

DEVELOPMENTAL: BOWLBY EFFECTS OF DEPRIVATION – THE 44 THIEVES

Aim: to test the maternal deprivation hypothesis, that is, to see whether frequent early separations were associated with a risk of behavioural disorders: in particular, a disorder termed "affectionless psychopathy". Bowlby used this term to describe individuals who have no sense of shame or guilt; they lack a social conscience. Is it possible that such individuals were more likely to have experienced a disrupted early childhood?

Procedures:

- ❑ Participants were 88 children ranging in age from 5 to 16 who had been referred to the child guidance clinic where Bowlby worked
- ❑ Forty-four of the children had been referred to the clinic because of stealing (the "thieves"). Bowlby identified 16 of these thieves as affectionless psychopaths
- ❑ The remaining 44 children in the study had not committed any crimes; they were emotionally maladjusted, but did not display antisocial behaviour. None of this control group were diagnosed as affectionless psychopaths
- ❑ Bowlby interviewed the children and their families and was able to build up a record of their early life experiences

Findings:

- ❑ Bowlby found that a large number (86%) of those thieves diagnosed as affectionless psychopaths had experienced "early and prolonged separations from their mothers".
- ❑ Only 17% of the other thieves (the ones who weren't classed as affectionless psychopaths) had experienced such separations
- ❑ Even fewer (4%) of the control group ("non-thieves") had experienced frequent early separation

Conclusions:

- ❑ These findings suggest a link between early separations and later social and emotional maladjustment
- ❑ In its most severe form, maternal deprivation appears to lead to affectionless psychopathy. In its less severe form it leads to antisocial behaviour (theft)
- ❑ These findings support the maternal deprivation hypothesis

Criticisms:

- ❑ The evidence is correlational, which means that we can only say that deprivation/separation and affectionless psychopathy are *linked*, not that one *caused* the other
- ❑ The data on separation were collected retrospectively and may not be reliable. Parents may not have accurately recalled separations during infancy. They may have over or underestimated the frequency. In addition, how do we know whether these children experienced deprivation (the loss of emotional care) or whether they had good substitute emotional care during their separations?
- ❑ Rutter has provided a number of serious criticisms of the conclusions based on this study