogenic disorders. Spitz reported that in many cases infants suffering from those conditions would literally wither away and die. But Pinneau pointed out that it was difficult to evaluate Spitz's claims, because he had not identified the specific sites of his studies – he only mentioned a nursery in a penal institution for delinquent girls and a foundling home. More troubling, by putting together data offered by Spitz in different reports about the same set of studies, Pinneau exposed grave inconsistencies and shortcomings: Spitz had not indicated the composition and training of the research staff, and he had presented contradictory data on the number of children studied and the description of the parents.⁵³

In addition, Spitz had not determined the health of infants before or during his study, although he mentioned a lethal measles epidemic during his study of hospitalism. In addition, due to the loss of children through adoption, there was a selective sampling bias in the foundling home. From the evidence presented, it was clear that the groups being compared differed substantially in their economic backgrounds, constitution and hereditary make-up. Pinneau pointed out that Spitz was inconsistent in presenting data about when the children were observed and only provided cross-sectional but not longitudinal data. Pinneau also attacked the validity of the developmental scale that

49 Abraham Myerson, 'Let's quit blaming mom', *Science Digest* (1951) 29, pp. 10–15, 11. William H. Sewell, 'Infant training and the personality of the child', *American Journal of Sociology* (1952) 58, pp. 150–159, 151.

50 Harold Orlansky, 'Infant care and personality', *Psychological Bulletin* (1949) 46, pp. 1–48, 12, used in Samuel R. Pinneau, 'A critique of the articles by Margaret Ribble', *Child Development* (1950) 21, pp. 203–228, 222.

51 L. Joseph Stone, 'A critique of studies of infant isolation', *Child Development* (1954) 25, pp. 9–20, 14.

52 Stone, op. cit. (51).

53 Samuel R. Pinneau, 'The infantile disorders of hospitalism and anaclitic depression', *Psychological Bulletin* (1955) 52, pp. 429–452.

Spitz used to obtain developmental quotients. Pinneau concluded, 'the results of Spitz's studies cannot be accepted as scientific evidence supporting the hypothesis that institutional infants develop psychological disorders as a result of being separated from their mothers'.⁵⁴

Even researchers in Bowlby's own group reconsidered the effects of maternal separation. A 1956 paper by several members of his Tavistock group – 'The effects of mother–child separation: a follow-up study' – noted that

some of the workers who first drew attention to the dangers of maternal deprivation resulting from separation have tended on occasion to overstate their case. In particular, statements implying that children who experience institutionalization and similar forms of severe privation and deprivation in early life *commonly* develop psychopathic or affectionless characters are incorrect.⁵⁵

This statement caused a stir, as it clearly contradicted Bowlby's position in earlier papers and in the WHO study.

However, Bowlby did not retreat. Almost two years later, in response to letters from perplexed readers who were wondering whether he had changed his views, Bowlby published a short note to 'discourage anyone from supposing that I have changed my position in any material way'.⁵⁶ Indeed, Bowlby never changed his mind about the determinant role of mother love in an infant's life.

But during this period Bowlby turned towards other areas of research, specifically animal studies, to support his views. For guidance in this area, Bowlby looked to ethology. In his 1958 paper 'The nature of the child's tie to its mother', Bowlby presented the most developed theory about the biological basis of the mother–infant dyad and also clarified the social implications of his views on mother love.

The nature of the child's tie to its mother and its social consequences

From early on in his career, Bowlby was interested in finding a biological foundation for the child's emotional needs. In his first papers he had discussed animal research about primates and considered this work relevant to explanations of human behaviour.⁵⁷ He had often talked about the 'natural' family unit, emphasized the natural basis of the mother–child dyad and portrayed the child's emotional development as a process similar to embryological development. The mounting criticisms of the observational studies on children also probably encouraged him to look to other areas to support his views. He was thus happy to encounter the work of ethologists Konrad Lorenz and Niko Tinbergen, who postulated the existence of instincts to explain animal and human social behaviour.

⁵⁴ Pinneau, op. cit. (53), p. 448, original emphasis. See also pp. 453 ff. for Spitz's reply.

⁵⁵ John Bowlby, Mary Ainsworth, Mary Boston and Dina Rosenbluth, 'The effects of mother–child separation: a follow-up study', *British Journal of Medical Psychology* (1956) 29, pp. 211–247, 242.

