

Essay on harlow and ainsworth

[Experience](#), [Human Nature](#)



Harry Harlow and Mary Ainsworth undertook studies aimed at providing a clearer insight into the processes associated with attachment. Even though both Harlow and Ainsworth chose a different approach to their research, they met with some similarities. This essay will therefore seek to both compare and contrast their researches, the methods they used as well as evidence gained through their respective researches.

It is I feel important to have a brief understanding as to what attachment is, and thus help to provide a perspective in regards to what the experiments being conducted are aiming to define. Attachment can be defined as “ a long term emotionally important relationship in which one individual seeks proximity to and derives security and comfort from the presence of another” (discoveringpsychology. 193, 2012). As such both Harlow and Ainsworth through their different approaches sought to investigate the mechanisms inherent with infant bonding.

Was it due to the carer providing for their emotional and physical needs or was it more deep-seated, in that infants were more inclined to seek attachment to stimulus that met their needs, such as warmth, and softness as suggested through the researches of Bowlby (1948) (discovering psychology p. 196 , 2012) Harlow in his approach chose to base his research solely on animals, in this case the Rhesus Macaque monkey. He chose this method in part due to the fact that these monkeys have approximately ninety four percent in common with human DNA.

Coupled with this was the further factor concerning ethical issues, as it would have undoubtedly raised serious concerns had he chose to conduct his experiments on human infants. His observations were conducted entirely

within the seemingly harsh surroundings metered through the laboratory environment, which differed in comparison to the research conducted by Ainsworth through her responses to sensitivity. Through his research, Harlow noticed that the monkeys grew attached to sanitary pads placed in their cage, and suspected that the monkeys bonded with them and gained "contact comfort" from them, as they were the only soft item in their otherwise harsh environment, (discovering psychology p. 202, 2012) Harlow thus surmised that the softness of the sanitary pads along with the "contact comfort" the monkeys gained from them seemed a more important factor within the infant bonding process than the presence and supply of food. (discovering psychology p. 202, 2012)

In order to further investigate his hypothesis, Harlow constructed two very different types of "surrogate mothers", one being constructed of wire which lacked any form of tactile comfort, whilst the second was made of wood with a layer of sponge and covered with a soft layer of towelling. Both "mothers" had heating supplied by a light bulb and both had a feeding bottle inserted through the body providing the monkey with food. Through his observations and experimentation, Harlow noted the monkeys bonded with the soft bodied "mother" regardless of whether it contained a supply of nourishment or not. (discovering psychology p. 205, 2012). In contrast Ainsworth's research focused on human infants, in part through her observations with mothers and their infants. Whilst living in Uganda, Ainsworth observed a number of families with unweaned babies, and noticed that the more responsive the mothers were to the signals of the infant, the less the infant cried and the more confident the infant was, conversely the less responsive

mothers were to signals the more the baby cried (discovering psychology p. 216, 2012).

Ainsworth, though different in her approach, in her case observing children and their carers in natural surroundings which differed from that of Harlow, in that he observed monkeys in a laboratory surrounding, they both however reached the same conclusion. Infants that feel secure, in that they have a safe base, whether this is provided by a terry towel covered “ mother” or a doting parent, the tactile stimulus provided by each is of paramount importance in infant and monkey bonding. At the centre of Ainsworth’s research was what became known as the “ strange experiment”, which she conducted in America, and consisted of a series of even consecutive episodes within a controlled environment. The experiment involved three people, the mother, infant and a stranger. (discovering psychology p. 217, 2012). Ethical considerations have to be taken into account once more, for unlike Harlow’s monkeys who having been bred in captivity and could not choose to opt out, or indeed be comforted as in Ainsworth’s experiments, whereby should the infant become distressed the experiment was stopped and the infant immediately comforted.

Monkeys though forming a complex hierarchical society are not deemed to be as complex as humans, as such the responses to various stimuli employed by Harlow in his experiments could be deemed as being easier to interpret. In contrast to Harlow’s experiment, Ainsworth through her more closely controlled observations, and in mind that humans exhibit a more complex behaviour, she was able to delve deeper into the mechanisms

associated with infant bonding, whereby she was able to define four different types of attachment. (Discovering psychology p. 204, 2012)

Clearly the relevant studies undertaken by Harlow and Ainsworth had both their advantages and disadvantages. Harlow for example based his researches entirely on monkeys, within the harsh confines of the laboratory environment. The fact that Macaque monkeys share ninety four percent of DNA with human infants does not necessarily denote that their subsequent behaviour would be similar to that of human infants. " There is a need to be very careful how one interprets this genetic similarity, for a small difference in DNA can make a huge difference in a species' anatomy and behaviour" (discovering psychology p. 04, 2012). Ainsworth on the other hand centred her research based on observations in both Uganda and America. She chose a more sensitive approach. Her observations were of infants interacting with primary care givers and strangers and gauging their reactions. Through this process she was able to delve deeper into the mechanisms of attachment, given that not only are humans more complex as exhibited through their interactions, it also offered further opportunities for her to expand and deepen her researches.

This however had its own disadvantages, for Ainsworth it seems did not factor into account the country of origin or cultural backgrounds of the infants being studied, along with the infant's mood or indeed if the infant was used to the situation they were being exposed to. (discovering psychology p. 219, 2012). This situation did not arise in the research conducted by Harlow, as all the monkeys had been raised in captivity which in itself ensured a more general set of expected patterns of behaviour.

Ainsworth's study does not seem to reflect any innate behaviour in the infants, whereas the researches of Harlow's, particularly concerning the wire and terry towel covered " surrogate mothers" seem to support his theory that regardless of species, that infants show an innate predisposition in forming attachments with carers who provide for their needs. This I feel was due to Harlow being able to look deeper into this facet of infant behaviour as he was not hindered by ethical considerations as was the case with Ainsworth.

It is fair to say that both researchers had their work criticised to some extent by the scientific community at large. Obvious questions having been raised as to the validity of their findings, Harlow for his sole use of monkeys and how the research correlated to human behaviour, whereas the work of Ainsworth in her not taking into account of the differences of nationality and thus the cultural background of the infant. The primary aim of this essay was by way of making an informed comparison between the works of Harlow and Ainsworth.

Were they able through their researches to show a clear insight into the mechanisms associated with infant bonding? What evidence did their different methods of approach provide? Are animals an effective means of basing a premise as to the expectations of human behaviour? Researches that have insight into our innate tendencies allow us a glimpse into the hidden world of the psyche. Whether evidence provided has come via way of animal experiments, viewed as repugnant by many, or through closely monitored experiments with human infants. The implications can have a marked effect upon other avenues of research that come to follow.

Undoubtedly the work of both Harlow and Ainsworth has had a marked import upon and allowed for a deeper understanding into the mechanisms of infant bonding. The implications of their research has provided for a basis upon which to build a yet deeper and fare wider reaching insight, not only on the various stimuli associated with infant bonding, but also in regards to how the infant develops through their life and their wider range of social interactions.

References

1. Brace, N. and Byford, J. Discovering Psychology (2012), Milton Keynes, The Open University.