

Mike Rutter 1933 – 2021

**Obituary**

**By Uta Frith and Francesca Happé**

**9<sup>th</sup> November 2021**

Professor Sir Michael Rutter transformed Child Psychiatry from a dismal and incoherent state into a scientifically based discipline. His legacy includes his huge body of academic writing, and generations of child psychiatrists he has influenced directly and indirectly. He singlehandedly improved the training of psychiatrists worldwide through his continuously revised Handbooks. His work provided the first evidence of the genetic basis of autism, which turbocharged the field to be one of today's most active areas of research in neurodevelopmental disorders. The diagnostic criteria and the instruments now used to diagnose autism have been developed under his authoritative guidance. He was a founding Fellow of the Academy of Medical Sciences and Academia Europaea, a Fellow of the Royal Society and Honorary Fellow of the British Academy. He was knighted in 1992 for his contribution to the field of Child Psychiatry.

He will also be remembered for his population studies of children's educational attainments and mental health on the Isle of Wight and in London. These led to policy changes in clinical services and in education. He led ground-breaking work that addressed the nature/nurture question with a natural experiment, created when Romanian orphans were adopted into caring homes after varying lengths of extreme institutional deprivation. He personally interviewed the children as they grew up; many showed a remarkable recovery. This confirmed his own theory and earlier work on resilience, without downplaying the long-term consequences of early neglect. In his 1972 book, 'Maternal Deprivation Reassessed', he countered prevailing views, and effectively liberated future generations of working mothers.

Michael Llewellyn Rutter was born in 1933 in Lebanon, where his father was a doctor. Having moved to Wolverhampton, in 1940 his parents sent 7-year-old Mike and his sister to live with foster families in North America for four years, because of fears of a German invasion. Mike spoke fondly about his foster family; he denied any link between his own parental separation and his later academic work on maternal attachment. He trained in medicine at the Universities of Birmingham and London. In 1973 he became the first Professor of Child Psychiatry in the UK, at the Institute of Psychiatry, and in 1984 he established the MRC Child Psychiatry Research Unit there. In 1994 he founded the MRC Social, Genetic and Developmental Research Centre at the now Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology and Neuroscience, and attracted a formidable team of world-renowned researchers to study nature-nurture interplay in typical and atypical development. He remained an active member of this Centre until only a few months before his death, when he retired after 55 years at the Institute. He produced over 400 academic papers and 40 books.

His interest in child psychology and psychiatry was encouraged by Sir Aubrey Lewis when Mike Rutter trained at the Maudsley Hospital. He began to question vague and woolly, largely psychoanalytically influenced, ideas about child development. His critical stance drove his interest in the science of typical and atypical development. Diverging from most clinicians at the time, he adopted rigorous empirical methods of testing children to get answers about possible causes of developmental disorders. This led him to critique the idea of the central role of mother-infant attachment and anticipated his later search for genetic and

other biological causes of developmental disorders. His interests spanned a wide variety of such conditions including dyslexia, ADHD and autism.

In the 1960s and 70s mothers were widely blamed for causing their child's autism. Mike Rutter had the idea that studying the occurrence of autism in twins could support or refute the role of parenting versus genetics. The evidence was collected by Susan Folstein a trainee psychiatrist from the US, who visited 21 twin pairs across the UK, in which (at least) one twin had been diagnosed with autism. Their autism symptoms and their cognitive abilities showed a stunning degree of concordance (82%) in the identical twin pairs, but not in the nonidentical twin pairs. This remarkable finding – which Mike said he had not expected - fired up his optimism to find the 'handful' of genes that cause autism. Always ready to be proved wrong, Mike was fast to recognise that hundreds of genes are likely implicated, and that the causal paths from gene to brain to mind and to behaviour are far too entangled to arrive at a single, definitive explanation.

The importance of the first discovery of a genetic basis for autism in 1977 cannot be exaggerated; it smashed the very harmful 'refrigerator mother' theory and created the momentum for large scale population studies using genetically sensitive designs and constantly improving methodology and technology.

Mike Rutter had the great satisfaction of seeing the Centre he founded flourish, not from a distance, but from within. He had an office next to one of us (FH) and proved an inspirational senior colleague and mentor to many. He received over 20 honorary degrees and many awards. Characteristically he donated one such recent prize to support several younger colleagues' work.

From personal experience, we can say that we were both deeply influenced by Sir Michael's presence. When one of us (UF) trained as a clinical psychologist in the 1960s she was first introduced to problems of development by attending his ward rounds. His rigorous approach sparked her interest in autism. She would not have embarked on her lifelong career of research without meeting him. Although already a formidable authority in the medical establishment, and a feared critic, he was accessible and encouraging to young students.

Competitive and combative in his academic work, as in his much-loved tennis, Mike could be daunting in debate. He worked incredibly hard – supported by and occasionally co-authoring with, his wife Marjorie - and sometimes overlooked the personal demands that kept others from meeting his strict standards. However, he was famously gentle with his clinical patients, and increasingly kind and avuncular in his later years.

Sir Michael defined the discipline of Child Psychiatry and changed our conception of autism, attachment and development. He was a giant without equals.

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