⁵⁶ John Bowlby, 'A note on mother–child separation as a mental health hazard', *British Journal of Medical Psychology* (1958) 31, pp. 247–248, 248.

⁵⁷ Bowlby, op. cit. (8), pp. 69. E.F.M. Durbin and John Bowlby, *Personal Aggressiveness and War*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1939, includes an appendix on the social life of monkeys and apes.

In his search for a naturalistic basis for the mother–child dyad, Bowlby specifically used Lorenz’s views on imprinting. Working mainly with ducks and geese, Lorenz had discovered that, after birth, the infant birds follow the first moving object they see. If the object is not the mother, however, the young will not develop the social and sexual responses typical of their species. Thus in Lorenz’s work Bowlby saw scientific evidence for the view that the mother–infant dyad was a biological system whose disruption had disastrous consequences.⁵⁸

When the WHO report was reprinted in its popular 1953 version Bowlby hardly made any changes, but he considered his discovery of ethology sufficiently important to add several pages to the first chapter. This addition has not been noted in the literature on Bowlby, but it marked a key transitional moment in his thinking. Bowlby now pointed out that some European biologists had shown that in birds and dogs ‘emotional experiences at certain very early and special stages of mental life may have very vital and long-lasting effects’. Thus his own theories, ‘far from being in themselves improbable, are in strict agreement with what biological science has shown to be true of both bodily and mental growth’. Yet Bowlby did not elaborate. He did not explain the ‘emotional’ experiences of dogs and birds. And he did not report the evidence allegedly provided by biological science for his views.⁵⁹ But he soon took the necessary steps to find out more about Lorenz’s views.

With the support of the WHO, Bowlby helped organize an international Study Group on the Psychobiological Development of the Child. This group met in Geneva in 1953, London in 1954, and Geneva again in 1955 and 1956. Among the permanent members were Bowlby, Lorenz, American anthropologist Margaret Mead and Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget.⁶⁰ These meetings focused on ethological research and its implications for child psychology. Bowlby spent these years building up his knowledge of imprinting and animal research, which he used to develop what he called the theory of component instinctual responses, later known as the ethological theory of attachment. In 1958 Bowlby published those views.⁶¹

In ‘The nature of the child’s tie to its mother’, Bowlby argued that five instinctual responses serve to bind the child to the mother and contribute to the reciprocal dynamic of binding mother to child. The baby is the active partner in three of them, sucking, clinging and following. The other two, crying and smiling, serve to ‘activate maternal behaviour’. Bowlby presented the mother–child dyad as a biological system, in which each part fits the other, as designed by evolution. Thus not only is the child tied to the mother, the mother is also tied to the child: ‘It is fortunate for their survival that babies are so designed by Nature that they beguile and enslave mothers’.⁶²

58 See Marga Vicedo, ‘The father of ethology and the foster mother of ducks: Konrad Lorenz as an expert on motherhood’, *Isis* (2009) 100, pp. 263–291.

59 Bowlby, *op. cit.* (8), p. 15. Bowlby did not name Konrad Lorenz in the text, but included him in a ‘List of authorities referred to but not named’. *Idem*, *op. cit.* (8), p. 183.

60 J.M. Tanner and Baurbel Inhelder (eds.), *Discussions on Child Development*, London: Tavistock Publications, 1971.

61 Bowlby, *op. cit.* (1).

62 Bowlby, *op. cit.* (1), pp. 351, 367.

Was the biological mother, then, the person best suited to care for her child? Bowlby's adoption of a biological framework to explain the mother-child dyad once again raised the central question about the implications of his views for childcare: who exactly could provide the love and care necessary for the child? Could several people do so? Could the father?

Aware of the social significance and controversial implications of his theory, Bowlby was often ambiguous about this matter. Bowlby described attachment responses as 'mother-oriented', though he said it was evident that this was so 'only potentially'. Each response could in principle be focused on an object other than the mother. But in practice 'this is improbable, since all or most of the consummatory stimuli which terminate them habitually come from the mother-figure'. Even here, Bowlby talked about a mother 'figure'. But it was evident that, in his view, only the mother was designed by nature to provide appropriate responses to the child's demands.⁶³

For Bowlby, nature had designed the child to elicit maternal responses from the mother and had also designed mother to respond to her child. In arguing that evolution designed babies to 'enslave mothers', Bowlby could hardly be referring to anyone other than the biological mother. Who else besides the biological mother could have been designed by nature with the instincts to care, to love and to enjoy her baby twenty-four hours a day, 365 days a year? Surely no babysitter could fit the bill.

