

## **INTERVIEW WITH PROFESSOR M. RUTTER**

This interview with **Sir Michael Rutter** was conducted by Alice van der Pas on March 11, 1999 in the Maudsley Hospital, London.

At the request of the interviewer professor Rutter formulated **four pieces of advice** for child protection workers to frame and hang in their office.

### **Development is all about change - an interview**

#### **Via research on mentally ill parents to Bowlby's thinking on maternal deprivation**

'My interest in attachment theory first came in the late sixties, when we were looking at the effects of childhood separation. I was aware of Bowlby's work, and interested in it, but our work was not directly inspired by him, nor was it conceptualized in attachment terms at first. Our findings, however, told us that separation could not be viewed as a risk factor without taking into account the antecedents, the experiences that followed, and the social context (Rutter, 1971), and inevitably I became intrigued by Bowlby's writings on attachment. His ideas were in the air, but there are always multiple influences. The combination of pediatrics and psychiatry was my background, and I was aware of childrens' responses to admission to hospital and of the controversies, at that time, over Bowlby's emphasis on separation as such.

In the sixties I was looking at families with mentally ill parents and, of course breakup of the family was one of the things that sometimes happened. Parenting broke down, or the ill parent went into hospital. The issues of separation were key, but people who were writing about major mental illness in families from a sociological perspective, like John Clausen in the United States, did not focus on the parenting qualities of parents with psychiatric problems. An important point from this early work was that in some ways it is easier for the child when the parent is psychotic, than when there is a more ordinary emotional disorder. Parents who are hearing voices, very obviously are not themselves. It is a stress, but it is understandable and the child can see it as an illness. However, when parents become depressed and irritable and hostile, it can seem to the children as though they have turned against them for reasons they didn't understand. Depression often is not so clearly an illness, and therefore depression and other more ordinary emotional disorders are in some respects more stressful for the partners and for their children.

From that finding, a by-product of our study of parental mental illness, I became interested in the controversies over maternal deprivation. Bowlby's WHO report in 1951 ran into criticism, because it had to rely on pretty poor quality research. That is no criticism of Bowlby. It was all that was available then, but academic critics had a field day in saying 'there's no basis to this.' With the benefit of hindsight, one can say that their criticisms

were partially correct, but unbalanced. They were correct in the sense that, yes, a lot of the research was inadequate, and Bowlby had overstated some claims, as is often the case with an initial proposition. The criticism was *unbalanced* in not recognizing that Bowlby had picked on a really important issue and that he had some very good ideas on the topic.

His 1969 book, to the contrary, was well received. It was integrative in terms of spanning theories of animal behavior, evolutionary theory and developmental psychology. That was unusual for someone from a psychoanalytic background. Of course, the psychoanalytic establishment did not like that, but the attachment idea became very quickly taken up in academic psychology. It provided a way of translating the rather diffuse concept of mother love, in Bowlby's earlier writings, into something more process-oriented and much more developmental. For developmental psychology this was a hugely important step.

Still, people like Rudolph Schaffer and the ethologist Robert Hinde had reservations of various kinds, and my book on maternal deprivation was an attempt to bring those issues together (Rutter, 1972). In it, I raised all sorts of questions, but the book was never intended as an attack on Bowlby. Some Bowlby supporters viewed it as such and Bowlby, too, was initially fairly negative about it. He worked in an isolated fashion, tucked away in the Tavistock. He was not used to the hurly-burly of academic criticism. It took him a little while to appreciate that there was nothing hostile in my writings and that, although I had criticized some aspects, I was supportive of many of the things he said.'

### **Early attachment: biologically unavoidable ... but then what?**

*'Despite the many loose ends of the concept, it has become something of a holy cow.'*

'Indeed, for some people it has acquired almost religious qualities. Because the concept has been put forward as an explanation for everything, there is a danger of its explaining nothing.

Really important in Bowlby's contribution was his recognition that attachment is not the whole of relationships. He picked out a particular aspect that he said was of fundamental importance, but at no time did he say that it is all of what is involved in relationships.

People have overgeneralized the idea in ways that are unhelpful and damaging, because if attachment is the whole of life, then what?'

