

Michael Rutter

Benjamin Lowry, Lisa K. Lashley, Charles J. Golden

Nova Southeastern University

Michael Rutter was born August 15th, 1933 to Winifred and Llewellyn Rutter in Lebanon, where his father was working as a doctor. He returned with his parents to England when he was 3-years-old. In 1940, at the age of 6-years-old, Rutter and his younger sister were evacuated to North America due to fear of German invasion of the British Isles. He and his sister were taken in by different families in the United States and only living together a few months near the end of their four year stay abroad. Rutter denied feeling separated from his parents during his stay abroad, indicating that his parents wrote letters regularly.

After returning to England and completing secondary school, Rutter attended the University of Birmingham Medical School in Edgbaston, Birmingham, England where he completed his M.D. specializing in psychiatry in 1955. Rutter was a senior lecturer from 1965-1973 at the University of London Institute of Psychiatry culminating in him becoming the first professor of child psychiatry in the United Kingdom. In 1984, Rutter founded the Medical Research Council Unit in Child Psychiatry at the Maudsley Hospital and Institute of Psychiatry and served as honorary director; additionally,

Rutter founded the Social, Genetic, and Developmental Psychiatry Centre in 1994, where he also served as honorary director; the goal of the Social, Genetic, and Development Psychiatry Center was increase the understanding of the interaction between genetics and the environment as it pertains to the development of complex human behavior. Starting in 1998, he was hired as a professor of developmental psychopathology at the Institute of Psychiatry. Rutter is regarded as

one of the founding figures for the field of child psychology and one of the most influential psychiatrists in the 20th century.

Initially, Rutter's work focused on epidemiological studies, studies of autism, and studies of children of sick parents. From 1964-1972, Rutter was involved in the Isle of Wight epidemiological studies, which were designed to evaluate educational, psychiatric, and physical disorders in 9-11-year-old children. Some of the findings of these studies include a positive correlation between self-reported childhood levels of stress and antisocial behavior, however, no positive correlation was found between juvenile delinquency and separation from either mother or father. Childhood stress was found to be associated with lower socioeconomic status families and elevated levels of family discord. Furthermore, juvenile delinquency was also associated with below average IQ and difficulties in school. These studies served as a strong foundation for Rutter's later works, particularly regarding risk and resiliency factors.

Rutter also studied attachment and adjustment, which facilitated his challenge of John Bowlby's theory of maternal deprivation; Bowlby's theory posited that maternal deprivation results in irreversible mental health consequence, however, in his 1972 paper "Maternal Deprivation Reassessed," Rutter challenged Bowlby's theory by proposing that children normally attach to multiple people rather than selectively attaching to a singular person. Furthermore, Rutter proposed that maternal deprivation is only a single risk factor that can disrupt emotional and social development in children.

Rutter identified additional risk factors that influence the development and lifespan behavior, including malnutrition, poverty, and early family discord. With this understanding of risk factors in place, Rutter continued to study psychosocial resilience and protective factors regarding development. Rutter identified four main processes that protect against the

psychological risks of adversity, which include reducing risk impact, reducing negative chain reactions, establishing and maintaining self-efficacy and self-esteem, and creating opportunities to move beyond the adversity.

Rutter continued long-term epidemiological studies, which identified genetic influences on childhood disorders and evaluated adult outcomes. These have included studies of autism, wherein he helped to formulate an autism diagnostic interview and standardized observation schedule, as well as helped to identify autism as a strongly genetic disorder, and studies of early childhood deprivation. In 1989, Rutter headed the epidemiological study team that followed Romanian orphans adopted into English homes from childhood to teenaged years, These orphans spent their early life in impoverished Romanian orphanages and the study was focused on evaluating the effects of early privation and experiential deprivation on child development. Rutter and his team were able to find that many of the Romanian adoptees fared well after adoption, both developmentally and psychologically, particularly if they had been adopted before six months old. These results indicate optimism regarding recovery from early childhood deprivation and neglect.

Given his prodigious productivity as both a clinician and a researcher, Rutter has received various honors and awards. He has received multiple honorary degrees from institutions in the United Kingdom, United States, and Finland. The British Academy has awarded Rutter an honorary membership and he has been elected as a fellow of the Royal Society. Rutter was also knighted in 1992.

Further Reading

Rutter, M. (1972). Maternal deprivation reconsidered. *Journal of Psychosomatic Research*, 16(4), 241-250.

Rutter, M. (1987). Psychosocial resilience and protective mechanisms. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 57(3), 316.

Rutter, M. (2002). Nature, nurture, and development: From evangelism through science toward policy and practice. *Child development*, 73(1), 1-21.