

The Cold War and Postwar America 1946-1963 (Discovering U.S. History)

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

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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

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

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