*'What makes this theory so catchy - almost like an epidemic?'*

'When you have a child, it changes your life. It's a very unusual parent who isn't quite taken over by the experience. Children exert a hugely powerful pull on you. The notion of parent-child attachment as a biological 'given' is therefore a very attractive one. Ignoring a crying child is difficult: however

distressed, even angered you are by it, you can't ignore it. Of course, the commitment and love that go with that are important, but parents are also aware that having the child provides problems and challenges for the rest of their life. How do you fit the child in with your career, with attention to your husband or wife, your sports club, your church, whatever it may be? Being a parent arouses both commitment and guilt, simultaneously. So, some people have wanted parenting to be all-encompassing: mothers should stay at home and give up their careers. Others have swung the opposite way, stating that parenting is relatively unimportant, you just lead your life. This has led to an unhelpful polarisation. Aside from scientific evidence, which points in the same direction, the truth lies somewhere in the middle. Also, it would be biologically absurd if either of those extremes were correct. Development is all about change. We are social animals, and as such we have multi-faceted needs and demands. For a social animal *not* to be concerned with the care of its young would make no sense biologically. Equally, for that to be our *only* concern makes no sense either. There are all the other tasks of life. Therefore polarisation, although understandable, must be basically pointless.'

*'And what makes for the multiple and tenacious misunderstandings that you do not cease to point to?'*

'One of the difficulties is that early research was entirely concentrated on the first two years. In that period children develop attachments to their parents, and all the things that both theorists and researchers drew attention to come to light. But people became increasingly aware that the implications of attachment do not stop at age two. The next question becomes: how do the early, selective attachments develop? How are they transformed? Your love relationship with a partner has many similar qualities: isn't that also an 'attachment relationship'? The thought is clearly both right and wrong. It is right in the sense that a love relationship involves many of the same kinds of components as early attachment. The difference is that it's not a *dependent* relationship in quite the same way. What Bowlby drew attention to was the security provided for the child by the parent. Parent and child have a dyadic relationship, but an uneven one. The parent is not made more secure by the child being present, but the child is made more secure by the parent. Love relationships between two adults, however, are much more even. There may be patterns of dominance and submission, but the adult love relationship is bidirectional with respect to the position of security. It differs in that crucial respect from the relationship between parent and child.

### **Advice no. 1**

#### **Don't believe without question what the experts say.**

Elizabeth Newson wrote that child care experts always know what is needed, but every ten years it is something different. So, a healthy degree of scepticism is needed. Look at the evidence, don't look at the prestige of the person speaking. Respect their scientific achievements, but ask what is their evidence for a particular statement.

*'But doesn't the adult relationship grow out of those early relationship?'*

'Of course it does, as do friendships with peers. The presence of another person does provide security, even into extreme old age. It helps a lot to have a loved one there when you are on your deathbed.

But how, then, does the early developmental phenomenon grow into all these other things? What are the equivalents? Take the way a child seeks proximity, and how a toddler runs or crawls to the parent.

Are confidential emotional exchanges the adult equivalent for the child's proximity-seeking? Perhaps they are. That must of course become an empirical question, and one has to ask: what would make them equivalent? How could one tell whether they are the same?

Some people have called all of these things attachment relationships, which has to be half right. Others have taken a strongly sceptical view of that. There are parallels, they say, but only on the surface. And, they ask, what is the evidence that early attachments form the basis of later love relationships?

My own position is somewhere in the middle. I accept the need to ask questions about it but, biologically speaking, it seems likely that there will prove to be some causal connection. The interest lies in finding out the extent to which the links are direct and in determining the mechanisms or processes by which one type of relationship links on to other kinds of relationships.'

*'There is a tendency to jump from descriptive data to predictive, if not prescriptive conclusions.'*

'Much research has jumped in a totally unwarranted way from finding a statistical association to an assumption that causation is involved, and yes, assuming causation without proper testing leads to prescribing what to do about it. Such prescriptions often include an element of truth, but they may be largely misdirected in the same sort of way that Bowlby's research on children in institutions in the early fifties was quite misleadingly generalized to apply also to day care. The children studied by Bowlby had been removed from their parents, often because of failures in parenting, to the institutions, too, the care they received lacked continuity, commitment, and indeed attention. That is a very different phenomenon from going to a day care center for part of the day with continuing continuity in committed parental caregiving.'

