Maternal Negativity & Child Maltreatment

Evolutionary Perspectives

Royal College of Psychiatry EPSIG

October 29th, 2021

Daniela F. Sieff, PhD

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Maternal Maltreatment

"[A]ll types of physical and/or emotional ill-treatment… which results in actual or potential harm to the child's health, survival, development or dignity in the context of a relationship of responsibility, trust or power."

World Heath Organisation, 2020

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Unconditional

Maternal Love

Eyvind Early - Mother & Child (Wikiart)

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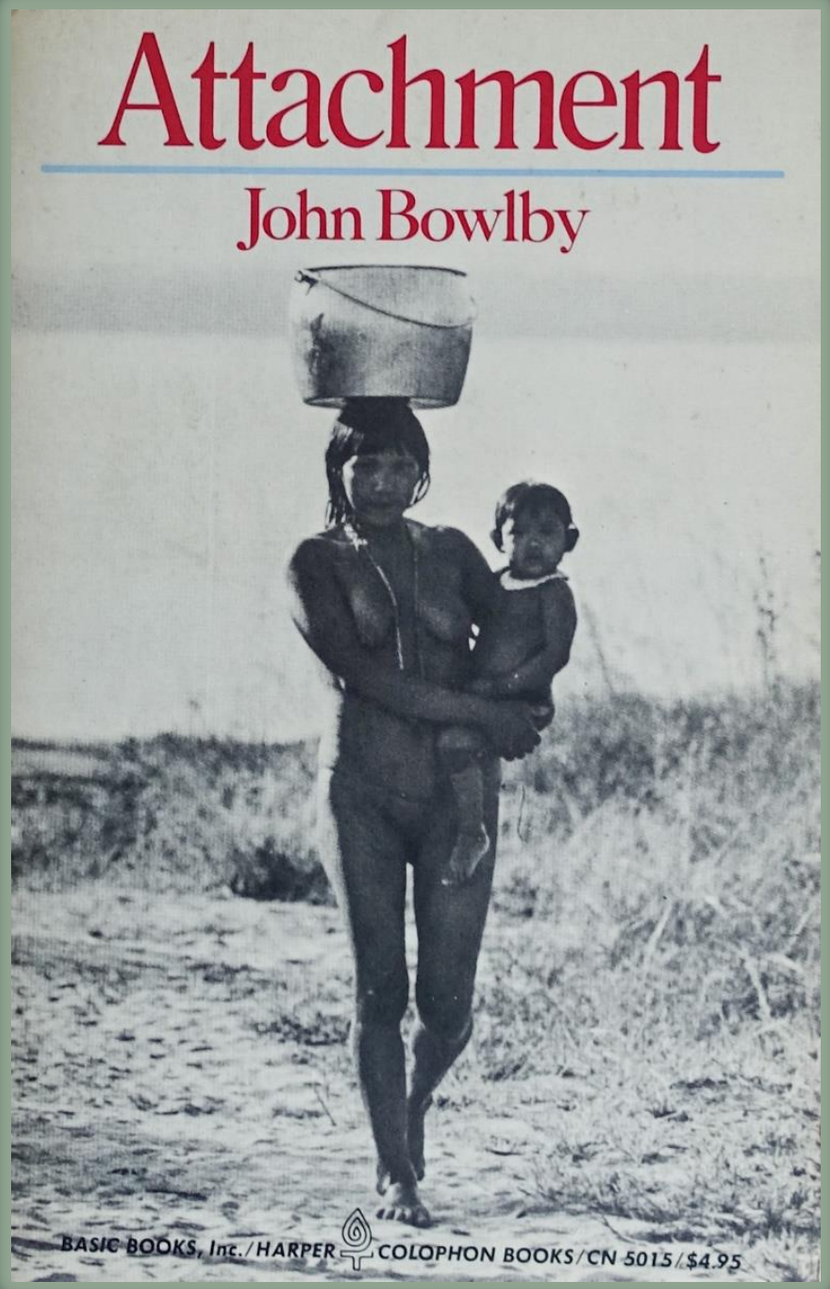

