

DEVELOPMENTAL PSYCHOLOGY

Topic 3: Developing an identity

Content: Attachment.

Key Idea: Identity is the result of an interaction between biological, cognitive and social factors.

KEY STUDY: *Ainsworth & Bell (1970). Attachment, exploration, and separation: illustrated by the behaviour of one-year-olds in a strange situation.*

Background

Identified three different attachment styles (secure, insecure-avoidant, insecure-resistant /ambivalent) and concluded that attachment style can be seen in the behaviour exhibited by caregiver and child with the majority of children showing a secure and positive relationship with the caregiver.

Aim

To investigate attachment styles between a young infant and his/her caregiver.

Participants

56 white middle-class infants from the USA, aged 49-51 weeks.

Procedure

A controlled observation lasting a total of 20 minutes in which the following procedure was set up and then observed by Ainsworth:

1. The mother enters the room with her baby and sits down. The room contains interesting toys but is unfamiliar to the baby. (i.e. it is a *strange situation*).
2. A stranger enters, talks to the mother and then approaches the baby with a toy.
3. The mother leaves quietly. The stranger attempts to interact with the infant. If the baby shows distress the stranger attempts to comfort them.
4. The mother returns and greets the infant. The stranger leaves. The mother then tries to engage the baby in play and then she leaves, saying goodbye to the baby.
5. The baby is left alone.
6. The stranger enters and tries to play with and speak to the baby. If the baby is upset the stranger will offer comfort.
7. The mother returns, greets the baby and picks them up. The stranger leaves quietly.

The observed behavioural categories included separation anxiety (signs of distress from the baby when the mother leaves); stranger anxiety (signs of distress when the stranger attempts to engage with the child); proximity-seeking and exploration (use of the mother as a secure base from which to confidently explore the environment); reunion behaviour (behaviour of the baby when the mother re-enters the room).

PSYCHOLOGY SORTED: KEY RESEARCH TO SUPPORT STUDENTS AND TEACHERS

BOOK 2 – APPLIED PSYCHOLOGY

Results

Ainsworth categorised the attachment styles she observed as follows:

- **Insecure-avoidant attachment (Type A) - seen in 10-15% of strange situation studies:** Behaviours associated with this type of attachment include the child showing very little interest in the mother with little or no separation anxiety or joy when reunited. Stranger anxiety is also absent, in fact the child may actually show preference for the stranger over the mother. Children within this attachment style may grow into adults who are 'disconnected' from life, who struggle to show empathy and who cannot sustain intimate relationships.
- **Secure attachment (Type B) - seen in 70% of strange situation studies:** Behaviours associated with this type of attachment include a dependence on the mother, seeing her as a secure base, but still having the confidence to explore the environment. There is separation anxiety but the child calms down quickly when reunited with the mother: the child definitely prefers the mother to the stranger and will only be comforted by the mother. This is a highly healthy attachment type: both mother and child benefit from it. Securely attached children generally grow up to be well-adjusted, sociable and productive adults according to attachment theory.
- **Insecure-resistant/ambivalent attachment (Type C) - seen in 10-15% of strange situation studies:** Behaviours associated with this type of attachment include an unwillingness to explore the immediate environment, staying close to the mother, clingy behaviour even when the mother is in the room and extreme separation anxiety (they may not calm down even during the reunion phase). They appear angry as well as anxious and they do not seem to see the mother as a secure base.

Conclusion

Attachment style can be seen in the behaviour exhibited by caregiver and child with the majority of children showing a secure and positive relationship with the caregiver.

Evaluation of Ainsworth & Bell (1970)

Strengths

- ✓ This research uses controlled observation with a standardised procedure, which makes it replicable; plus the use of measurable quantitative data enhances the study's reliability. The use of qualitative observations also adds rich, in-depth data to the results.
- ✓ The study has been replicated many times with similar results, thus validating Ainsworth's categorisation of specific attachment styles.

Limitations

- X Ecological validity is low as the study took place in a lab setting that could have resulted in artificial or out-of-character behaviour from infant or mother.
- X Attachment is a complex and multi-layered phenomenon so it cannot be definitively measured using one 20-minute sample of mother-infant behaviour.
- X Using stranger anxiety as a measure of attachment is ethnocentric and does not allow for cultures where stranger-care is more common.

Reference

Ainsworth, M. D. S., & Bell, S. M. (1970). Attachment, exploration, and separation: illustrated by the behaviour of one-year-olds in a strange situation. *Child Development*, pp.49-67.