



Intimacy and the face of the other: A philosophical study of infant institutionalization and deprivation



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ABSTRACT

The orphans of Romania were participants in what is sometimes called “the forbidden experiment”: depriving human infants of intimacy, affection, and human contact is an inhuman practice. It is an experiment which no ethical researcher would set out to do. This paper examines historical data, case histories, and research findings which deal with early deprivation and performs a phenomenological analysis of deprivation phenomena as they impact emotional and physical development. A key element of deprivation is the absence of intimate relationships with other human beings. However, the absence of intimacy impacts not only the social/emotional abilities of infants, but their very ability to perceive the world. Philosophically and from a radically Merleau-Pontean perspective, the intimate face of the other appears to be a world opening event for the child. Its absence has a profound impact on the child’s experience of embodiment, coexistence, spatiality, temporality, and language. When seen through early deprivation, intimacy appears as a necessary foundation for establishing the transcendence of the world beyond perceptual presence, and it provides the possibility for language, culture, and history.

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Mother, you made him small, it was you who began him; he was new to you, you bent over his new eyes the friendly world, and held off the hostile.

Rilke, 3rd Duino Elegy

1. The psychology of deprivation and intimacy

1.1. Attachment: cultural practices, scientific data, philosophical concepts

In 1915 Henry Chapin, a New York physician, investigated ten founding homes across the country. In a report to the American Pediatric Association he stated that in all but one of the homes, every child admitted was dead by the age of two. Other pediatricians from across the country made similar reports: many founding homes had mortality rates of 100% for infants under one year of age (Blum, 2002: 149).

These shocking statistics are part of the history of childhood and how we think about the relationship between children and adults: do infants need hygiene, food, and a disciplined institutional

structure, or do they need physical contact, engaged social interactions, and attachment from the adults in their lives? In the wake of Ainsworth et al. (1978), Bowlby (1969), Harlow and Harlow (1986) and Spitz (1949) developmental psychology has answered that question in favor of attachment. US culture has answered it by abolishing orphanages almost completely across the country and by replacing them with the foster care system.

The following study is an attempt to explore the deeper, existential structure of attachment by approaching it through a number of perspectives. We will give a brief sketch of the history of the institutionalization of infants and show how attachment and its absence plays out in the cultural landscape; we will lay out some of the contemporary concepts and data about deprivation from neuroscience and occupational therapy and bring them together with a phenomenological analysis of a case-history from a Romanian orphanage, which reveals the intersection of attachment/intimacy and perceptual/neurological development on the personal level, but also in the larger population; finally we will conclude with a philosophical analysis of the absence and presence of the face of the other and what it means for the trajectory of a human life.

At the heart of this philosophical and psychological inquiry lies the disturbing observation that deprivation in infancy not only leads to disturbances in interpersonal and attachment relationships, but that it restructures the perceptual and cognitive

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functions of the body as well as the child's relationship to its meaningful world. Inspired by the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty (1942, 1962, 1968) this paper applies what I call a *chiasmic psychology*, which allows us to disentangle some of the complex phenomena of early deprivation. It borrows three hermeneutic procedures from his work:

1. A descriptive phenomenological study of a particular human experience that shows some of the deeper and complex structures of human existence.
2. A critical discussion of concepts in psychology and an attempt to put them to the test and widen their scope in interchange with case material and other qualitative, experiential data. Integrating experiential data with the population data from the scientific research literature gives us a double view because it brings together the deep structures of an individual existence with the general perspectives of data and concepts in the sciences – and hopefully agitates both and pushes the inquiry further.
3. A philosophical inquiry into the complex existential web of embodiment, space, time, and others in the formation of personal identity. Following Merleau-Ponty's ontology (1968), this leads to a perspective that tries to think the subject of psychology from a radically non-dualistic, *chiasmic* perspective.

1.2. A Brief historical excursion

Henry Chapin's report from 1915 was a snapshot of the deplorable practices in the treatment of institutionalized children that have continued in one place or another through much of the 20th century. Forward to the 1930's: the trend in medicine was to isolate infants in sterile environments to protect them from the "germs" that could kill them, and from the people who would carry those germs. Children's Memorial Hospital in Chicago had now a mortality rate of only 30%, as reported by staff physician Dr. Brennan. Progress, you say? The 30% rate describes mostly the youngest children, the infants in their first year of life.

