Learning Outcome: Examine attachment in childhood and its role in the subsequent formation of relationships.

*Command term*: Examine-consider an argument or concept in a way that uncovers the assumptions and interrelationships of the issue. This could include how and why an argument or concept is explained, or finding similarities and differences.

What is attachment?

Definition: “The formation of a strong, reciprocal emotional bond between an infant and a primary caregiver”.

Psychologists believe that it is both normal and healthy for infants to form an attachment to one or more of their caregivers and that this attachment is important for later development.

Bowlby: Attachment and the internal working model

Bowlby is a key theorist for the developmental concept of **attachment**. He first published in 1951 but he developed and improved his theory many times.

* Bowlby argued that there is strong **evolutionary support** for a **biological explanation** of attachment. Babies possess **instincts** such as crying, grasping and smiling, which provoke care giving from the parent figure. Parents, mothers in particular, have i**nstincts** to respond to these signals by offering comfort, care and protection. Babies whose instincts were weak in the past would have been less likely to survive and parents who did not protect or care for their infants would be less likely to leave behind surviving offspring.
* Bowlby believed that attachment should take place within a particular window of development-or a **sensitive period**. His view was that children should form an attachment before the age of around 3 years. If they were unable to do this, Bowlby thought that lasting emotional damage would ensue.
* Bowlby believed that young children use the parent as a **secure base**, returning for security and reassurance when a threat is detected and moving away to explore their environment when the threat disappears. They will seek **proximity** to familiar people in times of distress.
* Events that interfere with attachment, such as abrupt separation or the inability of carers to be responsive, sensitive or consistent in their interactions, have short-term and long-term consequences for the child.
* One of the most important concepts in Bowlby’s theory was the idea of the **internal working model (IWM)**. Bowlby argued that the first attachment with the mother figure enables babies to build up a mental representation called an IWM, of how relationships work. The IWM is therefore a cognitive schema of expectations concerning the attachment figures-for example, if they are likely to give support during times of stress. The internal working model includes three important elements:

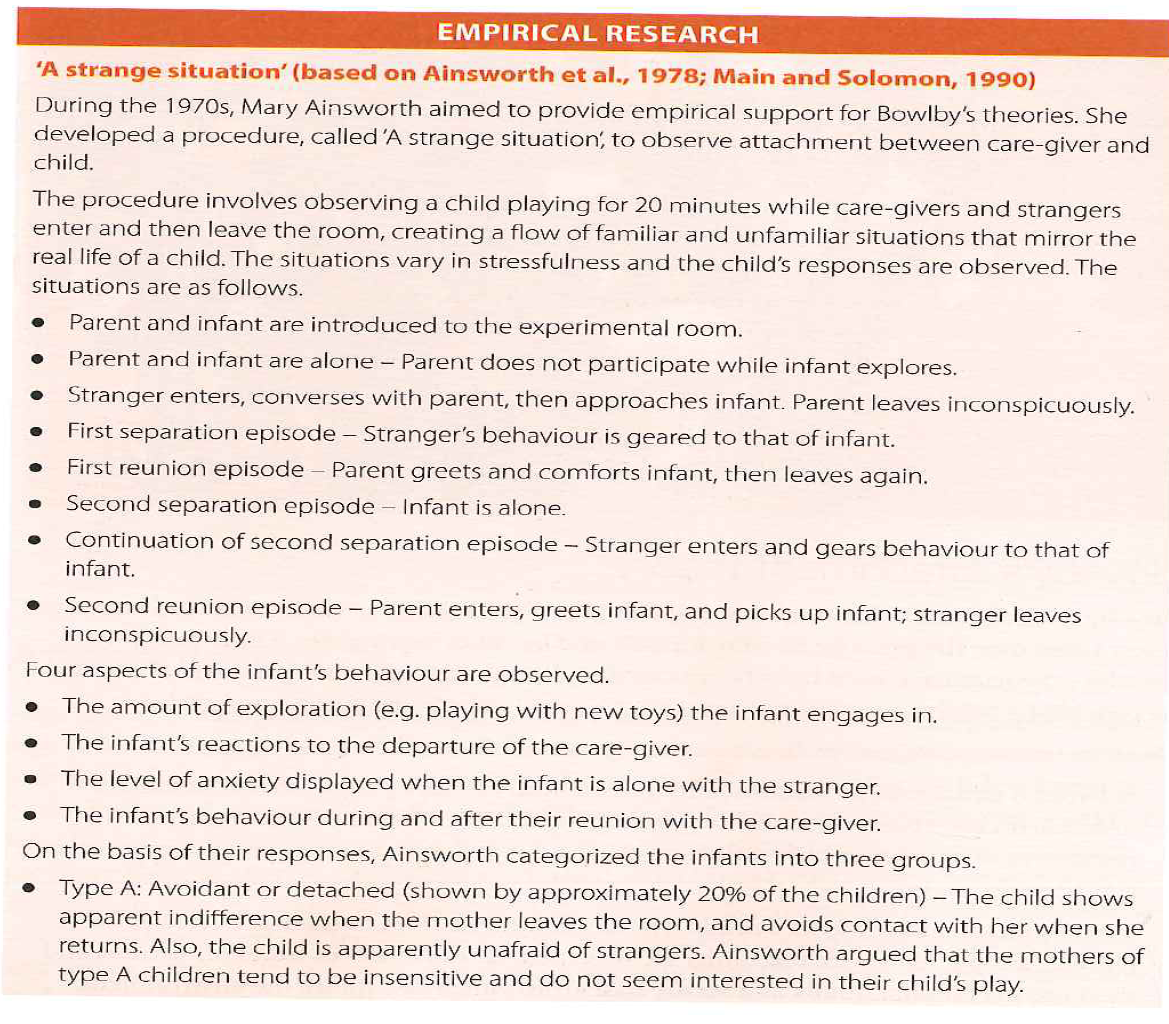
1. Ideas about attachment figures and what can be expected from them.
2. Ideas about the self.
3. Ideas about how the self and others relate.

