**MARY AINSWORTH & THE “STRANGE SITUATION”**

**What is Attachment?**

Attachment is a special emotional relationship that involves an exchange of comfort, care, and pleasure. The roots of research on attachment began with Freud's theories about love, but another researcher is usually credited as the father of attachment theory.

Psychologist John Bowlby devoted extensive research to the concept of attachment, describing it as a "lasting psychological connectedness between human beings." Bowlby shared the psychoanalytic view that early experiences in childhood have an important influence on development and behavior later in life. Our early attachment styles are established in childhood through the infant/caregiver relationship.

In addition to this, Bowlby believed that attachment had an evolutionary component; it aids in survival. "The propensity to make strong emotional bonds to particular individuals [is] a basic component of human nature" (Bowlby, 1988, 3).

**The Strange Situation**

During the 1970s, psychologist Mary Ainsworth further expanded upon Bowlby's groundbreaking work in her now-famous "Strange Situation" study. The study involved observing children between the ages of 12 to 18 months responding to a situation in which they were briefly left alone and then reunited with their mother.

To test a child’s "attachment style," researchers put the child and her mother alone in an experimental room. The room had toys or other interesting things in it, and the mother let the child explore the room on her own.

After the child had time to explore, a stranger entered the room and talked with the mother. Then the stranger shifted attention to the child. As the stranger approached the child, the mother snuck away.

After several minutes, the mother returned and comforted the child.

**How children respond to the Strange Situation**

As suggested by its name, the Strange Situation was designed to present children with an unusual, but not overwhelmingly frightening, experience (Ainsworth et al 1978). When a child undergoes the Strange Situation, researchers are interested in two things:

1. How much the child explores the room on his own, and

2. How the child responds to the return of his mother

Typically, a child’s response to the Strange Situation follows one of four patterns.

Securely-attached children: Free exploration and happiness upon mother’s return

The securely-attached child explores the room freely when his mom is present. He may be distressed when his mother leaves, and he explores less when she is absent. But he is happy when she returns. If he cries, he approaches his mother and holds her tightly. He is comforted by being held, and, once comforted, he is soon ready to resume his independent exploration of the world. His mother is responsive to his needs. As a result, he knows he can depend on her when he is under stress (Ainsworth et al 1978).

Parents of securely attached children tend to play more with their children. Additionally, these parents react more quickly to their children's needs and are generally more responsive to their children than the parents of insecurely attached children. Studies have shown that securely attached children are more empathetic during later stages of childhood. These children are also described as less disruptive, less aggressive, and more mature than children with ambivalent or avoidant attachment styles.

As adults, those who are securely attached tend to have trusting, long-term relationships. Other key characteristics of securely attached individuals include having high self-esteem, enjoying intimate relationships, seeking out social support, and an ability to share feelings with other people.

In general, secure attachments are associated with sensitive, responsive parenting.

Avoidant-insecure children: Little exploration and little emotional response to mother

The avoidant-insecure child doesn’t explore much, and he doesn’t show much emotion when his mother leaves. He shows no preference for his mother over a complete stranger. And, when his mother returns, he tends to avoid or ignore her (Ainsworth et al 1978).

Children with avoidant attachment styles tend to avoid parents and caregivers. This avoidance often becomes especially pronounced after a period of absence. These children might not reject attention from a parent, but neither do they seek our comfort or contact. Children with an avoidant attachment show no preference between a parent and a complete stranger.

As adults, those with an avoidant attachment tend to have difficulty with intimacy and close relationships. These individuals do not invest much emotion in relationships and experience little distress when a relationship ends. They often avoid intimacy by using excuses. Other common characteristics include a failure to support partners during stressful times and an inability to share feelings, thoughts, and emotions with partners.

Avoidantly-attached children tend to have parent(s) who are emotionally unavailable or rejecting. In theory, the child learns that his parent(s) will not respond to his emotional needs. As a result, he gives up on trying to signal his needs.

Resistant-insecure (or “ambivalent") children: Little exploration, great separation anxiety, and ambivalent response to mother upon her return

Like the avoidant child, the resistant-insecure child doesn’t explore much on her own. But unlike the avoidant child, the resistant child is wary of strangers and is very distressed when her mother leaves. When the mother returns, the resistant child is ambivalent. Although she wants to re-establish close proximity to her mother, she is also resentful—even angry—at her mother for leaving her in the first place. In some cases, the child might passively reject the parent by refusing comfort, or may openly display direct aggression toward the parent. As a result, the resistant child may reject her mother’s advances (Ainsworth et al 1978).

As these children grow older, teachers often describe them as clingy and over-dependent.

As adults, those with an ambivalent attachment style often feel reluctant about becoming close to others and worry that their partner does not reciprocate their feelings. This leads to frequent breakups, often because the relationship feels cold and distant. These individuals feel especially distraught after the end of a relationship. Cassidy and Berlin described another pathological pattern where ambivalently attached adults cling to young children as a source of security (1994).