They were coming in to those spotless hygienic rooms and inexplicably fading away. At children's Memorial, babies were dying seven times faster than the older children; they accounted for much of that stubborn 30 percent mortality. Brennan also noted that babies who did best in the hospital were those who were 'the nurses' pets, those who enjoyed a little extra cuddling despite hospital rules. Sometimes the hospital could turn an illness around, he said, by asking a nurse to "mother" a child, just a little.

Blum, 2002: 44

Forward another decade: in 1947 René Spitz and Katherine Wolf compared infants raised in a foundling home with others who were institutionalized at birth, but still attended by their mothers. In both institutions the children were well housed and well fed. Their documentary film of the foundling home, *Grief: A Peril in Infancy* made the rounds of medical society meetings and shocked fellow doctors. It has since then become a classic in psychology. Spitz found that the infants in the "Nursery", who were attended by their mothers, thrived like normal infants. The "Foundlinghome" group, however, did not fare so well. During a twelve-month period all children slid in developmental norms to 45% of normal functioning in mastery of perception, bodily functions, social relations, memory and imitation, manipulative ability, and of intelligence. Spitz remarks on a startling factor:

In a five years' observation period during which we observed a total of 239 children, each for one year or more, "Nursery" did not lose a single child through death. In "Foundlinghome" on the other hand, 37 per cent of the children died during a two years' observation period. The high mortality is but the most extreme consequence of the general decline, both physical and psychological, which is shown by children completely starved of emotional interchange.

Spitz, 1949: 149

Forward to 1990. The ABC news show 20/20 broadcast the first images from Romanian orphanages. The shocking footage showed malnourished infants housed in cribs, naked children housed in cages, rocking teenagers sitting on a ledge or tied up on urine soaked floors. By 1989 170,000 children lived in Romanian orphanages, many under inhuman conditions (Zeanah et al., 2003). Between 1990 and 1993 US families adopted ca. 2800 Romanian orphans, and many more came to live with British and Canadian parents (Groze and Ileana, 1996; Gunnar et al., 2000). Well-meaning, warm-hearted Western parents believed that love would be enough to raise these children and integrate them into their families and societies. Many of them were in for a rough awakening: children institutionalized for more than eight months have physical, cognitive, and emotional problems which *generally do not resolve themselves* but require prolonged therapeutic intervention (Ruggiero and Johnson, 2009). The longer children are institutionalized, the more severe and resistant to treatment these impairments become.

This brief historical sketch about the institutionalization of children mirrors 20th century cultural practices and ideas about what child rearing is and how to frame the relationship between parents and children. From early ideas about the importance of distance and discipline in Chapin's time and the belief that infants in the first years of life are impervious to outside influence, to the urgency for distance and germ control in Brennan's time, to the appearance of attachment to the mother in Spitz' time and finally the recognition of cognitive and behavioral deficits in Romanian orphans, child care institutions reflect the ideology and the power discourse of their time and culture (Foucault, 1978). Amassing this information and putting it in a timeline, however, has another effect: it is disturbing to see how long it took to understand and acknowledge the impact of institutionalized spaces and institutionalized human relationships on young human children.

1.3. Deprivation and the senses

Henry Chapin's institutionalized babies, Renee Spitz' foundling home group, and the orphans of Romania were participants in what researchers who work with children call "the forbidden experiment" (Shattuck, 1980): no ethical researcher today would intentionally set out to prevent the formation of attachment in human infants because it is a cruel practice and has detrimental effects on the child's future development. It is forbidden to place infants in environments where they experience deprivation that causes long-term developmental impairments. But many adoptive families today live with the results of the "forbidden experiment" and researchers from a number of disciplines have worked with adopted Romanian orphans to understand the effects of early deprivation and to devise treatment methods. Perhaps we can learn something from the plight of the Romanian orphans and their terrible situation: no institutionalized child in the future should have to suffer such a fate.

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