The Mother-Infant Tie: 50 Years of Theory, Science, and Science Fiction

Beverly Birns, Ph.D.

About the Author
Beverly Birns, Ph.D. is Professor of Psychology and Director of Women’s Studies at the State University of New York at Stony Brook. Dr. Birns’ published work is on infancy, mother-child interactions, and the psychology of women.

Abstract
Beliefs about mothering come from many sources, including psychoanalysis and child development literature. This talk presents and critiques some of the theory and research which suggest that children are “products” of maternal behavior, particularly during the child’s infancy. Research is discussed which suggests that factors other than mothering are significant in development and that experience during infancy may not be as important as commonly believed. The author believes that current advice to mothers may be burdensome to women and not in the best interest of the child.

This paper was originally presented at a Stone Center Colloquium on March 6, 1985 while Dr. Birns was a Visiting Scholar at the Stone Center and a Research Fellow in the Program on Family Violence at Children’s Hospital in Boston.

Two very brief vignettes illustrate the relationship between mother and child.
Many years ago I visited with a dying woman during the last hours of her long life. She had been a very strong, independent person who had raised three children, worked gainfully all of her adult life, and remained extremely competent until her final days. The last coherent statement she made was, very simply, “I want my mother.”

Another anecdote on the brighter side concerns another stage of the life cycle and consists of a conversation between a mother and daughter about motherhood. The younger woman commented that she was relieved to note that even though she worked full-time and was away from her little children long hours, neither of her children ever doubted who their mother was. The older woman replied, “Of course, it is not the hand that feeds you but the heart that beats for you.”

I preface my paper with these comments because they are meaningful to me, personally, and they express my own feelings about the importance of mothers, the experience of motherhood, and the mother-infant tie.

Since the title of this talk is both broad and somewhat provocative, I would like first to indicate what the paper will be about. In discussing theory, I will focus on psychoanalytic theory and its derivatives, not because it is the only theory, nor necessarily the one I think best explains human behavior. However, I do believe that psychoanalytic theory has had the greatest influence in formulating research questions and in influencing the way all mid-to-late 20th-century people, professional and nonprofessional, think about families, and particularly about the mother-child relationship.

In discussing science, I shall be referring to the discipline of child development — again, not because I think it is perfect or pure, but because we use the
conventions of the empirical scientific method, that is, make hypotheses, design and conduct research, and then interpret our findings. Since our methods are quantitative, experiments can be replicated. Of course, the questions that we ask, the design that we employ, and certainly our interpretation of the results are all dependent on a variety of factors which include values, personal biases, availability of subjects, government grants, and the state-of-the-art or technology (Eisenberg, 1981). Theory and science are certainly intertwined; psychoanalysts are engaged in research and developmental psychologists are rarely atheoretical, even when the theory is not articulated.

Finally, we come to science fiction — the dictionary states that it is fiction in which actual or potential scientific discoveries form the plot. I shall be referring to the belief that mothers construct their children just as automobile workers build cars and, further, that the critical period in this construction is infancy. Science fiction is theory that is totally believable but not necessarily true. The belief that events in the early months predetermine adult behavior and that mothers are the major determinants of development implies epigenetic theory, a view basic to Freud’s, Erickson’s, and Piaget’s formulations. Epigenetic theory states that development is the elaboration of early-appearing structures and therefore that the earliest structures have within them the seeds of later development. For epigenetic theorists early states become the core of all later stages: for Freud, infantile drives satisfied first by the mother; for Erikson, basic trust; for Piaget, sensorimotor development. My contention is that this view of development is only partially correct, and therefore also partially false (Samoff, 1975; Clarke & Clarke, 1976). By accepting infancy as the critical period, and mothers as the critical players, we are telling women that by providing the right proportions of the proper ingredients — love, affection, closeness but separateness — they will produce psychologically healthy children. This has been called by many (Kagan, 1984; Phillips, 1983) the inoculation theory of development — enough of what is good early fortifies children against later trauma.

I will trace briefly some theory of the last fifty years, describe some research, and then, in discussing science fiction, provide evidence that development is marked by discontinuities as well as continuities, and that early experience may in fact have little bearing on later behavior.

Theory

Long before Freud, philosophers, theologians, and educators were telling women how to rear their children. In all instances the advice was predicated on an image of the type of adult that children would become. In colonial America the Puritans urged cold baths for infants and beatings for older children to teach them obedience and rid them of “original sin.” Childrearing was determined by religious beliefs, the harshness of life, high infant mortality, and the need for sturdy folk. The Quakers rejected “original sin,” believed in reason and democracy, and used coercive but not physically punitive methods of childrearing. Advice to mothers has always been influenced by social, economic, political, and ideological factors (Ehrenreich & English, 1979).

Because Freud was a physician, had scientific credentials, and derived his ideas from clinical experience, his theories were far more influential than the opinions of theologians or philosophers. In a most compelling manner he explained adult neurosis on the basis of early infantile experience. Although Freud’s ideas remain controversial today, particularly as they pertain to women, some of his ideas are basic to most personality theories. Some consider Freud’s emphasis on the resolution of the Oedipal conflict as the cornerstone of his theory; others, however, have expanded and revised his view on the critical nature of the mother-infant tie. In 1938 Freud wrote that the infant’s relation to the mother was “unique, without parallel, laid down unilaterally for a whole lifetime as the first and strongest love object and as prototypic of all later love relations for both sexes.” This one statement had a profound influence on psychological theories. Bowlby’s formulations of the nature of the mother-infant bond derive, in part, from this theory.

Bowlby’s early work, published by the World Health Organization in 1951, synthesized studies of the 30s and 40s that demonstrated a negative impact on the child because of separation from the mother in the earliest years. He claimed that sustained separation of infant from mother led to mental retardation as well as the development of affectless psychopaths. Although widely criticized (Casler, 1961; Yarrow, 1961), Bowlby’s work led to reforms in many countries concerning the care of thousands of children orphaned by the war. Early adoption or foster home arrangements replaced the “warehousing of children in institutions.”

Another outcome was the development of a new field of inquiry, that of the nature and development of the mother-infant bond. If separation was so devastating, then understanding the mother-infant