## **Advice no. 2**

### **Beware of simplistic, evangelistic answers**

There's a saying that goes 'for every complicated question, there is a very simple answer - and it is wrong'. One needs to be very sceptical about answers that put everything into one basket. It's not likely that life is like that, and it is most unlikely that everything is explained by separation or by internal working models, or whatever the all encompassing explanation may be.

### **The multiple roots of attachment**

'This kind of jump also ignores the fact that biologically speaking, the golden rule is that most circumstances have multiple roots. It's very unusual for any developmental phenomenon to be reliant on one particular factor. For example, the idea that parental bonding exclusively depends on skin-to-skin contact, which dominated for a while, is actually ridiculous. That's not to say that skin contact may not help, but children become attached and parents become bonded even if they're blind or deaf or without limbs. Biology provides many roots for bonding and attachment. The notion that one particular sensory modality has to be present is simplistic.

Klaus and Kennell (1976) were undoubtedly correct in pointing to damaging effects on the mother's bonding with the baby from absurd procedures in neo-natal nurseries, but they made a mistake in focussing on the skin-to-skin contact, as if that was all that counts. Rather, such contact constituted an index of wider qualities of care.

I see a parallel with a study of mental hospitals, done back in the nineteensixties. It showed that hospitals varied considerably with regard to how well the patients fared. One of the predictive variables was whether the patients had their own toothbrush. This could lead to the inference that all you had to do for your patients was to give them their own toothbrush. However, what the study actually concluded was that an institution that was so impersonal that people didn't even have their own toothbrush was likely to be lacking in many other features of care.

In the same way, institutions that allowed no contact between mother and child were also likely to be providing a generally inferior form of care that could be damaging to the child's development.

*'Is an "Attachment Quotient" for babies thinkable: something like the IQ, with a nice bell-shaped curve?*

*The one baby reaches and the other does not; one baby wakes up in a murky mood, and another with a smile, and mothers who have felt uneasy with their baby will tell you, years later, that for instance the baby was sleeping*

*most of the time. She felt almost ignored. - What the child brings into attachment formation must be crucial.'*

'Oh yes, the way in which attachment develops is bound to be influenced by the qualities that the child brings into the interaction and quantifying is important. Still, I would be sceptical about an attachment quotient, because of the number of different dimensions.

There is, first of all, the extent to which babies develop *selective* attachments. They have to do so even in the most unpromising circumstances. However in a profoundly depriving environment, without any kind of continuity, as for example seen in Romanian orphanages, it seems that the development of selective attachments is impaired. That is one aspect of quantification, i.e. the extent to which selective attachments develop at all.

As Mary Ainsworth's research showed, the *security* provided by attachment is also important (1967). There are children who manifestly show selective attachments, yet they have not got a relationship that provides the sort of security that attachment should provide. That constitutes a second, rather different aspect that could be quantified.'

*'Bowlby mentions smiling, following, grasping, crying and sucking as specific attachment behaviors of the baby. Is anything known about the relative importance of each one of those, or of other behavior?'*

'One of the issues of controversy, still, is the importance of children's temperamental qualities. Critics like Jerome Kagan at Harvard have been quite sceptical about the importance of attachment and say that the really important variable is whether the child is behaviorally inhibited. Attachment will affect relationships, but temperament is, in his view, more basic. Others, from within the attachment area, such as Alan Sroufe, have stated that we are dealing with a dyadic relationship in which temperament plays a contributory, but minor role.

The evidence suggests that temperamental features probably have some influence, but as one of several factors. Children's attachment relationships vary from person to person. The relationship with the mother and with the father, for instance, shows only a very modest degree of agreement. If temperament were all important, one would expect relationships to be very similar with everybody. Manifestly they are not.

Of course, children do differ in their behavior, and this influences one's response to them. But our responses are personalized; some parents are happy with a lively baby, and some prefer a placid one. It's a matter of taste.'