Resistant-insecure children may have parent(s) who are more emotionally demonstrative. However—according to popular theory—these parents tend to be inconsistent, and they aren’t particularly sensitive. They offer comfort on their own terms, rather than according to a child’s needs.

Disorganized-insecure children: Little exploration and confused response to mother

The disorganized child may exhibit a mix of avoidant and resistant behaviors. But the main theme is one of confusion and anxiety. (Main and Solomon 1986). Disorganized-insecure children are at risk for a variety of behavioral and developmental problems.

These children are described as displaying dazed behavior, sometimes seeming either confused or apprehensive in the presence of a caregiver.

Main and Solomon (1986) proposed that inconsistent behavior on the part of parents might be a contributing factor in this style of attachment. In later research, Main and Hesse (1990) argued that parents who act as figures of both fear and reassurance to a child contribute to a disorganized attachment style. Because the child feels both comforted and frightened by the parent, confusion results.

Studies suggest that disorganized attachment is linked with frightening maternal behavior. Disorganized attachment may also be associated with mothers who are themselves frightened (Main and Hess 1990). In addition, children who are abused or neglected are more likely to suffer from disorganized attachment (Barnett et al 1999).

**What about cultural differences?**

International studies of the Strange Situation

In studies recognizing three attachment classifications (secure, avoidant-insecure, and resistant-insecure), about 21% of American infants have been classified as avoidant-insecure, 65% as secure, and 14% as resistant-insecure. The same distribution is found when researchers pool the results of studies conducted worldwide (van Ijzendoorn and Kroonenberg 1988).

However, there are local variations. A study conducted in Bielfeld, Germany has reported relatively high rates of avoidantly-attached infants (52%--Grossman et al 1981). And research conducted elsewhere--in Indonesia, Japan, and Israel—has reported relatively high rates of resistantly-attached infants (Zevalkink et al 1999; van IJzendoorn and Kroonenberg 1988).

Studies recognizing a fourth classification--disorganized attachment--also vary by local population. The prevalence of disorganized attachment among middle class, white American children is about 12% (Main and Solomon 1990). Among the children of American adolescent mothers, the rate is over 31% (Broussard 1995).

Disorganized attachment is also relatively common among the Dogon of Mali (~25%, True et al 2001), infants living on the outskirts of Cape Town, South Africa (~26%, Tomlinson et al 2005) and undernourished children in Chile (Waters and Valenzuela 1999).

Why local populations differ

In some cases, these outcomes may reflect differences in the way infants perceive the Strange Situation, rather than real differences in attachment.

For instance, Israeli children raised in collective farm settlements (called kibbutzim) rarely meet strangers. As a result, their high rates of resistant behavior during the Strange Situation test may have had more to do with heightened fear than with the nature of their maternal bonds (Sagi et al 1991).

Similarly, the Japanese results were probably skewed by the facts that Japanese infants are virtually never separated from their mothers (Miyake et al 1995). Nor do Japanese people value independence and independent exploration to the same degree that Westerners do, with the result that otherwise securely-attached babies may explore less (Rothbaum et al 2000).

But in other cases, results of the Strange Situation may reveal genuine cultural differences in the way that children have attached to their mothers. For example, researchers analyzing a variety of attachment studies concluded that German and American infants perceived the Strange Situation in similar ways (Sagi et al 1991). So the relatively high incidence of avoidant-insecure attachments in Germany may reflect real differences in the way that some Germans approach parenting.

**Has attachment research overemphasized the *mother*-infant bond? Some evolutionary considerations.**

One criticism of the Strange Situation procedure is that it has focused almost exclusively on the mother-infant bond.

In part, this may reflect a cultural bias. Many people who study attachment come from industrialized societies where mothers usually bear most of the responsibility for childcare.

But in some families, fathers spend a great deal of time with their children.

And in some parts of the world, grandmothers, aunts, uncles, and siblings make substantial--even crucial--contributions to childcare.

In fact, among some modern-day foragers, like the Aka and Efe of central Africa, infants spend the much of the day being held by someone other than their mothers (Hewlett 1991; Konner 2005).

Such evidence has inspired evolutionary anthropologists to “rethink...assumptions about the exclusivity of the mother-infant relationship" (Hrdy 2005).

For instance, anthropologist Sarah Blaffer Hrdy has argued that non-maternal caregivers may have played an important role in human evolution (Hrdy 2005). When infants have multiple caregivers, their mothers bear less of the cost of child-rearing. Mothers can afford to have more children, and their children can afford to grow up more slowly.

Interestingly, these life-history traits—higher fertility and an extended childhood—distinguish humans from our closest living relatives, the great apes (Smuts et al 1989). And ape mothers—unlike many human mothers—must raise their kids without helpers.

So perhaps “allocare" (non-maternal childcare) gave our ancestors the edge—allowing us to reproduce at faster rates than our nonhuman cousins.

If so, it seems doubtful that human babies are “designed" for exclusive attachments to a single, maternal caregiver.

While this point doesn’t detract from the importance of Strange Situation studies, it reminds us that infants can bond with more than one person.