Bowlby clarified his position by drawing a parallel with the English monarchy:

It is for this reason that the mother becomes so central a figure in the infant's life. For in healthy development it is towards her that each of the several responses becomes directed, much as each of the subjects of the realm comes to direct his loyalty towards the Queen; and it is in relation to the mother that the several responses become integrated into the complex behaviour which I have termed 'attachment behaviour', much as it is in relation to the Sovereign that the components of our constitution become integrated into a working whole.⁶⁴

So there was a functional integration in nature, just as there was a well-functioning system in society. The system as a whole works properly when each of the parts performs its function. In the case of the mother-infant dyad, the child focuses his or her demands on the mother, while the mother focuses her responses on her child. The two together form the basis of the attachment.

Developing his analogy further, Bowlby claimed that just as political authority should be vested in one individual, instinctual responses should focus only on the biological mother:

We may extend the analogy. It is in the nature of our constitution, as of all others, that sovereignty is vested in a single person. A hierarchy of substitutes is permissible but at the head stands a particular individual. The same is true of the infant. Quite early, by a process of learning, he comes to centre his *instinctual responses* not only on a human figure but *on a particular human figure*. Good mothering from any kind of woman ceases to satisfy him – *only his own mother will do*.⁶⁵

63 Bowlby, op. cit. (1), p. 369.

64 Bowlby, op. cit. (1), pp. 369–370.

65 Bowlby, op. cit. (1), p. 370, added emphases.

In the same way that society has instituted a political hierarchy of authority for the sake of maintaining a well-functioning social order, nature has given mother the central role in child rearing in order to ensure the proper functioning of the natural order: 'The tendency for instinctual responses to be directed towards a particular individual or group of individuals and not promiscuously toward many is one which I believe to be so important and so neglected that it deserves a special term. I propose to call it monotropy'.⁶⁶

Bowlby's analogy between the family and the British monarchy is very powerful. First of all, it helped rhetorically to drive home the point that without a central figure of authority at home, the family unit would disintegrate. The mother as queen of the home assures family stability, much as the queen mother ensures social order.

Second, it helped him to avoid the charge that he was committing the naturalistic fallacy. Although initially it seems that Bowlby argued that monotropy should be a rule of society because it is a law of nature, a second look reveals that his argument is more complex. If Bowlby had only said that mothers are best able to provide good care since they are the ones designed by nature for the role, one could ask, but why should society follow the designs of nature? Moral philosophers have often pointed out the fallacy of going from natural descriptions to moral prescriptions. But what Bowlby said was that it is not only nature but also society that has shown the functional desirability of monotropy.

Here, Bowlby revealed that his concern was not only about the effects of working mothers on their individual children. His concern was also about group welfare, and the maintenance of a distribution of parental roles that he believed essential to a healthy social order and even to the very continuity of the species. Finding the nature of the child's tie to the mother was about how to preserve a gendered social structure that Bowlby saw as necessary for the very survival of the human race. 'The theory of Component Instinctual Responses, it is claimed, is rooted firmly in biological theory and requires no dynamic which is not plainly explicable in terms of the survival of the species', he stated.⁶⁷

This position had important implications for mothers. Placed in a wider historical perspective, many of the ideas presented by Bowlby and other theorists of maternal deprivation were not new. Views about the early significance of child experiences, the mother as the nurturer of her child's emotional character, and the public significance of forming the right character for the future of the social good were all elements already present in American political and family history since the end of the eighteenth century, as economic and social changes increased the separation of men in the public realm and made women keepers of the hearth. So certain elements of Bowlby's position were already a part of what historians have identified as 'the kernel of the emotionology of motherhood' in the United States.⁶⁸

66 Bowlby, op. cit. (1), p. 370.

67 Bowlby, op. cit. (1), p. 369.

68 Ruth Bloch, 'American feminine ideals in transition: the rise of the moral mother, 1785-1815', *Feminist Studies* (1978) 4, pp. 101-126; Jan Lewis, 'Mother's love: the construction of an emotion in nineteenth-century America', in Rima D. Apple and Janet Golden (eds.), *Mothers and Motherhood: Readings in American*

Yet never before had love for mother been categorized as a child's biological necessity. Nor had mother been identified as a psychic organizer. In earlier times, mother could enable or constrain her children's capacities. She could temper, control and educate her children within the constraints imposed by differences of disposition, disease and inheritance. Now, according to Bowlby, children had a uniform, universal need for a specific type of mother love, while a mother's feelings determined her children's mind. This view had far-reaching consequences for our understanding of mother love, mother's work and gender roles.