*'Does your emphasis on the multiple roots of attachment imply, that what is called a "reactive attachment disorder" is hardly ever due to just one source of deprivation, loss or stress?'*

There are supposed to be two different types of 'reactive attachment disorder': disinhibited and inhibited. The first applies to a pattern in which children seem markedly indiscriminate in their social approaches, lacking in attachment selectivity, liable to go off with strangers, and appear unable to develop close emotional ties to other people. This set of features has mainly been found in children reared in institutions or in other conditions of prolonged pervasive deprivation. For example, this was one of the prominent patterns in some of the children from Romania that we studied. The second, the so-called 'inhibited' type, has been reported in children with a more diverse range of experiences. Unlike the first group, they have developed attachments but their quality seems abnormal in that their relationships come across as disorganized and dysfunctional. We lack a good understanding of both patterns but, yes, I think that it is unlikely that either will come about from a single loss or stress or from just one bad relationship.'

*'Does it also imply that large helpings of sensitive responsive foster parenting are not necessarily the cure?'*

'Yes, it does. Sensitive responsive parenting *is* needed and is part of what is required. But, when children have had serious prolonged deprivation over several years, the findings suggest that 'large helpings of sensitive responsive foster parenting' may not be enough. The therapeutic challenges presented by the children adopted from Romanian orphanages when older clearly illustrate the difficulties and serve as a reminder that we do not yet have really effective solutions (Rutter et al., in press).

### **The core of attachment theory**

*'One could distinguish three areas in writings on attachment theory: a core area of theorizing about which there is no longer any doubt; then statements 'out there', which are really nonsense; and in between these two a large grey area where research is needed. What belongs in which area?'*

With regard to early childhood, it is fairly easy to answer the question. The initial observation, by Bowlby and others, was that attachment brought security. In a threatening situation, children show *increased* attachment behavior and *decreased* play. In any strange or threatening situation, they stop playing and go for a cuddle, for reassurance. In a relaxed situation, children may prefer playing with a stranger to being with their mother. It's new, it's novel. When something threatens, play is inhibited, and attachment increases.

An important observation, from both animal and human studies, is that this is the case, irrespective of rewards. Children will go to an abusing parent in a situation they perceive as threatening. Of course, given a choice between a loving parent and an abusing one, they will go to the loving one. An attachment relationship, however, provides anxiety reduction. Even in a

punishing situation the child will seek that comfort.  
The core of what attachment is all about is the anxiety-reducing or stress-relieving aspects of an attachment relationship.

**Advice no. 3**  
**Look at the evidence**

We need to consider children in their real-life situation. They grow in a social context, and we do not fully understand how that works. 'Context' is more than mother and 'real life situation' means: within a family which is within an extended family which is within a peer group, which is within a community which is within a particular culture. I mean all of that, and the particular theory which is en vogue. Now that the Judith Rich Harris book is en vogue, people want 'it' to be either parents or peers. That is silly, really.

**The area where much research is needed**

*'Do you determine the relevance of studies according to the age of the person?'*

'We know, that at a later age other relationships provide something of that same stress-relieving quality. As I said before, even on one's deathbed one is reassured by the presence of a loved one. Love relationships have that quality. To the extent that they lack the one-sided dependency, they're different, and therefore they belong in the grey area.

There are elements to love relationships and to close friendships that look the same as 'attachment', and there are elements that look different.'

*'What kind of research would you like to do if you had all the time and money in the world?'*

'Many things are high on my agenda, but not all of them related to attachment.

*Romanian adoptees*

One of them is a study of adoptees into English families from Romanian institutions. We saw them at age four and at age six, and are now scoring them again at age eleven. Our interest is in `the complex mixture of spectacular recovery in some of these children, and the deficits in some. I'm interested in the issue of resilience and sequelae: why and how do children recover? Of course we are looking at their cognitive development and their educational achievements, but most especially their social relationships, which have been less a focus of previous research. That has to be a main point of interest, because these children lacked not just good parenting, but even the most basic sorts of caregiving. So the question is, what happens to their peer relationships and to their love relationships?

