

Bruno Bettelheim

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Bruno Bettelheim (August 28, 1903 – March 13, 1990) was an Austrian-born American child psychologist and writer. He gained an international reputation for his work on Freud, psychoanalysis, and emotionally disturbed children.

Currently, Bettelheim's theories in which he attributes autism spectrum conditions to parenting style are considered to be thoroughly discredited.^{[2][3][4][5]} However, as Michael Rutter has observed, "Many people made a mistake in going from a statement which is undoubtedly true - that there is no evidence that autism has been caused by poor parenting - to the statement that it has been disproven. It has not actually been disproven. It has faded away simply because, on the one hand, of a lack of convincing evidence and on the other hand, an awareness that autism was a neurodevelopmental disorder of some kind."^[6]

	Bruno Bettelheim
Born	August 28, 1903 <div>Vienna, Austria-Hungary</div>
Died	March 13, 1990 (aged 86) <div>Silver Spring, Maryland, United States</div> <div>Suicide</div>
Citizenship	United States
Nationality	Austrian
Fields	Psychology
Doctoral students	Benjamin Drake Wright
Known for	Contributions to child psychology; <i>The Uses of Enchantment</i>
Spouse	Regina Alstadt (1930–?; divorced) <div>Gertrude Weinfeld (1941–1984; her death; 3 children)^[1]</div>

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Background

When his father died, Bettelheim left his studies at the University of Vienna to look after his family's

sawmill. Bettelheim and his first wife Gina took care of Patsy, an American child whom he later described as autistic. Patsy lived in the Bettelheim home in Vienna for seven years. Having discharged his obligations to his family's business, Bettelheim returned as a mature student in his 30s to the University of Vienna. He earned a degree in philosophy, producing a dissertation on Immanuel Kant and on the history of art.

In the Austrian academic culture of Bettelheim's time, one could not study the history of art without mastering aspects of psychology. Candidates for the doctoral dissertation in the History of Art in 1938 at Vienna University had to fulfill prerequisites in the formal study of the role of Jungian archetypes in art, and in art as an expression of the Freudian subconscious.

Though Jewish by birth, Bettelheim grew up in a secular family. After the merging of Austria into Greater Germany (April 1938), the authorities sent him with other Austrian Jews to Dachau and Buchenwald concentration camps for 11 months from 1938 to 1939. In Buchenwald he met and befriended the social psychologist Ernst Federn. As a result of an amnesty declared for Hitler's birthday (April 20, 1939), Bettelheim and hundreds of other prisoners regained their freedom. Bettelheim drew on the experience of the concentration camps for some of his later work.

Life and career in the United States

Bettelheim arrived by ship as a refugee in New York City in late 1939 to join his wife Gina, who had already emigrated. They divorced because she had become involved with someone else during their separation. He soon moved to Chicago and became a naturalized U.S. citizen in 1944 and married an American woman.

The University of Chicago appointed Bettelheim as a professor of psychology and he taught there from 1944 until his retirement in 1973. He had trained in philosophy, but stated also that the Viennese psychoanalyst Richard Sterba had analyzed him.

Bettelheim also served as Director of the University of Chicago's Sonia Shankman Orthogenic School, a home that treats emotionally disturbed children. He made changes and set up an environment for milieu therapy, in which children could form strong attachments with adults within a structured but caring environment. He claimed considerable success in treating some of the emotionally disturbed children. He wrote books on both normal and abnormal child psychology and became a major influence in the field, widely respected during his lifetime. He was elected a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 1971.^[7]

Bettelheim analyzed fairy tales in terms of Freudian psychology in *The Uses of Enchantment* (1976). He discussed the emotional and symbolic importance of fairy tales for children, including traditional tales at one time considered too dark, such as those collected and published by the Brothers Grimm. Bettelheim suggested that traditional fairy tales, with the darkness of abandonment, death, witches, and injuries, allowed children to grapple with their fears in remote, symbolic terms. If they could read and interpret these fairy tales in their own way, he believed, they would get a greater sense of meaning and purpose. Bettelheim thought that by engaging with these socially-evolved stories, children would go through emotional growth that would better prepare them for their own futures. In the U.S., Bettelheim won two major awards for *The Uses of Enchantment*: the National Book Critics Circle Award for Criticism^[8] and the National Book Award in category Contemporary Thought.^[9]

His writings covered a wide range of topics, beginning shortly after he arrived in the United States with an essay on concentration camps and their dynamics. He long had a reputation as an authority on these topics.^[10]

