

STRESSFUL CHILDHOOD EVENTS: A RETROSPECTIVE JOURNEY INTO THE LIFE OF ADULTS WITH DEPRESSION; A REPORT OF 5 CASES. The importance of maternal love

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SUMMARY

The importance of maternal care for a harmonious development of the child has been at the center of the interest of child psychology since the second half of the twentieth century. Great scholars such as Lorenz, Harlow, Spitz and Bowlby have asserted that love for mum does not have its roots in satisfying the need for food, but in the need for protection and if there is a lack of care the consequences are extremely negatives. Nowadays, epigenetics is finding the biological basis of the effects of maternal care, if they are present and affectionate, and even if they are lacking or absent. A report of 5 cases helps to understand the importance of maternal love.

Key words: maternal care – childhood – negative events – depression

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INTRODUCTION

Today, more and more researchers agree that maternal care leaves its mark in the DNA of children; how an individual is depends on his/her genes but also on his/her first experiences of life, both in the mother's womb and during childhood, and therefore from the environment and the social context in which he/she grows and lives. The most recent studies in the field of epigenetics show that there are important interconnections between environmental influences and genetic characteristics. Researchers at the Salk Institute for Biological Studies in California (study published in Science in 2018) have recently shown how maternal care in the early days of life can modify the DNA sequence in mouse pup neurons, translating into persistent changes in their behavior: the mice that during the first days of life receive more attention and pampering from the mother, have the DNA of some neurons different from that of the rodents that have received less as if, explain the researchers, the experience of the very first moments of life was recorded in the genome.

A spokesman for the research team explains that the discovery could help psychiatric medicine in the prevention field (experts believe it could be used to combat anxiety, depression and schizophrenia): "We are taught that our DNA is something stable and immutable that makes us what we are, but in reality it is much more dynamic. It turns out that there are genes in cells that are able to copy themselves and move, which means that DNA changes."

The last mystery of heredity, (2011) the book of the writer and biologist Richard C. Francis, still unpublished in Italy, is one of the first popular works on the new frontiers offered by epigenetics and the way in which the environment can leave indelible traces on DNA, referring in particular to the fact that environ-

mental stress can have such a profound impact on the physiology of an individual that his biological modifications can be inherited for generations to follow. There seems to be a striking analogy between modern neuroscience and the more traditional horizons of evolutionary psychology regarding studies of maternal love, as if the biological foundations of what was theorized in the past by some great researchers were finally found.

In fact, the scientific study of the importance of maternal care and physical contact on the nervous, affective and behavioral development of mammals dates back to the mid-twentieth century. Some studies in particular represent milestones in the history of medical and psychoanalytic research.

LITERATURE

René Spitz, an Austrian physician and psychoanalyst (1887-1974), working in the United States, performed numerous researches on the mother-child relationship since the 1940s. He is one of the first scholars to apply the methods of field research to early childhood studies; from his research he draws the conclusion that the relationship between the mother and the child is fundamentally an environment-individual relationship and that the mother constitutes an essential growth stimulus for the child. *"We rarely realize the great importance of the mother in the child's learning and awareness processes. Even more rarely we realize the primordial importance that in this process have the feelings of the mother, that is what we call "affective attitude". The mother's tenderness allows her to offer the child a rich range of life experiences; his affective attitude determines the quality of the experiences themselves. [...] In the first months the child's experiences are exclusively emotional."* (R. Spitz, *The first year of the child's life*, 1965).

Between 1945 and 1946 Spitz compares two groups of institutionalized children. The first consists of 220 elements, children of women held in a women's prison, but with the opportunity to dedicate themselves personally to their children in a nursery attached to the structure. The second one, however, includes several hundred abandoned infants and hosted in a foundling hospital.

Spitz notes that in both cases the children are adequately nourished and treated hygienically, but in the second group, despite the presence of professional workers specially trained for assistance to infants, the children present a disturbing clinical picture starting from the fulfillment of the 1st year of life, because the nurses do not have the opportunity to cuddle or caress the children, having to look after too many of them. Many will not have a regular growth: they will manifest evident delays in cognitive and motor development - with symptoms such as lack of response to external stimuli, facial expression (apathy and indifference), muscle spasms, crying crisis - as well as a marked lowering of immune defenses. 37% of them will come to die within the second year of life. Spitz concludes that they are treated in an aseptic and impersonal way, as an object, when instead what is needed is an environment that is primarily emotional and relational, not merely material.