‘ For ... mothers to love babies is taken for granted as intrinsic to human nature. As a result, whenever ... these standards become markedly different from the norm.... all are disposed to judge the condition as pathological. ’

Bowlby 1969/1997, p.242

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Individual Variation

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Trade-offs

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Child Mortality

© Marcel Clemens / Shutterstock – Mummified children

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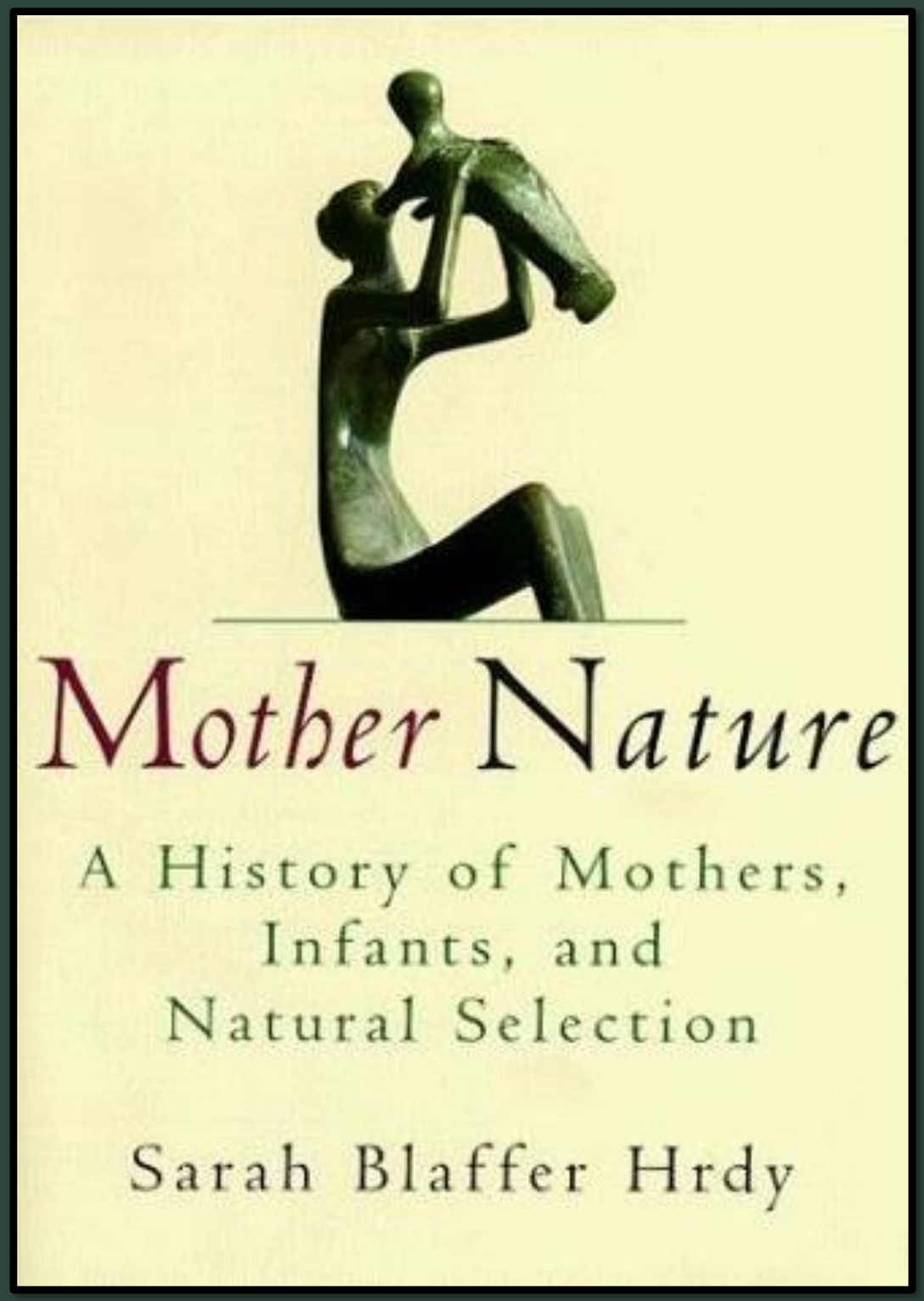

