Title
The Nature and Nurture of Love: From Imprinting to Attachment in Cold War America

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Author
Plant, RJ

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In the early twentieth century, when physicians and scientists in the U.S. and Britain debated what children needed to develop into healthy citizens, they spoke largely in terms of nutrition and environmental factors. But as infant and child mortality declined, concerns over children’s emotional and psychological needs gradually assumed center stage. In response to the horrific violence of World War II, numerous researchers in the psychological and social sciences turned their attention to the role of emotions in fomenting political instability. Above all, they focused on that most primal of human relationships—the mother-child dyad. Only warm, consistent, and uninterrupted maternal love during infancy and early childhood, they argued, would yield an emotionally sound citizenry capable of sustaining peace and democracy in the new atomic age.

In her learned and provocative study, *The Nature and Nurture of Love*, Marga Vicedo shows how this political and intellectual context gave rise to attachment theory, a highly influential school of thought that described mother love—the infant’s attempts to connect with its mother and vice versa—as manifestations of biologically based instincts. The maternal-infant relationship, according to attachment theory, determines the quality of subsequent relationships and overall emotional well being. At the heart of Vicedo’s study is John Bowlby, a British psychoanalyst and psychiatrist who, along with psychologist Mary Ainsworth, is today widely viewed as the theory’s co-founder. The book also provides original and in-depth readings of figures like ethologist Konrad Lorenz and psychologist Harry Harlow, whose works were enlisted to support attachment theory, and psychoanalyst Anna Freud and comparative psychologist Daniel Lehrman, who trenchantly critiqued it. *The Nature and Nurture of Love* represents a major contribution to the history of the psychological sciences (and mid-century science more broadly), for it is the first deeply researched historical account of attachment theory—a fact that is somewhat surprising, given the interest it elicits both within and beyond the academy. Yet Vicedo’s book is not simply an historical account. Trained as both a philosopher and a historian of science, Vicedo puts her cards on the table, leveling a rigorous critique of the theory’s central claims and founding works.

John Bowlby attended medical school and pursued psychiatric and psychoanalytic training in 1930s London. But he ultimately strayed far from psychoanalysis, embracing a view of instinct at odds with the notion of psychoanalytic drives, which emphasizes the role of fantasy in shaping individual mental life. Intimations of Bowlby’s future trajectory are apparent in his highly influential *Maternal Care and Mental Health*, a report commissioned by the World Health Organization in 1951 to better understand the mental needs of orphaned children. (For instance, his characterization of the mother as the infant’s “psychic organizer” drew upon a concept from embryology.) Soon thereafter, he discovered the work of Austrian ethologist Konrad Lorenz, who famously developed the concept of “imprinting” to describe how gosling ducks became attached to the first being or object they saw after hatching. Strongly influenced by Lorenz, Bowlby in the late 1950s attempted to synthesize psychoanalysis and ethology, describing the quest for attachment as an evolutionarily determined process that progressed through particular stages during the first two years of life.

Around this same time, psychologist Harry Harlow was conducting his legendary experiments on the effects of maternal deprivation on rhesus monkeys. In what is perhaps
the book’s most riveting chapter, Vicedo offers a fascinating and revisionist account of Harlow’s ideas and the role they played in helping to validate attachment theory. In Harlow’s lab, infant monkeys, deprived of their mothers, were provided with inanimate surrogates, some made simply of wire, others covered with terry cloth and warmed by a light bulb. The infants elected to spend almost all their time with the soft surrogates, even when the wire ones dispensed all of their meals. From this, Harlow concluded that babies—for he did not hesitate to leap from monkeys to humans—require more than food; they crave “contact comfort” or “love.”