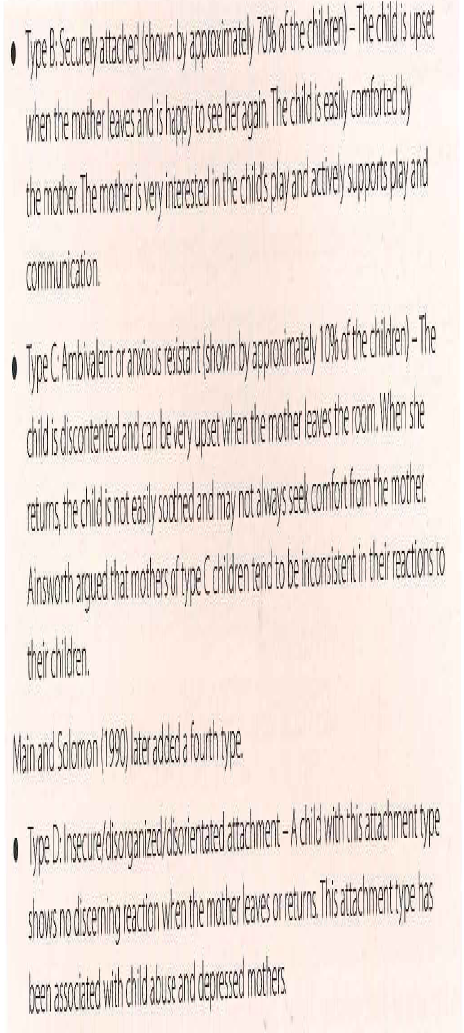
The IWM was believed to provide a **template** that would shape the child’s friendships and later romantic relationships. This idea is known as the **continuity hypothesis**. If a child experiences love and affection, he or she comes to see him/herself as worthy of love affection. This is the child’s IWM.

*Think of mnemonic to help you remember the main points of Bowlby’s theory. The main points are listed in bold.*

Ainsworth: Attachment classification and the strange situation

US psychologist Mary Ainsworth (1970) devised a procedure called the **strange situation** so that the concept of attachment could be tested **empirically**. She used observations to classify attachment patterns. This is sometimes called **Strange Situation Classification** or **SSC**.





What factors could influence the attachment of a child?

Parental sensitivity- As well as being able to classify attachment types, Ainsworth claims that attachment is related to the sensitivity of the parent figure, rather than the inbuilt temperament of the infant. Secure attachment is particularly dependent on emotionally responsive mothers.

Child Temperament - **Kagan (1982)** States innate differences in children’s temperaments influence how the children and the environment interact. He argues a child’s temperament is stable over time and is therefore predictive of future behavior. Kagan claims that temperament rather than actual attachment is being measured in the strange situation research procedure as each child will respond differently to different situations as a result of their innate personality. He was also critical of the rigidity of much of the debate surrounding attachment, arguing it was a complex human phenomenon that was not well understood by the psychological establishment.

Family circumstances- A family is not always a stable, unchanging unit over time and setting. Events such as poverty and bereavement intervene and the child may not receive consistent support. This will affect attachment development – a stable. Loving home is still the best predictor of a well adjusted adult, competent in navigating their own as well as others emotional worlds.

Evaluating the Strange situation

Ethics-The babies were placed in an unfamiliar environment and were deliberately exposed to a range of stressful situations including separation from their mothers and contact with a stranger. Although this was short term, it was likely to be an unpleasant experience. However, Ainworth’s research allowed for the situation to be hated at any time by the mother or researchers if a baby became very distressed. The distress would not be any more than what the baby would face as a part of everyday life.