First, the mother's role is entirely constructed from the perspective of the child. In all these discussions about mother love, the great absentees were always the mothers. There was hardly any research on how mothers felt about their children, about being separated from them for voluntary or involuntary reasons, or about what they felt and needed when they were with them twenty-four hours a day, 365 days a year, as Bowlby suggested.

Second, although mother acquires a central role in a child's emotional development, mother love is devalued. In arguing that mother was designed to fulfil her child's instinctual needs, maternal love and care were transformed from a personal choice requiring devotion, work, patience, dedication and not a few renunciations into a natural product of a woman's biological constitution. Furthermore, when maternal feelings are understood as the products of biology, they are removed from the realm of intelligence and freedom, and thus from the realm of behaviours that deserve moral recognition. Bowlby thought he had an upbeat message for mothers: 'The normal mother can afford to rely on the prompting of her instincts in the happy knowledge that the tenderness they prompt is what the baby wants'.⁶⁹ But when the normal mother is equated with the unthinking and natural mother, who acts just out of instinct, maternal care is deprived of rationality, of choice and of moral value.

Third, the view of mother love as a child's biological need is used to justify gendered parental roles and this justification exerts a profound emotional hold on mothers. It is important to grasp not only the logic of an argument, but also its emotional fabric. For mothers, Bowlby's view that nature had designed babies with a biological need for their love introduced a new element of tremendous emotional power. A mother was now called upon to stay home not to fulfil society's desire for social order, but to fulfil the needs of her own children. The emotional power arises because women were not being asked to sacrifice their personal desires for the greater good of the social organism. Early in the Cold War the separation of spheres was justified with the rhetoric of containment, but as time went on even that was unnecessary. If the mother is her child's psychic organizer, she needs to stay home, regardless of whether the times brought war or peace.

At a crucial period in reassessing parental roles in American society, Bowlby's views about the biological need for mother love represented a powerful emotional argument

History, Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1997. Peter N. Stearns and Carol Z. Stearns, 'Emotionology: clarifying the history of emotions and emotional standards', *American Historical Review* (1985) 90, pp. 813-836.

⁶⁹ Bowlby, *op. cit.* (8), p. 17.

supporting separate parental and gender roles. Although by the 1950s the companionship marriage was often touted as an ideal, the different parental roles assigned to men and women made this ideal practically unattainable and socially undesirable. There was an increasing call for fathers to be kind, gentle and loving to their children during this period, but there was no broad effort to reassess the roles of mother and father. The traditional family unit seemed necessary, as Bowlby and many others pointed out. A father's main role was to provide financial support. As historian Robert L. Griswold has argued, 'to support children financially while fostering their sex-role adjustment became the essence of "maturity," "responsibility," and "manhood itself"'. In the 1950s, the father remained the breadwinner, while the mother was responsible for child rearing. The emotional force of appealing to children's biological need for love served to justify the traditional division of labour with mother at home and father at work.⁷⁰

Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to examine the fate of Bowlby's ideas during the 1960s and after, I want to suggest that the strong emotional hold of his position in a specific social context and the alleged biological support for it are important in explaining the persistence and influence of Bowlby's views, especially in light of increasing scientific criticisms. In the 1960s, child psychologists continued to challenge the data upon which Bowlby had erected his views about mother love. Child studies did not provide convincing evidence that the absence of the biological mother provokes the catastrophic consequences that Bowlby and others had asserted. Neither the individual psychic development nor the healthy social order seemed to depend only on mother. But those studies remained peripheral to the debates about whether mothers should work outside the home. As a measure of this, let me mention that when the WHO decided to publish a new 1962 volume entitled *Deprivation of Maternal Care: A Reassessment of Its Effects*, all of the articles, written by a variety of researchers, were critical of Bowlby's conclusions. But hardly anyone noticed. To this day the 1962 WHO report is little known.⁷¹

Research on non-humans also posed challenges to Bowlby's views. During the 1960s Bowlby continued to appeal to Lorenz's studies of imprinting in birds and to the studies of psychologist Harry Harlow in rhesus monkeys. Elsewhere I have shown that during a short period Harlow did support Bowlby's views.⁷² However, after several different experimental variations, Harlow came to conclude that peers were as important as, or even more important than, mothers for the healthy emotional development of rhesus monkeys and, in his view, other primates as well. Harlow also rejected the explanation of infants' needs in terms of Lorenz's instincts. Bowlby, however, continued to cite Harlow's earlier studies in support of his own views about the unique significance of mother.⁷³

70 Robert L. Griswold, *Fatherhood in America: A History*, New York: Basic Books, 1993, p. 186.

71 World Health Organization, *Deprivation of Maternal Care: A Reassessment of Its Effects*, Geneva: WHO, 1962. For the history of attachment to the present see Vicedo, op. cit. (18).