The child does not need only material care but also, and above all, to establish a strong emotional bond with the mother (or the person who cares for the child regularly). The smiles, the caresses, the physical contact with her body stimulate in the child a positive reaction absolutely necessary for their proper development. The already formed self of the mother enables the creation and formation of the child's self, through a continuous interaction consisting of sensations and emotions transmitted through symbols, that is the words and gestures with which the mother communicates her affection to the child. If instead this link is absent, or fails for any reason, the child feels abandoned, lost, unable to find the reference point that is vital. Here the emotional stress caused by the lack of a real maternal figure affects the maturation giving rise to a series of serious physical and psychological disorders.

In 1958 the American psychologist Harry Harlow carried out an experiment that became extremely famous. More than 60 little macaques are separated from the mother a few hours after birth and raised with artificial milk. It is interesting how the pups are immediately attracted to diapers found in the cage and when these cloths are removed to be washed, the macaques protest and show signs of great affliction. Faced with this, the scholar decides to build two "surrogate mothers" and to place them in the cages 24 hours a day: one of iron with a bottle that dispenses milk attached to the chest and one with the same structure but covered with cloth and without bottles. Harlow observes that the monkeys tend to embrace the "soft mother", warm and welcoming, and spend only the time necessary for feeding with the other figure. Moreover, if a strange object that inspires fear is

introduced into the cage, the little macaque runs towards the cloth puppet and crouches there as a source of security. Harlow demonstrates the preference of the little ones for the "soft" mother who does not provide milk, noting how a warm contact is more important for the little ones than the need for food itself. It is not the fulfillment of primary needs to create that indissoluble bond that is established between mother and child in every species, but the need for physical closeness, warmth, the possibility of feeling protected. In fact, very soon the soft puppet is no longer enough: the young macaques begin to suffer the lack of the mother in the flesh and become sad and apathetic. The puppet is not able to embrace them, hold them gently, kiss them, let them go and take them back, in short, to perform all those actions that convey love.

After some weeks of this experience, some of the animals are again placed with the real mothers, but this fact will not be enough to repair the serious damage done: in fact, once grown, monkeys will exhibit social, sexual and maternal pathological behavior; they will show excessive fear of any change, they will not play with their companions, they will not be receptive to the courtship and, if they become mothers in turn, they will attack their young. Deprivation of maternal care, in particular the lack of affectionate contact, determines dramatic and pervasive effects: love not received and not experienced cannot be given. (Harlow 1958)

John Bowlby, a British physician and psychoanalyst, (1907-1990), carried out his rich research activity in London. All of his experience in the field gives him the conviction that the origin of psychopathologies is to be found in the real experiences of interpersonal life and they direct his interest, from the beginning, to the study of the nature of that link, powerful and enduring, that is established precociously between the growing individual and those who take care of it, leading him over time to formulate a true and proper theory of attachment, expressed in a complete and systematic way in the trilogy *Attachment and loss* (1969; 1973; 1980). Today this theory constitutes "the most complete and articulated theoretical model to refer to in order to understand and explain the psychodynamic mechanisms that underpin evolutionary processes" (Tani 2011).

Supported by Harlow's studies of the comforting nature of mother attachment, Bowlby goes so far as to refute what he calls "the love of object relations", according to which the child attaches to the mother because she satisfies some of his/her physiological needs such as those of food and warmth (Bowlby 1969).

Based on observations of the mother-child bond in non-human primates, as well as those derived from his clinical practice, Bowlby comes to theorize that the child has a "biological predisposition" to develop an attachment bond towards the person who takes care of him/her. This predisposition is genetically determined and phylogenetically transmitted as it is functional to the survival of the individual and of the species. Bowlby explores ethology influenced by K. Lorenz's findings on the phenomenon of imprinting and Harlow's studies.

In Lorenz's studies it can be seen that in small ducklings an attachment bond develops even without the intermediation of food. In short, it can be inferred that the attachment system is not connected to nourishment, as theorists of social learning and psychoanalytic school argued, but it is a primary need that can be studied within an evolutionary circle. According to Lorenz's theory, the ducklings, deprived of the natural maternal figure, follow a human being or any other object, towards which they develop a strong bond that goes beyond the simple request for nutrition, given that this type of animal feeds independently (Lorenz 1935).

Returning to Bowlby, the style of attachment that the child develops depends on the "quality" of the maternal care received and not on the "quantity" of food, and the style of the first attachment relationships has a considerable influence on the early organization of the personality and above all the concept that child will have of himself/herself and of others. Anxiety and depression manifested in adulthood, could derive from periods in which the person has experienced childhood anguish and detachment from the reference figure.

Three basic types of attachment are identified: secure attachment, insecure-ambivalent attachment, insecure-avoiding attachment, and later, by a group of scholars of the University of Berkeley, disorganized attachment.