Very little is known about the circumstances of the adoption. The great majority of children were admitted to institutions as small babies, under two weeks. Poverty and disadvantage were key to this. That makes it from a research point of view a particularly interesting situation. Studying later breakdowns in parenting is a very complicated matter, because so much happened before the child went into residential care, so much after that, and it is very hard to get systematic measurements. Nothing much happened with the Romanian children, however, in the few days before they went into residential care.

*'What help do the adoptive parents receive?'*

The amount of services provided used to be negligible, but that is changing as people become aware of the needs.

One of the key challenges for research is the fact that children do not have their experiences randomly allocated. Children's behavior induces different reactions in different other people. We talked a moment ago about this phenomenon in relation to attachment, but of course it applies generally. Some children are difficult and others are easy, but how other people respond is in part a function of what *they* are like.

The challenge is to understand how individual differences in behavior lead to individual differences in experience, and how experience in turn influences behavior.

*Fourteen hundred twins*

We are dealing with a dynamic interaction, and we have to progress from saying 'life is so complicated' to trying to understand how those complications work. So in 'the Virginia twin study' in America, we are looking at how genetic and environmental factors work together. In this large-scale study we follow more than fourteen hundred twin pairs over three time periods across the 8-16 year span.

*Genetic factors in autism*

A quite different form of research involves a molecular-genetic study of autism. This is a neuro-developmental disorder with very strong genetic factors, but what are the susceptibility genes and how do they work?

*Effects of parental violence*

We are also looking at the effects of parental violence, conflict, discord on young children, again with a special interest in the nature-nurture interplay. How does violence and the factors with which it is associated create risks that lead to psychopathology, and what part do individual differences play? Some of the things we think of as brought about by environment, are actually mediated by genes, the geneticists say. Parents both pass along genes to their children *and* they create environments for them. So, if we see a risky environment, maybe that simply tells us that the parents have passed

on bad genes. The challenge for research is to say 'let's go find out.'  
In this study professors Terrie Moffitt and Avshalom Caspi, with the help of a large sample of twins, are looking at the ways in which development is affected by circumstances, and the ways in which all of that is influenced by genetic background.

#### *Follow up studies of forty years*

Another study of the moment, with Barbara Maughan, is a follow up of the children we studied on the Isle of Wight, back in the nineteen sixties. They are in their forties now, and one of our interests is how their experiences and their behavior in childhood and in adolescence have influenced what has happened to them subsequently. We know that, as other studies have shown, their outcomes are quite various, and we want to try to track the paths. Why have some turned out OK, why have some gone on having difficulties?

With OK we mean everything: work, marriage, parenting, freedom from serious mental disorder - the usual range of things. The factors which lead to turning out OK in one sort of outcome may not be the same as those that operate in others. For example, the factors that predict working well and holding a good steady job may not be the same as those that predict being a good parent. We will see.'

#### *'What predicts being a good parent?'*

'Both behavior and experience, predict. We do know something about that - but only something. We have reasonable knowledge of some of the predictors of parenting, but no knowledge that allows us to quantify these in a satisfactory way.

Seriously adverse experiences in childhood, like abuse or being reared in an institution, do not prevent later good functioning as a parent, but they make it less likely. We know that persistently anti-social behavior is a risk factor, because individuals with persistently anti-social behavior are more likely to leap into early childbearing, early marriage, and are more likely to marry somebody from a difficult background.

Obviously, circumstances in adult life are also very important. Poverty and social disadvantage do not in themselves cause poor parenting, but they certainly make it more difficult to be a good parent. Similarly, we know that isolated single parents have a more difficult time. Politicians sometimes infer from these findings that being a single parent is necessarily damaging but it is not.'

#### *'The crucial factor is not being a single parent, but the whole of the situation in which parenting takes place, including society's responses.'*

'If you haven't got anybody to help out, it's obviously more difficult. In spite of all that, some people cope amazingly well, and all credit to them. Living circumstances do, however, play a part.

## Concepts outside of attachment theory

Outside the gray area, many other aspects of relationships may be important, but for quite different reasons.