At the end of his life Bettelheim suffered from depression. He appeared to have had difficulties with depression for much of his life.^[10] In 1990, widowed, in failing physical health, and suffering from the effects of a stroke which impaired his mental abilities and paralyzed part of his body, he committed suicide as a result of self-induced asphyxiation by placing a plastic bag over his head.^{[11][12]}

Controversies

Political controversy

Bettelheim became one of the most prominent defenders of Hannah Arendt's book *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. He wrote a positive review for *The New Republic*.^[13] This review prompted a letter from the writer Harry Golden, who alleged that both Bettelheim and Arendt suffered from "an essentially Jewish phenomenon ... self-hatred".^{[14][15]}

Autism controversy

Bettelheim's theories on the causes of autism have been largely discredited, and his reporting rates of cure have been questioned, with critics stating that his patients were not actually suffering from autism.^[16] Bettelheim believed that autism **did not have an organic basis, but resulted when mothers withheld appropriate affection from their children and failed to make a good connection with them. The most extreme expression of this concept suggested that mothers literally did not want their children to exist.** Bettelheim also blamed absent or weak fathers. One of his most famous books, *The Empty Fortress* (1967), contains a complex and detailed explanation of this dynamic in psychoanalytical and psychological terms. He derived his thinking from the qualitative investigation of clinical cases. He also related the world of autistic children to conditions in concentration camps. In *A Good Enough Parent*, published in 1987, he had come to the view that children had considerable resilience and that most parents could be "good enough" to help their children make a good start.^[17]

Bettelheim subscribed to and became a prominent proponent of the "refrigerator mother" theory of autism: the theory that autistic behaviors stem from the emotional frigidity of the children's mothers. He founded the Orthogenic School at the University of Chicago as a residential treatment milieu for such children, whom he felt would benefit from a "parentectomy". This marked the apex of autism viewed as a disorder of parenting.^[18]

Although Bettelheim foreshadowed the modern interest in the causal influence of genetics in the section *Parental Background*, he consistently emphasised nurture over nature. For example: “When at last the once totally frozen affects begin to emerge, and a much richer human personality to evolve, then convictions about the psychogenic nature of the disturbance become stronger still.”; *On Treatability*, p. 412.

The rates of recovery claimed for the Orthogenic School are set out in *Follow-up Data*, with a recovery good enough to be considered a ‘cure’ of 43%., ps. 414–415.

Subsequently, medical research has provided greater understanding of biological basis of autism and other illnesses. Scientists such as Bernard Rimland and Leo Kanner challenged Bettelheim's view of autism by arguing that autism is a neurodevelopmental issue. As late as 2009, the "refrigerator mother" theory retained some prominent supporters,^{[11][19]} including the prominent Irish psychologist Tony Humphreys.^[20] His theory still enjoys widespread support in France.^[21]

Personal controversy

After Bettelheim's suicide in 1990, detractors claimed that Bettelheim exploded in screaming anger at students, and went beyond firm treatment to corporal punishment. Three former patients questioned his work and characterized him as a cruel tyrant. Roberta Carly Redford, a student at the Orthogenic School from age 16 to 23, claims in her book *Crazy: My Seven Years at Bruno Bettelheim's Orthogenic School* that she was "beaten regularly, emotionally abused, and subjected to a variety of humiliations. Bettelheim himself was a key part of this treatment." Other former patients wrote or spoke publicly to tell how much Bettelheim had helped them, so there seemed to be no consensus.^{[22][23][24][25]}

Alida Jatich, who lived at the school from 1966 to 1972 from ages twelve to eighteen, wrote in an initially anonymous April 1990 letter to the *Chicago Reader*, "Bettelheim told the children over and over how lucky they were to be at his school, and that if they didn't do as they were told, they would end up in a state mental asylum where they would be given drugs and shock treatments." She further stated, "I lived in fear of Bettelheim's unpredictable temper tantrums, public beatings, hair pulling, wild accusations and threats and abuse in front of classmates and staff. One minute he could be smiling and joking, the next minute he could be exploding." Ms. Alida Jatich publicly revealed her name and the time she was at the school in another letter a year later.^[26]

In a July 1990 letter to the *Chicago Reader*, a former counselor at the school writing anonymously stated, "At that time, in the late forties, I probably had more experience upon which to assess the adjustment of the children than most of the counselors at the school. By age 22, when I worked there, I had spent fully a third of my life in group living with a variety of youngsters under stress; four years in an orphan home followed by three and a half years in the wartime army. I understood that the stream of human normality was very wide, and that time healed many wounds without human intervention. It amazed me that Bettelheim, a man from another culture, could look at the same child as I and see a 'schizophrenic' while I saw another rambunctious American kid. What did a forty year old Viennese intellectual really know about the inner (or outer for that matter) life of a ten-year old West Side Chicago Irish kid who had no one to care for him?"^[27]