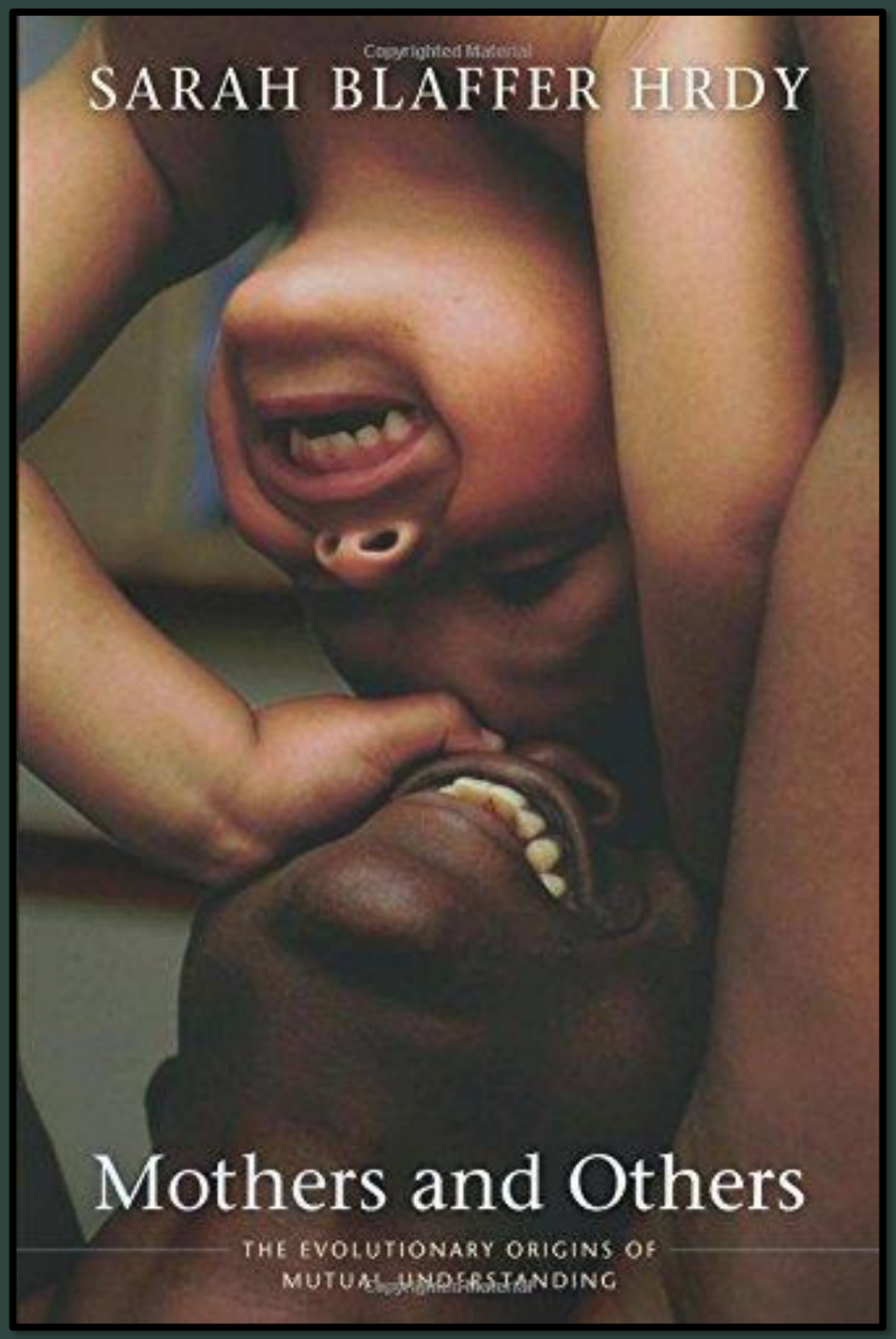

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Continuum

Maternal Feelings and Behaviour

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1. *Mother's resources*

2. *Children's characteristics*

3. *Social learning of mothering*

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Maternal Resources

1) Nutrition & Economic

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Trade-offs

Mother & Child

New Africa / Shutterstock.com

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Mother and child - Oswaldo Guayasamin (wikiart)

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Trade-offs

Siblings

Mother and children (1911) Max Weber (Wikiart)

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Birth Spacing

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Throwing baby to the wolves

Charles Michel Geoffroy, 1840

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Older children at risk

The Children of the Poor - c1875. Artist: T Cobb

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How is this relevant today?