Secure attachment occurs when the caring figure is sensitive to the child's signals, available and ready to give protection when the child requests it; consequently, the child acquires and maintains security in the exploration of the world, the conviction of being lovable, the capacity to endure prolonged detachment, no fear of abandonment, trust in one's own abilities and those of others. An insecure attachment occurs when the child is not sure that the mother is available to respond to a request for help, indeed most likely will be refused. In particular, the attachment figure is available on some occasions but not on others (ambivalent), unpredictable in its behavior, alternating in feelings, unexpected in reactions. These children develop the anxiety of abandonment, insecurity in the exploration of the world and the sense of guilt, the inability to bear prolonged detachments, the mistrust in their abilities. It is also possible to check that the mother constantly rejects her son every time he approaches her for comfort or protection, avoiding any physical contact. In this child the predominant emotions are sadness, pain and emotional coldness, detachment and a tendency for avoidance.

As we can see, the oral gratification received by the child is no longer in the foreground, but rather the quality of the care, that is the availability and the ability to respond to the mother. His work as a child psychiatrist at the Child Guidance Clinic in London contributes to the development of his thought, but also his ten-year experience as director of the "Department for Children and Parents" of the Tavistock Clinic in London and the appointment of a World Health Organization consultant with the task of preparing a report on the mental health of abandoned children.

From the last interview granted in 1990, just before dying: *"It all started in the 1930s, between 1936 and 1940. I worked as a child psychiatrist in London while completing my psychoanalysis training. One of the concepts I was interested in very early on was the importance of early parent-child relationships and the extent to which adverse experiences within the family could have a negative effect on the child's physical and mental health. At that time many psychoanalytic colleagues were unwilling to attach importance to adverse life events as an important factor in the development of the child. [...] In the 1930s, in London, there was a strong attitude that one should never have believed the stories of patients regarding sexual abuse or any other adverse experience caused by the parents, and that one should not trust the validity of the patient's account. Instead, I thought adverse events were of great importance, and as a young psychoanalyst and young psychiatrist of childhood, I tried to show that early childhood real life events played a prominent role in determining mental health. And that's how the study began which I have since then dedicated to. [...] The reason why I focused on separation and loss was, in part, because it could be the object of research; I had also observed, at the Child Guidance Clinic, a number of cases where the personality of the child, who later became delinquent and unmanageable, seemed to me to have been precociously preceded by very destructive relationships between the child and the mother. Once considered early antecedent events, their presence could be demonstrated in a statistically significant way to study if an important connection was likely. There were many internal clinical evidences suggesting that early adversity had led to results that included children with poor emotional relationships or disinterestedness in them, who did not seem to be influenced by praise or punishment, or who went their own way. They sailed the school, ran away, they made petty theft, and so on. They were emotionally blocked. It all started like this; I was starting from a condition that I believe represents, in reality, the early stages of a psychopathic personality."*

(Interview held in London, 11 January 1990, by prof. Leonardo Tondo and published the same year in the journal *Clinical Neuropsychiatry*.)

In more recent times, since the 70/80s of the twentieth century, numerous studies have verified that adults exposed in childhood to stressful events are more likely to present mental illness (in particular, a causal link between loss and the presence of depressive pathology was sustained) (Brown & Harris 1989). The experiences of detachment and/or abandonment experienced in childhood determine an intrapsychic vulnerability predisposing to the depressive illness, a condition characterized by passivity, low self-esteem, psychic and emotional dependence, self-evaluation and psycho-behavioral rigidity (Infrasca 2002). Many of these studies have used a method of investigation organized with a retrospective criterion, that is recording the number and

"weight" of negative events occurring in patients treated for depression during their childhood (Campbell 1983, Bernstein 1986, Barnett 1988, Kessler 1993, Brown 1994, Berger 1998).

The possibility of having reliable parameters capable of assessing the consistency of childhood factors linked to the risk of depression in adults is an essential condition for organizing appropriate prevention interventions.

THE REPORT

Even in the clinical pedagogical practice, my personal workplace, within the unavoidable anamnestic moment of knowing the other, it is possible to detect the life experiences of the subjects via a journey through the personal memory.

Five subjects of differing age, sex, origin, training, qualification (but with an identical and comfortable economic condition) have in common a negative childhood experience of loneliness and sadness due to a rejection/detachment from the mother figure and a unaffectionate family atmosphere, unprotected and sometimes conflictual, poor in communication, frustrating and unsatisfactory, resulting in adolescence with inner discomfort, difficulty in emotional relationships, lack of autonomy and self-esteem, pessimism. The relationship with the mother is still problematic and painful, despite adulthood; on the part of the female subjects the resentment and the anger due to the lack of love received and the poor care are strongly present. Most of the vital energies of the aforementioned subjects are spent in wanting to find at all costs a reason for the lack of maternal affection; there is no acceptance or resignation or understanding.