A September 10, 1990, *Newsweek* article stated: "There are indications that at least the local psychiatric community knew exactly what was going on, and did nothing. Chicago analysts scathingly referred to the doctor as 'Beno Brutalheim.'"^[28]

In November 1990, a *Chicago Tribune* article noted that Bertram Cohler, who worked with Bettelheim and briefly headed the school after Bettelheim left, got the idea from Bettelheim that his PhD was in art history, and Jacquelyn Sanders, who worked with Bettelheim for twelve years, also had the same idea. Ralph Tyler, who brought Bettelheim to the University of Chicago first to teach art history and then in 1944 to become the new director of the Orthogenic School, assumed Bettelheim had two PhDs with one being in art history

and the other in psychology. In some of his writings Bettelheim implied that he wrote a dissertation on the philosophy of education. The University of Chicago's official biographical sketch credits Bettelheim with only one PhD and does not specify the field.^[29]

This same *Chicago Tribune* article also contained additional accounts of abusive treatment of child patients at the 'Orthogenic School,' such as:

- "'I lived for years in terror of his beatings, in terror of his footsteps in the dorms--in abject, animal terror,'"
 - 'would pull an adolescent girl out of a shower, then hit and berate her in front of dormitory mates,'
 - 'another former student, Roberta Redford, recalls being summoned from a toilet stall for a similar thrashing,'
 - 'Orthogenic School patient Charles Pekow had allergies, but was not allowed to take medication, even when overcome by asthmatic attacks. Bettelheim thought allergies were psychologically induced—a theory largely laid to rest by subsequent medical research,' and
 - 'Richard Younker, a photojournalist in Chicago, remembers how he and a dormitory mate, both Cub Scouts, decorated their wall with a plaque illustrating how to tie knots. "Dr. B said to the whole dorm: "Look, the two boys who are so twisted up inside show the whole world by putting knots on the wall,"' Younker says.'

In her April 1991 letter to the *Chicago Reader*, Alida Jatich wrote, "I suspect that the main reason why it's so hard to talk about the Bettelheim tragedy is this: in one way or another, he induced all of us to act in ways that we feel sick to think about now. This includes kids, parents, staff members, students and faculty at the University of Chicago, colleagues, and so forth."^[30]

Two biographies published in the 1990s revealed evidence that Bettelheim had lied about or exaggerated many parts of his background. These included wartime experiences, family life, academic credentials and the use of corporal punishment at the Orthogenic School. While Richard Pollak's biography^{[31][32]} expressed a strongly negative view of Bettelheim, that by Nina Sutton^[33] offered a different interpretation of some of the material. Gaps emerged between the public reputation Bettelheim had established in the US and some of the facts revealed during this controversy, but some commentators made charges that related to Bettelheim's personality.^{[10][23][34]}

Popular culture

In 1974, a four-part series featuring Bruno Bettelheim and directed by Daniel Carlin appeared on French television — *Portrait de Bruno Bettelheim*.

Woody Allen included Bettelheim as himself in a cameo in the film *Zelig* (1983).

A BBC *Horizon* documentary about Bettelheim was televised in 1986.^[35]

Two former patients wrote about their experiences at the Orthogenics School, one in a novel and one in a memoir. Tom Lyons' novel, *The Pelican and After*, appeared in 1983. Stephen Eliot's memoir, *Not the Thing I Was: Thirteen Years at Bruno Bettelheim's Orthogenics School*, was published in 2003.

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35. ^ <http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=-619953871843503232>

External links

- Missing the Message: A Critique of Bettelheim's Analysis of *The Jinny and the Fisherman* (<http://alexfiles.com/jinny.shtml>)
- Reviews of Dr. Roland Kaufhold's Bettelheim, Ekstein, Federn (<http://www.suesske.de/kaufhold-1.htm>) (in German)
- Thomas Aichhorn, *Essays über Bruno Bettelheim* (http://www.suesske.de/buch_fisher.htm) (in German)

- Bruno Bettelheim (<http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0079291/>) at the Internet Movie Database
- The Edith Buxbaum Journal (<http://www.edithbuxbaum.com/HamidaBosmajian.html>) by Roland Kaufhold
- Bruno Bettelheim 1903–1990 (http://www.ibe.unesco.org/fileadmin/user_upload/archive/publications/ThinkersPdf/bettelhe.pdf)
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