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Maternal Resources

11) Social

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Children's Characteristics

Health & Robustness

Mother with sick child (1878) Vasily Perov

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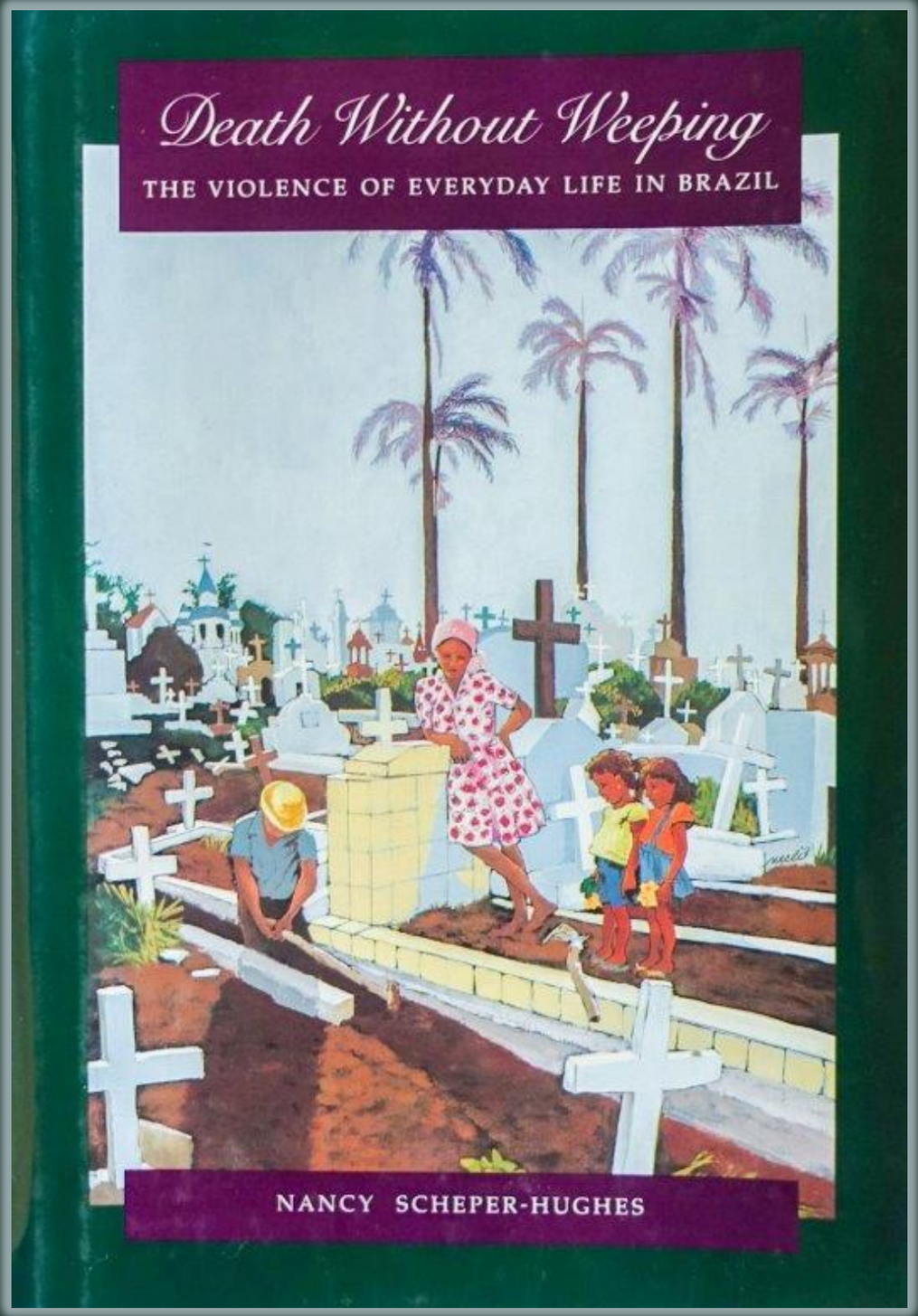