72 See Marga Vicedo, 'Mothers, machines, and morals: Harry Harlow's work on primate love from lab to legend', *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences* (2009) 45, pp. 193–218.

73 Marga Vicedo, 'The evolution of Harry Harlow: from the nature to the nurture of love', *History of Psychiatry* (June 2010) 21(2), pp. 1–16.

Still appealing to the authority of biological studies, Bowlby claimed that his theory represented the disinterested position of science; only self-interested parties could reject his views for non-scientific and socially suspect reasons. In 1965 he dismissed the criticisms of those who did not think mother should be blamed for everything that went wrong with children and societies:

Whenever I hear the issue of maternal deprivation being discussed, I find two groups with a vested interest in shooting down the theory. The Communists are one, for the obvious reason that they need their women at work and thus their children must be cared for by others. The professional women are the second group. They have, in fact, neglected their families. But it's the last thing they want to admit.⁷⁴

Indeed, which mother would want to admit she neglects her child's mental health?

Furthermore, what women admitted or not was irrelevant for Bowlby. If the question about who should raise children is not to be answered through social debate and personal reflection, but by following the dictates of nature, then mothers – and even fathers – have no voice in the answer. By naturalizing parental roles, decisions about the social distribution of childcare are taken to be a matter of scientific inquiry. Science is the arbiter, and scientists the judges of the designs of nature.

Conclusion

In the United States Bowlby was an important voice in the scientific discussion about children's needs and in the social debate about the consequences of those needs for the distribution of parental roles. I have argued that the impact of Bowlby's views about the significance of mother love for child development needs to be understood in the context of the widespread anxiety about changing gender roles during the early Cold War years. In the debate about the desirability of mothers working outside the home during the mid-1950s, Bowlby's views were influential.

By situating discussions about child development in their scientific and social context, I have provided an explanation for the high visibility of Bowlby's work and the corresponding neglect of alternative views. Bowlby's ideas about mother love and the implications he drew about the importance of the nuclear family resonated with pervasive social concerns about gender roles in mid-twentieth-century America. Since American child analysts had already made the role of the mother in helping her child develop the capacity to love into a central public concern, Bowlby was able to gain immediate prominence in ongoing discussions about parental roles. Amidst the Cold War emphasis on the functional benefits of gendered parental roles the numerous criticisms of the empirical evidence Bowlby used to support the essential role of mother love remained peripheral.

Furthermore, I have argued that by claiming that mother love was a biological need for children, Bowlby introduced a crucial new element in the history of functional justifications for gender roles. Although the significance of mother love for children had

⁷⁴ Quoted in Evelyn S. Ringold, 'Bringing up baby in Britain', *New York Times*, 13 June 1965.

already been part of the history of emotionology in the United States, the appeal to biology to justify the child's need for mother anchored the old logic of functionalism upon a new scientific foundation, one that held a tremendous logical and emotional power because it presented mother love as a child's biological need.

By illuminating the coalescence of factors that led to the success of Bowlby's views about mother love – the rise of a psychoanalytic account of mother love as the cradle of all loves, the support of the WHO, the context of Cold War anxieties about gender roles, and the construction of the mother–infant dyad as a biological unit – I hope to have shown that understanding Bowlby's interpretation of 'the *nature* of the child's tie to its mother' and interpreting its scientific and cultural reception during the 1950s cannot be done without locating its place in the debate about the *social* tie of the mother to her child. Bowlby appealed to biology to claim that his position was based on scientific knowledge independent of social views and contingent historical factors. But the development and impact of scientific pronouncements about mother love have to be understood in the context of the changing concerns about women's participation in the workforce and the recurring debate about the distribution of parental roles. Questions about the nature of mother love and children's needs were (and remain) entangled with the question 'who should rear the children and how?'