Supervision and discipline, for example, are important parts of parenting, but they don't have much to do with attachment.'

*'Are they a different thing altogether?'*

'Yes. Parents, of course, have to integrate all this. They cannot say 'now I'm being an attachment figure, in a minute I'm going to be a disciplinary figure.' It's all part of one relationship. Providing learning experiences is also part of being a parent: reading to the child, talking with the child, taking it to the park, to games or whatever, but this is not attachment. Perhaps it is helpful that these activities take place in the context of an attachment relationship, but they represent a different aspect of relationships.'

*An' internal working model'*

*'You use the concept "internal working model of relationships" less prominently than other authors in the field.'*

'My view on this subject is much the same as Robert Hinde's (1989). He made the point that, at one level, the internal working model must be a correct idea. We are thinking, feeling beings, and obviously we process our experiences. We form models about them. We therefore have to have something that could be called an internal working model of relationships, in the same kind of way that one has internal working models of everything else. Hinde's reservation was that this is such a generality. It has no predictive value, unless one can say more about it. So far, the theorizing has not been sufficiently specific.'

*'It jumps to conclusions.'*

'But the work of Mary Main and her colleagues on this subject is interesting (Main et al., 1985). Among children who have dreadful experiences in their early upbringing, some turn out well and some turn out badly. Main suggests that the processing of those experiences is important in determining the outcome, and she has put forward reasonably explicit suggestions that the outcome is better when the person accepts the reality of what has happened, and can integrate it with positive views of himself and with views of positive experiences. Ainsworth would say, to simplify somewhat, that individuals who have had bad attachment relationships in childhood are more at risk, either if they deny the fact (they don't actually remember anything, but say that childhood was wonderful) or if they think 'yes, it was bad, and I'm bad and it's sort of inevitable and awful, and nothing can be done about it.'

A more adaptive approach is to say: "Yes it was bad and I was deeply distressed at the time, but I also had a good relationship with somebody. It

wasn't my fault, and I think I can move ahead in a more positive way. I know that there are certain situations where all that awfulness tends to come back, and I have to be careful that I don't assume that this person is going to treat me in the way that my abusing parent did".'

*'I can see why this well-balanced adult, who has probably been in analysis, could manage lots of situations in work and marriage. While parenting, however, the old dynamite may explode again. Belsky calls stress 'a variable of parenting'. Parenting itself, however, can be the most incisively stressful experience one can think of.'*

'But I would not necessarily assume that the adverse effects of earlier negative attachment relationships will go into the parenting you give your child. One learns from that experience, and the effect can go either way.'

*'Indeed, Selma Fraiberg's work illustrates how parents can grow through parenting. It may help a person outgrow the aftereffects of a difficult childhood; parenting is also the situation par excellence to bring old problems to the surface.'*

'True. This is the challenge for internal working models: to explain how the internal cognitive processes affect it in various ways. If the concept does not do that, it doesn't help very much. There must be internal working models, of course, but theory and research have moved rather slowly in telling us what the effects are.

**Advice no. 4**  
**Remember that development is simultaneously about change**  
**and about continuity**

The exciting thing about watching young children is how different they are this week compared to last. My youngest granddaughter has in the last month learned to crawl, and it has opened up new horizons. She's now exploring all corners of the house. It is not so much that specific behavioral traits persist (although to some extent they do) but rather that there is a coherence in pattern that operates over time. You and I, looking back on our lives, will think about ourselves as the same individual throughout all that time. We may have looked different at age twelve than we look now, but we are still the same person. In thinking about development, we have got to reject a polarization between stability and change. There has to be both. The very essence of development is change; adults are very different from babies. But that doesn't mean that there is no connection between the biology at one age and the biology at another; how could that be the case!

Also, it does not mean that experiences in early life are either determinative (clearly that is not the case) or irrelevant (that, too, is obviously wrong). The scientific interest, and the importance to parents, lies in *how* the triple focus of nature, nurture and biological maturation work together to produce both change and coherence, and both individual differences and universality. That is why the study of development remains so fascinating and why seeing how one's children grow up is such a source of wonder to parents - and, hopefully, of pleasure.'