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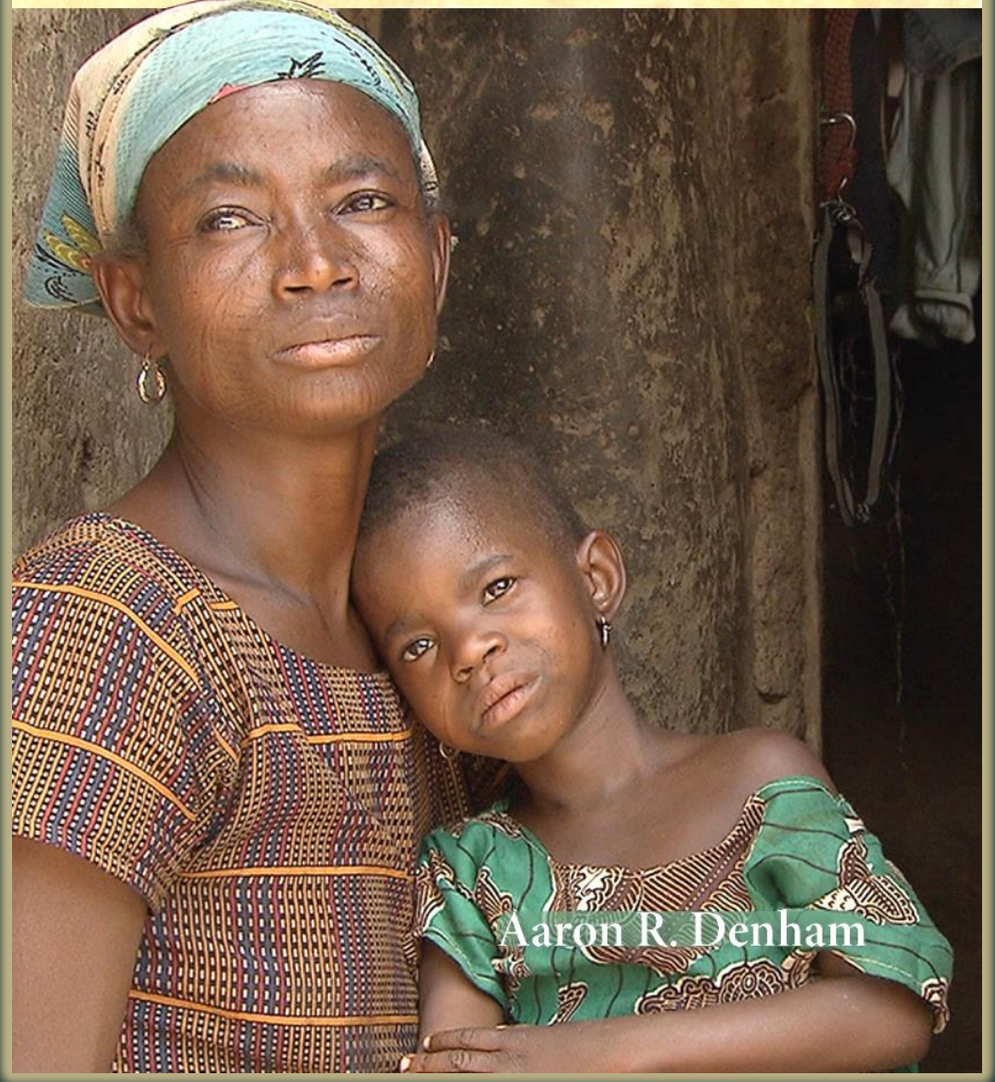
Spirit Children

ILLNESS, POVERTY, AND INFANTICIDE IN NORTHERN GHANA



Aaron R. Denham

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Changelings

Changelings by Henry Matthew Brock,© Welcome Library, London

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Child Mortality

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Social Learning

‘Any learning
that is facilitated
by observing or
interacting with
another individual.’