Validity- The Strange situation took place in an environment that was unfamiliar to the infants. This makes it unlike real separations which generally take place in the familiar surroundings of the child’s own home (babysitting). However, the Strange Situation does reflect some types of real life situations, for example when a child is left with a child-minder.

What does Goldberg say about the validity of SSC? See p199 of the Course Companion

Culture- See p198-199 of the Course Companion

Is Bowlby and Ainsworth’s approach to attachment etic or emic?

Outline **Van Ijzendoorn and Kroonenberg’s (1988)** study.

Continuity in attachment patterns in romantic love

Bowlby’s theory emphasized the crucial importance of the first attachment for later emotional health and adjustment. People have formed “Inner Working Models” of themselves based on their attachment history. These are an important source of continuity between early and later feelings and behavior.

*Can you think of ways in which infant/caregiver relationships are similar to romantic love relationships?*

Consistency of attachment types

**Longitudinal studies** can be used to examine if attachment styles persist from childhood to adulthood. Such studies have demonstrated that attachment classifications are generally stable over time, unless important life events take place in the family setting. **Hamilton (1994)** studied a group of adolescents in California and found a strong link between attachment type in infancy and adult attachment type. However, attachment style changed in a few individuals when major life events, such as loss of a parent, occurred.

*Fill in the table below to show how YOU THINK each attachment type would affect future romantic relationships.*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Attachment type** | **Affect on future relationship** |
| Type A-avoidant  *Mother does not respond to the baby’s demands. Baby gives up trying to gain attention.* |  |
| Type B-secure  *Mother is responsive to their baby’s needs and baby expects mother to respond to their needs and view her as a ‘secure base’ to return to in stressful environments.* |  |
| Type C-ambivalent  *Mother is inconsistent and responds to the baby irregularly and erratically.* |  |

**Hazan and Shaver (1987)** suggested that **romantic love is an attachment process** that is experienced differently by different people because of variations in their attachment histories.

Aim: To test if relationship experiences in adulthood could be mapped on to childhood attachment types.

Method: The researchers published a ‘Love Quiz’ in their local North American newspaper and asked for volunteers (self selected sample) to read three descriptions (A, B and C see below) and place a tick next to the alternative that best described their experiences of romantic relationships. There were 620 responses chosen randomly from over 1,200 received. There were 205 males and 415 females. The data collection exercise was then repeated with a sample of 108 first year university students.

**Part 1**

**A** ‘I am somewhat uncomfortable being close to others; I find it difficult to trust them completely, difficult to allow myself to depend in them. I am nervous when anyone gets too close, and often others want me to be more intimate than I feel comfortable being’.

**B** ‘I find it relatively easy to get close to others and am comfortable depending on them and having them depend on me. I don’t worry about being abandoned or about someone getting too close to me’.

**C** ‘I find that others are reluctant to get as close as I would like. I often worry that my partner doesn’t really love me or won’t want to stay with me. I want to get very close to my partner and this sometimes scares people away’.

**Part 2**

Respondents were also asked to tick items from a checklist of adjectives to describe the relationship they remembered having with their parents (for example, warm, detached, fearful) and to answer questions about how long their adult relationships had lasted.

Findings: In agreement with Ainsworth’s findings in the Strange Situation, most of the respondents (60%) chose statement B, and were classed as securely attached. This group was generally happy and trusting of their partner and expressed a belief in lasting love. They said their parents had been readily available, attentive and responsive.

About 20% chose statement A. This group were doubtful about the existence of love and felt that they did not need a close relationship to enjoy their lives. They said their parents were unresponsive, rejecting and inattentive.

About another 20% chose statement C experienced feelings of jealousy and possessiveness; they fell in love easily and often, but rarely found ‘true love’. They said their parents were anxious, only sometimes responsive and out of step with their needs.

Conclusion: There are different attachment styles which seem related to an individual’s attachment history. People’s inner working models include different beliefs about romantic love, whether they are worthy of love and what to expect from a partner.

Evaluation:

*In what way does this study support the findings of Ainsworth and Bowlby?*

*What are the methodological issues related to the sampling technique?*

*What are the methodological issues related to the gender and culture of the participants?*

*What are the methodological issues related to the use of a questionnaire?*

*In what way are the findings deterministic?*

Commentary on the role of attachments in later relationships

* It is clear that early attachments are highly significant in the development of young children as it is within the context of this first relationship that infants learn about intimacy and trust. People working within developmental psychology now accept this.
* Bowlby’s theory was developed in the 1950’s and 60’s, when most child rearing was carried out by mothers. Now it is acknowledged that ‘mothering’, can be carried out by fathers or anyone else who is prepared to form a close attachment with the child.
* Attachment styles are not necessarily fixed. Major changes or life events can ‘derail’ attachment styles. They can change in both directions-from insecure to secure and vice versa. Rutter (2009) notes, ‘Early experiences are important but they need to be combined with later experiences’.