

Give a brief account of one explanation of attachment and consider its strengths and limitations.

An attachment is a close emotional bond with another person, a close fondness or love for that person and a desire to spend time with that person. One prominent theory of attachment in the study of human attachment is the learning theory, put forward by behavioural psychologists such as Ivan Pavlov. Learning theory and the psychodynamic approach are called the 'cupboard love' theories of attachment in psychology. The basic principle of the learning theory is that all behaviour is learned as a result of either classical or operant conditioning.

Classical conditioning, developed by Ivan Pavlov, suggests that there is always an innate reflex to an external stimulus. Pavlov studied classical conditioning in dogs by carrying out an experiment where a bell was sounded in the presence of dogs just before food was presented. This was done so that the dogs would associate the sound of the bell with the presentation of food. After this had been carried out several times, the dogs began to salivate in response to the bell alone, suggesting that classical conditioning had taken place. This theory can be applied to humans as the person providing the food for a baby or infant becomes associated with food in the same way that Pavlov's dogs associated the sound of the bell with food. Also, the stimulus of food produces a pleasurable response of the infant, because its needs are satisfied. This eventually generalises into a feeling of security whenever the caregiver is present thus an attachment bond is formed.

The key difference between classical conditioning and operant conditioning is that in the latter, the participant provides the stimulus, which is later followed by a consequence. The participant eventually associates their behaviour with the consequence, therefore if the consequence is rewarding, their behaviour is reinforced – positive or negative. Dollard and Miller (1959)

suggest that all humans have primary motives to satisfy their drives for hunger and thirst. The means by which this is achieved (e.g. mother feeding infant) is associated with the rewarding drive reduction; thus an attachment bond is formed. This theory is supported widely through general praise and punishment tactics. For example, when a young child is being potty trained, the parents praise and encourage the infant when they are successful.

The learning theory is challenged by Harlow's research in 1959. Harlow set up an experiment by separating infant monkeys from their mother's shortly after birth and placed them in cage with two 'surrogate' mothers made of wire mesh, each with a face. One cylinder was wrapped with towelling and the other with a teat for milk. Harlow reported that the infant monkeys spent their time clinging to the cloth 'surrogate' mother. This concluded that monkeys have an innate need for comfort but only food and no comfort and only comfort and no food would not be sufficient for healthy development. Schaffer and Emerson's (1964) study also casts doubt on 'cupboard love' theories of attachment as they found that infants became attached to people who do not provide essential care. The learning theory may also be doubted as Pavlov's evidence was based on an experiment with dogs – can this evidence be transferred to produce a reliable representation of human behaviour?