In addition to the path of clinical pedagogical help, they are being treated for problems in disorders of mood and anxiety.

1

A twenty-five year old male, graduated, an only child, says he has no happy memory of his childhood. Lived in a condition of material well-being, he remembers the absence of the mother from home as a bar owner, a cold family atmosphere, an absent communication with both parents and a strong sense of detachment and subjection in their comparisons. He still remembers with sorrow her own loneliness and the lack of physical contact and sweetness of her mother, the absence of play with her, the severity of the rules. The absence of playful and communicative relationality with the mother tends to establish feelings of frustration and psycho-affective isolation in the small precocious child (Mahler et al. 1978). Moreover, subjection and fear produce conflicts in the cognitive and affective sphere and stimulate strong closure, unease and tendency to silence.

Today he lives in an inner condition of dissatisfaction, hypercritical attitude, devaluation of self, work disengagement.

2

A thirty year old woman, married with two children, born in a family who owned a restaurant. She remembers to have never experienced the warmth of the home, to have never experienced the pleasure of lunches or dinners (both daily and Sunday) or parties in her home, which was always half empty. She recalls her loneliness and the search for her parents' closeness (even through the daily afternoon study at the restaurant). She speaks with pain of their disinterest and inattention (in particular showing anger towards her mother, anger born during adolescence). She could never tell anyone in her family about having a voluntary abortion when she was 16. She lives in regret of what she has not had, does not enjoy the present, always complains and is uncomplaining, never happy.

It is known that the lack of parents' presence in the home does not allow the child to continuously enjoy the main sources of affection, sometimes feeding him the profound desire to live in another family unit. If the paternal attitudes are added to the maternal ones, this introduces additional problematic elements in the child's personality.

3

A thirty five year old young woman, married with two children, emotionally detached from her husband and children, very critical and dissatisfied. She tells about her mother, a very strict school manager, totally absorbed in her work, from her own problems and personal fulfillment, emotionally distant from her, never sweet and affectionate, even at home.

During her stories she melts and cries tears of pain. She tells of not being able to accept her mother's lack of affection and that this in turn prevents her from loving her husband, being unable to live as a couple and from being caring in her family; she sees the children as her property, prevents the spouse from educating them.

Subject opposed to authority, maternal authoritarianism assumes the meaning of rejection towards the child, causing in it a counter-hostility. Moreover, the authoritarian attitude tends to organize in the mother-child relationship an emotional-affective "wall", a condition that inserts elements of conflict in the child's personality.

4

A young 20-year-old male, a university student, remembers violent quarrels above all for years between his parents, and the memory of this still frightens him. The subsequent separation between the two did not bring him particular benefit: he lives with his mother, a woman in a detached and uncomprehending career. He shows a negative view of life, sadness, anhedonia, relational closure, psychological fragility. The constant conflict in the couple in this case has taken on meanings that have prompted in the child negative experiences of considerable importance, such as a permanent condition of insecurity, fear and emotional alarm and a continuous frustration of child expectations related to the need to be at the centre of parents' emotional interests.

5

A fifty year old woman, unmarried, with unsuccessful love affairs, the last of four children, parents advanced in age, not very communicative and strict; she remembers the constant avoidance of the mother towards her and her own search for affection never satisfied. A very cold father. She has no pleasant episodes of her childhood to remember. She lives a situation of estrangement and disinterest in life and the surrounding reality, feelings of guilt for not living up to maternal expectations, low self-esteem, sense of despair. The perception of herself as an unaccepted person, even rejected by her parents, has assumed a configuration that has torn the construction of basic trust; this negative perception has assumed a meaning of overall inadequacy and introduced a profound psychological discomfort.

CONCLUSIONS

To conclude, the continuity and permanence of stressful childhood experiences endanger the so-called "basic trust" (Erikson 1950), a necessary prerequisite to face life with serenity, and makes negative the image that the child has of himself, as not worthy of love and guilty. Feeling of being "unpleasant" for the mother figure, determines in children an experience of negativity, consequent to the perception of not being able to satisfy the maternal expectations (Bowlby 1983). In the mother-child relationship, the reiteration of these experiences tends to organize a stable trace in the intrapsychic structure of the child, originating a series of depressive veins in its personological structure. The affective and emotional distance introduced by the conviction of "not pleasing to the mother" creates a situation in which, unable to understand such rejection (not attributing it to the parent's problems), the subject tends to invest his person with devaluing meanings.

Thanks to the numerous recent research in the biological field, the teaching that perinatal psychology experts nowadays recommend to new parents to bring home is very simple: do not be afraid to cuddle children, remember the importance of physical demonstrations of affection and provide for the most affective care of the child.

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