

ATTACHMENT - THE STRANGE SITUATION - AINSWORTH & BELL

Aim: to produce a method for assessing the quality of attachment by placing an infant in a situation of mild stress (to encourage the infant to seek comfort) and of novelty (to encourage exploration behaviour). Both comfort-seeking and exploration behaviour are indicators of the quality of attachment.

Procedures:

- ❑ About 100 middle-class American infants and their mothers took part in this study
- ❑ A method of controlled observation was developed. This involved observing infants with their mothers during a set of predetermined activities (this is known as the strange situation). All the episodes of the strange situation, except the first one, took three minutes.
- ❑ Observers recorded the infants' and mothers' behaviours, especially noting the following:
 - separation anxiety: the unease the infant showed when left by the caregiver
 - the infant's willingness to explore
 - stranger anxiety: the infant's response to the presence of a stranger
 - reunion behaviour: the way the caregiver was greeted on return

Findings:

- ❑ The observational record led Ainsworth and Bell to classify the infants into three broad groups:
- ❑ Type B: Securely attached (66%) - one group of infants tended to explore the unfamiliar room; they were subdued when their mother left and greeted her positively when she returned. The infants showed moderate avoidance of the stranger, although were friendly when the mother was present. The mothers were described as sensitive.
- ❑ Type A: Avoidant Insecure (22%) - A second group did not orientate to their mother while investigating the toys and room; they did not seem concerned by her absence and showed little interest in her when she returned. These infants also avoided the stranger, but not as strongly as they avoided the mother on her return. It was observed that these mothers sometimes ignored their infants.
- ❑ Type C: Resistant Insecure (12%) - A third group showed intense distress, particularly when their mother was absent, but they rejected her when she returned. These infants showed ambivalent behaviour towards the stranger, similar to the pattern of resistance and interest shown to the mother on her return. These mothers appeared to behave ambivalently towards their infants.

Conclusions:

- ❑ This study shows that there are significant individual differences between infants
- ❑ It also shows that most American children are securely attached
- ❑ There appears to be a distinct association between the mothers' behaviour and the infants' attachment type, which suggests that mothers' behaviour may be important in determining attachment type.

Criticisms:

- ❑ It would be unreasonable to make generalisations about all infant behaviour on the basis of this sample. The study and its findings are restricted to middle-class American infants, i.e. are culturally biased.
- ❑ In another study, Main and Cassidy (1988) identified a further group of children; this classification group is referred to as disorganised (Type D). These children show inconsistent behaviour, confusion and indecision. They also tend to freeze or show stereotyped behaviours such as rocking.