Bowlby readily embraced Harlow’s findings, ignoring the fact—noted by Harlow himself—that his experiments did not actually reveal the need for mothers per se, but rather for any comforting body (or even object). Harlow’s subsequent discoveries seemed to offer more solid evidence: the motherless monkeys grew up to be highly disturbed, unable to mate properly and abusive toward their offspring. This is where the story usually ends. But as Vicedo details, Harlow went on to conduct other experiments, which showed that contact with peers was equally if not more critical to emotional health; baby monkeys deprived of mothers could grow into normal adults if allowed contact with peers. Moreover, the monkeys who turned out to be abusive mothers often transformed into normal mothers after giving birth the second time around. Unsurprisingly, Bowlby and other attachment theorists steered clear of these later, more confounding findings.

In the 1960s, Bowlby increasingly looked for validation to the work of his junior colleague, Mary Ainsworth, with whom he shared a sometimes fraught, yet in the end mutually beneficial relationship. According to Vicedo, Ainsworth’s observational research on mothers and babies in Uganda and Baltimore, proved to be “a key step in the reifying and biologizing of attachment,” in large part because she claimed “uniformity and universality in children’s attachment behavior.” It was Ainsworth who introduced the typology of attachment still used today and who developed the widely employed “strange situation” test to assess the quality of a child’s attachment to his or her mother. Suppressing points on which they potentially differed, both she and Bowlby portrayed her research as supporting his theory. Yet according to Vicedo, Ainsworth made unwarranted leaps in drawing conclusions from her data, such as assuming that certain maternal practices and emotions were not just correlated with, but actually the cause of, certain behavioral responses in infants.

In 1969, Bowlby published Attachment, a fully elaborated and updated statement of his views now regarded as attachment theory’s foundational text. Here, Bowlby continued to rely on Lorenz’s now discredited ethological theories, even as Lorenz, a former Nazi, issued increasingly reactionary pronouncements about social and biological decline. In fact, whereas Bowlby had earlier recognized the inadequacy of imprinting as an explanatory model of mother-infant attachment, in Attachment he argued that one could view it as a form of imprinting. He also claimed that, due to evolution, mothers and infants possess an innate system of behaviors designed to ensure the species’ survival within a specific environment. But this “environment of evolutionary adaptedness” often differed significantly from that which mothers and babies actually inhabited in modern, Western societies. Vicedo wisely chose to include an image of the cover of the original edition of Attachment, which shows a nearly naked indigenous woman carrying a baby on
her hip while balancing a vat on her head; she stands as an implicit rebuke to the neglectful Western mother, out of harmony with nature and her child.

In the conclusion, Vicedo attempts to explain why attachment theory has persisted, despite serious questions about its validity. She emphasizes the fact that attachment theorists succeeded in portraying their ideas as firmly grounded in biological science while presenting a unified front against critics. The interdisciplinary character of the theory also played a role, she argues, effectively shielding it from “focused critical appraisal,” meaning that psychoanalysts were not trained to adequately assess the claims of ethologists or biologists or vice versa. I would suggest there may also be other reasons, less internal to the world of scientific research. As Vicedo notes, it is no coincidence that attachment theory originated in an era when mothers were increasingly entering the workforce; perhaps its enduring appeal reflects persistent concerns over families’ heavy reliance on non-maternal (and non-parental) childcare. Alternately, it may be that attachment theory has some explanatory value, despite its shaky foundation. After all, one can jettison the idea of mother love as instinctual, as well as the fixation on the mother as the crucial attachment figure, without discarding all of the theory’s insights about stages of attachment or the importance of humans’ earliest relationships in establishing patterns that shape subsequent interpersonal relationships, sometimes to a dismayingly predictable degree.

In any case, Vicedo’s smart and salutary book deserves a wide readership. Brimming with fascinating biographical details, The Nature and Nurture of Love illuminates the very human and contingent process whereby a set of ideas acquires scientific credibility and popular currency. In the end, she reminds readers that it is both intellectually lazy and politically dangerous to succumb to the lure of theories of child development that purport to be firmly grounded in biological science.

Rebecca Jo Plant
University of California, San Diego