



Media representations of early human development: Protecting, feeding and loving the developing brain



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ABSTRACT

The public profile of neurodevelopmental research has expanded in recent years. This paper applies social representations theory to explore how early brain development was represented in the UK print media in the first decade of the 21st century. A thematic analysis was performed on 505 newspaper articles published between 2000 and 2010 that discussed early brain development. Media coverage centred around concern with 'protecting' the prenatal brain (identifying threats to foetal neurodevelopment), 'feeding' the infant brain (indicating the patterns of nutrition that enhance brain development) and 'loving' the young child's brain (elucidating the developmental significance of emotionally nurturing family environments). The media focused almost exclusively on the role of parental action in promoting optimal neurodevelopment, rarely acknowledging wider structural, cultural or political means of supporting child development. The significance of parental care was intensified by deterministic interpretations of critical periods, which implied that inappropriate parental input would produce profound and enduring neurobiological impairments. Neurodevelopmental research was also used to promulgate normative judgements concerning the acceptability of certain gender roles and family contexts. The paper argues that media representations of neurodevelopment stress parental responsibility for shaping a child's future while relegating the contributions of genetic or wider societal factors, and examines the consequences of these representations for society and family life.

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Introduction

Research in the area of early human development has implications far beyond the scientific sphere, impinging on domains such as parenting, education, health and welfare policy. The assimilation of scientific conceptions of child development into such domains may shape perceptions, assumptions, opinions and practices. It is therefore important to map how developmental research travels into the public domain and is represented in 'real-world' social contexts. This paper examines how early brain development is represented in the public sphere, drawing on a thematic analysis of media coverage of neurodevelopmental research.

The rise of the neuroscientific frame

Societal concern about the implications of early experiences for later developmental outcomes is not a new phenomenon, stretching back (at least) to the popularisation of psychoanalysis

and attachment theory (Wall, 2010). Recent times, however, have seen a shift in the focus of popular conceptualisations of the significance of early development. Since the 1990s the public profile of the field of neuroscience has expanded dramatically, with brain research increasingly recruited as a point of reference in media and policy debate (Dumit, 2004; O'Connor, Rees, & Joffe, 2012; Pitts-Taylor, 2010; Racine, Waldman, Rosenberg, & Illes, 2010; Rose, 2007). Neuroscientific knowledge has been positioned as directly relevant to a wide range of social domains, including law, marketing, economics, ethics and politics (Abi-Rached, 2008; Frazzetto & Anker, 2009; O'Connell et al., 2011). One domain in which the voice of neuroscience has been particularly conspicuous is childrearing: over the last two decades public dialogue concerning child development has increasingly incorporated a neuroscientific dimension (Maxwell & Racine, 2012; Nadesan, 2002; Thornton, 2011; Wall, 2010).

This neuroscientific framing of development holds that early experiences inscribe themselves on a child's brain, and it is this organ that carries childhood influences forward to adulthood. This explicit preoccupation with the brain has diffused widely through public discussion of child development, with many recent best-selling parenting books - e.g. Gerhardt's (2004) *Why Love Matters: How*

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*Affection Shapes a Baby's Brain, James' (2010) How Not to F*** Them Up: The First Three Years* and *Leach's (2010) The Essential First Year* - premised on the idea that understanding the neurobiology of development is essential for promoting optimal cognitive, emotional and social outcomes. The focus on the 'neuro' has also penetrated social policy, fuelling support for an 'early intervention' approach to a host of societal problems such as teenage pregnancy, crime and substance abuse (see Fig. 1) that purportedly result from neurobiologically suboptimal early environments (Allen, 2011).

Scientific knowledge in society

The position of scientific information in ordinary social life is a central focus of social representations theory (SRT), a social

psychological theory that analyses how information produced in the 'reified universe' of science is transformed into the everyday, common-sense knowledge that shapes social attitudes, practices, policies and beliefs (Moscovici, 2008). The concern of SRT is not with evaluating the accuracy of common-sense understandings relative to expert knowledge, but rather with documenting how common-sense representations of scientific information influence ordinary social life. Science, from the point of setting research questions to selecting findings of interest, is deeply influenced by cultural values (Barnes, Bloor, & Henry, 1996; Latour & Woolgar, 1986). Further layers of meaning are acquired as scientific knowledge moves from the laboratory into the dense networks of worldviews that saturate the public sphere (Farr, 1993). SRT holds that making sense of new ideas in society hinges on two processes:

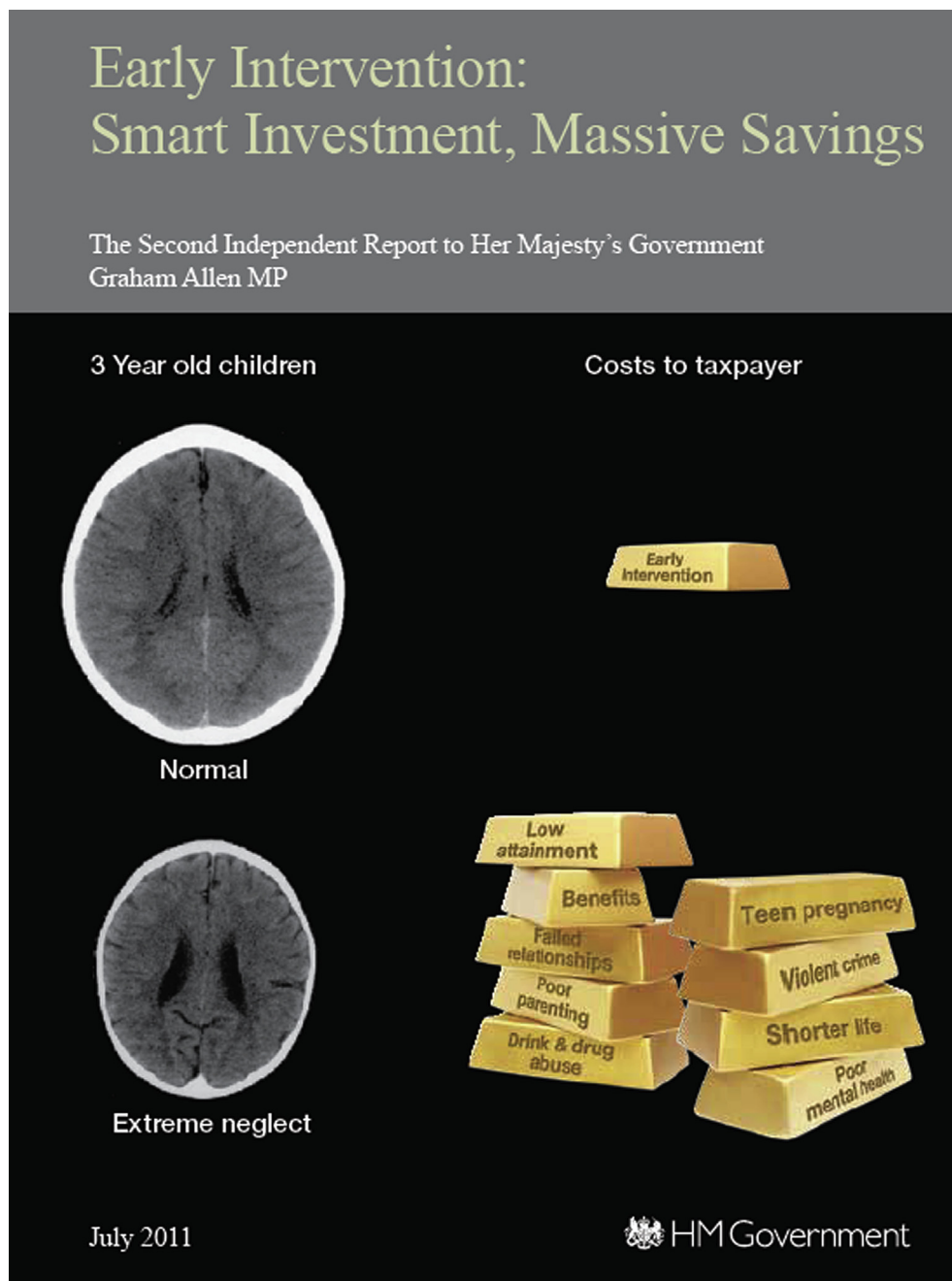


Fig. 1. Front cover of the governmental report *Early Intervention: Smart Investment, Massive Savings* (Allen, 2011).

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