

Q. Outline and evaluate Explanations of Attachment. (18 marks)

Attachment is a strong, reciprocal, emotional bond between an infant and their caregiver that is characterised by the desire to maintain proximity. Attachments take different forms, such as secure or insecure. Infants display attachment through the degree of separation distress shown when separated from the caregiver, pleasure at reunion and stranger anxiety.

Freud proposed an explanation of attachment known as the psychodynamic theory. He suggests the first major stage of psychosexual development is the oral stage, where the mother is the primary love object because she feeds the child. Freud saw this first relationship as a foundation for all future relationships. If it was loving and caring then the child developed the ability to give and receive love; if not then adult relationships would be unsatisfactory.

Harlow (1959) demonstrates 'cupboard love' isn't a valid explanation for infant attachment behaviour, as babies don't always attach to the person who feeds them. Attachment is separate from the need for food. This was demonstrated in Harlow's monkey study as when distressed the infant monkeys appeared to seek comfort not food. Schaffer and Emmerson (1964) showed 39% of infants attach to someone other than the person meeting their everyday needs. Another criticism of this theory is that Freud's evidence isn't based on facts and observations but on inferences. For example he assumes the existence of the id on his assumptions of the structure of the personality.

A second explanation of attachment is the learning theory, the idea that all behaviour is learnt either by association (classical conditioning) or consequences (operant conditioning). By classical conditioning the pleasure of feeding becomes associated with the person who feeds the infant and this person therefore becomes a source of pleasure even when there is no feeding. Because the caregiver is associated with positive reinforcement they become a secondary reinforcer. The attachment is reciprocal mothers being reinforced positively by smiles or negatively by crying.

It emphasises the role of 'cupboard love' so is subject to the same criticisms as the psychodynamic theory. Also if the theory were correct you would expect the attachment process to be gradual and steady whereas the stage of specific attachment and the accompanying separation protest occur suddenly. This suggests attachment is thereby a maturational rather than learning process. Later learning theorists have emphasised the role of attention and affection rather than food as a positive reinforcer which has more support but doesn't get over the criticism of suddenness. Although support for this theory is that it recognises the influence of interaction on attachment. However it fails to recognise nature's influence on attachment as supported by Harlow.

A third explanation of attachment is Bowlby's evolutionary theory, which is based around the evolutionary perspective that attachment serves to promote survival. Bowlby suggested that babies are born with social releasers e.g. crying and smiling which release a social response in adults. Attachment behaviour is therefore reciprocal as the carers are programmed to respond to the infant's needs. Bowlby also said that attachment occurs at around 7 months because it is synchronised with crawling, as before that the infant is unable to move away from their carer. The

bond with the main carer was also proposed to be special and different from all other attachments - the concept of monotropy. The first attachment serving as an internal working model for all future relationships and the attachment figure acting as a secure base from which the infant can explore. Bowlby's theory implies that poor attachment results in reduced exploration and poor development and also that the consequences of poor attachment are dire and possibly irreversible.

This theory formed the basis of a large body of research into the care of children having important practical applications, for example, a positive change in the attitudes towards infant care and improving childcare practices. However correlations between the qualities of a child's various relationships are actually quite low (Main and Weston 1981) so attachment isn't necessarily the template for future relationships. Where a positive correlation does exist it may simply be because some infants are better at forming relationships as supported by the temperament hypothesis.

Schaffer and Emmerson (1964) indicated attachment may not be monotropic. They found most babies attach to more than one person (stage of specific/multiple attachments). Some psychologists believe that although these attachments may be different, not one is more important than the other. The evolutionary approach also appears on the surface to be sensible and valid but the arguments are based on observing behaviour and proposing a survival function to account for it. But any behaviour can be explained in this way so although the approach is plausible there is no proof that it is correct.

However conflicting evidence is that like the psychodynamic theory it looks at attachment from the point of nature's influences which Harlow's study (1959) supports. Also if the theory is correct then emotionally secure and insecure infants will differ in later life; this idea is supported by the continuity hypothesis which is in turn supported by the Hazen and Shaver love quiz. Further support comes from Bowlby's study 'The Shady Deal', which indicated the theory, could possibly be extended to other species as infant giraffes showed the same secure base pattern behaviour as human infants. 'The Shady Deal' research was based on the concept of imprinting which on a positive note suggests that infants form a picture of their parents at birth helping them to stick to their parents for food and protection which is supported by Harlow as it considers the effect of responsiveness on attachment. However there is the contrasting view that it is based on the behaviour of animals which isn't representative of human behaviour so consequently cannot be accurately generalised across species. The temperament hypothesis also proposes that infants are born trusting and friendly which explains why they become securely attached.

In conclusion, both the psychodynamic and learning theory are 'cupboard love' theories which when compared with Harlow's study suggests they aren't likely to be effective explanations of attachment, they also have a wide range of criticisms. On the other hand however, Bowlby's theory although it too has a number of criticisms has a greater range of supporting research therefore appears to be the most accurate of the explanations.