

Critically consider the use of the Strange Situation as a method for studying young children's attachments

The Strange Situation was devised by Ainsworth & Wittig (1969) and was based on Ainsworth's previous Uganda (1967) and later Baltimore studies (Ainsworth *et al.*, 1971, 1978). The aim of the Strange Situation was to see how the baby's tendencies towards attachment and exploration interact under conditions of high and low stress, based on the belief this could be observed more easily in an unfamiliar environment.

The procedure involved eight episodes of approximately three minutes each, with the exception of the first which was only 30 seconds as it just involved the observer introducing the mother and baby to the experimental room before the stranger leaves them.

The stranger then re-enters and after the three minutes of this episode, the stranger approaches the baby and is then left alone with the baby. The first reunion episode then occurs and the stranger leaves. When the mother has settled the infant, she too then leaves. The stranger then enters and finally the mother re-enters and the stranger leaves unobtrusively.

The findings demonstrated that the babies explored the playroom and toys more vigorously in the mother's presence than after the stranger entered or while their mother was absent. However, Ainsworth was particularly interested in the reunion behaviours, which provided a clearer idea of the attachment than the response to the separation (Marrone, 1998).

Ainsworth found that attachment could be categorised into three styles. In Type A (anxious avoidant) the baby's behaviour demonstrates indifference towards the mother, 15 per cent of the sample demonstrated this. Another 15 per cent demonstrated Type C, anxious resistant, where the infant is ambivalent towards the mother. 70 per cent illustrated Type B attachment, a secure attachment, where the baby demonstrates separation anxiety and joy on reunion. Ainsworth *et al.* suggest the crucial feature determining the quality of attachment is the mother's sensitivity. The sensitive mother will respond to her baby's needs rather than acting on her own wishes.

The Strange Situation has been a very influential method of study and has generated much research. The advantage of observing the infant's behaviour rather than the mother's is that it prevents the results from being accused of bias.

It would appear that the attachment style resulting from the study remains fairly constant – in both the short term (6 months: Walters, 1978) and the long term (up to five years: Main *et al.*, 1985) when the family's living conditions don't change. This suggests that attachment style is a fixed characteristic, like temperament. However, Vaughn *et al.* (1980) have demonstrated that attachment type may change depending on variations in the family's circumstances, therefore suggesting that attachment types are not necessarily permanent characteristics.

It has also been found that attachments to mothers and fathers are independent, meaning the same child might be securely attached to its mother but insecurely attached to its father. This demonstrates that attachment patterns observed in the Strange Situation reflect qualities of distinct relationships, rather than characteristics of the child.

Main (1991) has proposed a fourth attachment type, namely insecure-disorganised (Type D). This is where attachment itself and the attachment figure is the source of fear, and therefore the child faces a conflict between seeking and avoiding closeness to the attachment figure.

The Strange Situation has been replicated in many countries revealing important differences between and within cultures. Van Ijzendoorn & Kroonenberg (1988) carried out a review of 32 worldwide studies involving eight countries and over 2000 infants, and reached three main conclusions. There seems to be a pattern of cross-cultural differences, with Type B being the most common, Type A being more common in Western European countries and Type C being more common in Israel and Japan. However,

there were marked differences within cultures. It was also found that that the overall worldwide pattern and that for the USA were similar to Ainsworth *et al.*'s standard pattern, yet there was marked variation between samples.

Valid interpretations of the Strange Situation in cross-cultural settings require an insight into the child-rearing customs, as socialisation practices would seem to explain the high percentage of Type C in Japan and Israel.

Although, as Melhuish (1993) suggests, the Strange Situation is the most widely used method for assessing infant attachment to a caregiver, Lamb *et al.* (1985) have criticised it for being highly artificial, therefore lacking ecological validity, for being extremely limited in terms of the amount of information that is actually gathered, and for failing to take into account the mother's behaviour.

As the Strange Situation is deliberately testing how infants react to stress, the study can obviously be criticised on the grounds of breaking ethical guidelines. However, in its defence the separation episodes were curtailed prematurely if the child became too stressed. Also, according to Marrone (1998), although the Strange Situation has been criticised for being stressful, it is simulating everyday experiences, as mothers do leave their babies for brief periods of time in different settings and often with unfamiliar people such as babysitters. This contradicts Marrone's earlier point to some extent. It can be argued that deliberately exposing children to stress as part of a psychological study is different to normal everyday life; however, the stress endured was short term.