Hoppitt & Laland, 2013

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Narrow learning opportunities

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Maternal Maltreatment

1. *Mother's resources*
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Insight I

Maternal behaviour evolved to be sensitive to circumstances

Toxic Shame

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Prevention

© Rone - Homewrecker

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Insight II

Maternal behaviour evolved to be shaped by social learning

CroMary/ Shutterstock

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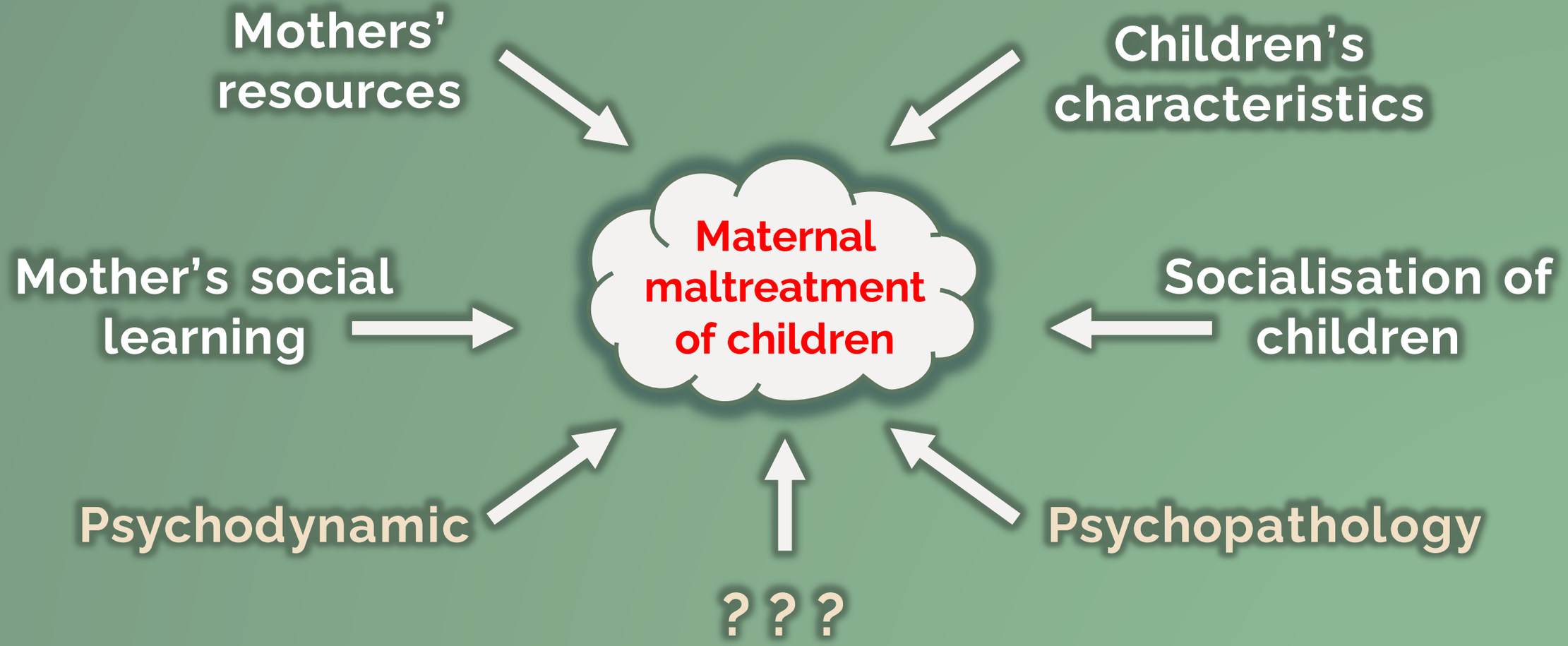
Insight III

Maternal behaviour emerges from many intersecting factors

Maternal Maltreatment of Children

Possible contributing factors



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Conclusion

Venus of Dolni, 29,000-25,000 BCE

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