

According to Ainsworth how does attachment develop?

According to Mary Ainsworth (1989) an attachment is an affectional bond which is a “relatively long enduring tie in which the partner is important as a unique individual (and where there) is a desire to maintain closeness to the partner”

Ainsworth argued that attachment isn't an inherited behaviour (nature), but took the view that attachment is a learned process (nurture). She agreed to the view put forward by the behaviourists to explain how all behaviour is acquired, known as the learning theory. The learning theory is based around two principles of conditioning; these are classical conditioning and operant conditioning. Classical conditioning states that the pleasure the child gets from food is reflected on to the mother, so attachment is formed. Operant conditioning goes further by saying recognises that the mother can help relieve the discomfort associated with hunger, the baby wants to retain its closeness to the mother for this reason.

The learning theory supported by behaviourists and Ainsworth has opposition. Shaffer and Emerson found in 1964 that less than half infants actually became attached to their 'feeder'. In another study by Harlow and Harlow they concluded that attachment was not solely based on the supply of food.

Bowlby's theory (1969) proposed the complete opposite that attachment was innate (nurture). He suggested that attachment was important for survival and both caregiver and infant have these innate tendencies to form an attachment that serves to increase their chances of survival.

Another view believed by psychoanalytic psychologists states that an infant becomes attached due to the person their being attached to being the source of food, comfort, warmth and a general source of satisfying needs. This view also states that unhealthy attachments can develop when the child is deprived or gains too much of this attention such as food or oral pleasure.

Ainsworth (1974) proposed a caregiver's sensitivity hypothesis that concluded that the type of attachment depends on the caregiver's warm and loving responsiveness and supposed that secure attachment was the result of mothers being sensitive to their children. This result was concluded through a procedure known as 'the strange situation' which is used to discover and measure the quality of attachment.

Ainsworth worked with Bell (1970) and assessed about 100 middle class American infants and their mothers using 'the strange situation' this is a method of controlled observation involving observing infants with their mothers during a set of predetermined activities. The observer records the infants and mothers behaviours such as 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 and finally reunion behaviour: the way the caregiver was greeted on return. They concluded from several studies of measuring secure and insecure attachment that there were three types of attachment. Type B (securely attached) was the largest group of infants. These children were constantly content in their mother's presence, showed distress on their separation and experienced little comfort from the stranger's attention. The second largest group was type A (anxious-avoidant) these children didn't appear to be emotionally close to their mothers and they showed little difference in behaviour when the mother left and returned. The mothers of these children were sometimes believed to be ignoring the child.

Type C (anxious-resistant) was the final group Ainsworth discovered. These children showed great distress throughout the procedure, the stress was more exaggerated when the mother left, however on her return the child ignored the mother. The mothers' responsiveness to the child in these cases was thought to be ambivalent.

Main and Cassidy (1988) identified a further group known as type D (disorganized) these children showed inconsistent behaviours, confusion and indecision. They also tended to freeze or show certain stereotypical behaviours such as rocking.

'The Strange Situation' by Mary Ainsworth is still credited and used today by the modern psychologist. Warther used the reliable procedure in 1994 and discovered that the category a child falls into is normally the same at different ages proving Ainsworth's results are valid through the infants' life. Ainsworth also gained some support by Melnisch in 1993, also concluded that the differences in classification of a child can be put down to changes in the form of care given to a child.

Ainsworth's work although mainly supported had some criticisms and oppositions.

Vaughn (1980) concluded that attachment types are non permanent and may change.

Zarsen and Diener (1987) concluded that differences in a baby's character may result in differences in quality of attachments. Mary's work on 'the Strange Situation' was only carried out in the USA and makes unreasonable generalizations about all infants' behaviour. When carried out in different cultures a completely different set of results would occur.