A child only becomes attached to their mother

For this assignment task I will discuss what attachment theory is and its origins. Describe the settings and conditions for child attachment to caregiver and how attachment is identified as well as the potential outcomes. Furthermore, I will discuss the theories surrounding attachment and whether these theories support the idea that a child will only become attached to the mother and not the father, taking a closer look at cultural trends and society changes as well as role of fathers in attachment to infants.

Bowlby is credited with developing a radically new way of thinking about child development and mental health. He is also credited with reinforcing the belief that mothers are the only people ‘ naturally’ equipped to bring up babies, and that babies’ development will be harmed if the mother goes to work, leaving the baby either with its father or a substitute carer. There are some fiercely critical articles in newspapers and academic journals, particularly from feminist writers.

The original concept of attachment has been attributed to the studies developed by John Bowlby (1953, 1969, 1973, 1988). Attachment models are regularly referenced in attachment theory research. The attachment model explains infant behaviour towards their attachment figure, during times of separation and reunion. Traditionally, research into attachment has been heavily influenced by Freud’s psychoanalytic theory and has stressed the importance of the infant-mother relationship. Bowlby (1969) and other researchers influenced by the analytic tradition believed that the attachment bond which develops between an infant and its mother forms the basis of all inter-personal relationships in later years. More recent research, however,

has also stressed the importance of attachments which form with other adults, particularly the father.

Attachment can be defined as ”…an affectionate bond between individuals that endures through space and time and serves to join them emotionally” Fahlberg (1994).

Bowlby’s (1951) evolutionary theory of attachment suggests that children come into the world biologically pre-programmed to form attachments with others, because this will help them to survive. Bowlby was very much influenced by ethological theory in general, but especially by Lorenz’s (1935) study of imprinting. Lorenz showed that attachment was innate (in young ducklings) and therefore has a survival value. Bowlby believed that attachment behaviours are instinctive and will be activated by any conditions that seem to threaten the achievement of proximity, such as separation, insecurity and fear.

During the evolution of the human species, it would have been the babies who stayed close to their mothers who would have survived to have children of their own and Bowlby (1951) hypothesised that both infants and mothers have evolved a biological need to stay in contact with each other. These attachment behaviours initially function like fixed action patterns and all share the same function. The child behaves in ways that elicits contact or proximity to the caregiver. When a child experiences heightened arousal, he/she signals their caregiver. Crying and smiling are examples of these signalling behaviours. Instinctively, caregivers respond to their children’s

behaviour creating a reciprocal pattern of interaction. The determinant of attachment is not food but care and responsiveness.

Bowlby suggested that a child would initially form only one attachment and that the attachment figure acted as a secure base for exploring the world. The attachment relationship acts as a prototype for all future social relationships so disrupting it can have severe consequences. Bowlby's theory of monotropy led to the formulation of his maternal deprivation hypothesis.

Bowlby used the term maternal deprivation to refer to the separation or loss of the mother as well as failure to develop an attachment. The underlying assumption of Bowlby's Maternal Deprivation Hypothesis is that continual disruption of the attachment between infant and primary caregiver (i. e. mother) could result in long term cognitive, social, and emotional difficulties for that infant. The implications of this are vast – if this is true, should the primary caregiver leave their child in day care, whilst they continue to work?

Bowlby did recognise that the quality and strengths of attachments do vary. Mary Ainsworth, a colleague of Bowlby's, designed an experimental situation, the ' Strange Situation' procedure, which sought to evaluate the relationship that a child has with attachment figures. The Strange Situation Test is probably the best known assessment of attachment. It was designed by Ainsworth and Witting (1969) and later revised by Ainsworth et al (1987) and Main and Solomon (1986, 1990). It assesses the attachment behaviour of young children, aged nine to 18 months, to their primary carer or carers.

In the test, the infant and mother are left in a room and the infant is allowed to explore. A stranger enters, speaks with the mother and approaches the

infant. The mother then leaves and the stranger interacts with the infant. The stranger leaves and the mother comes back and greets or comforts her infant before trying to settle them to play. The mother leaves again, but this time with the infant's knowledge. The stranger enters the room. A few minutes later the mother re-enters and the stranger leaves quietly. The test is videoed, and the videotape then coded according to the level of exploration, distress separation and the child's behaviour on reunion.

Ainsworth initially identified three categories of attachment (secure, avoidant and resistant) but also found a number of infants who did not fall into any of these categories. Later work by Main and Solomon (1986, 1990) identified a fourth category of disorganised. When Ainsworth's original videotapes were re-examined, most of the infants who she could not classify fell into this new category of disorganised.

The test has been shown to be reliable in different cultures. Importantly, when independent researchers code the same tape, they are very likely to classify the infant in the same way. Distinctions were made between secure and insecure attachment describing securely attached children as those who will show signs of protest when their carer is not present and will seek comfort on the carer's return facilitated by a secure base that promotes engagement and exploration. Holland (2011) suggests that attachment provides a way of understanding the emotional development and behaviour of children and adults. Howe (1995) notes that observation of children, for example when tired, frightened or unwell, can support the assessment of the attachment relationship with the main carer.

On evaluation, Bowlby’s ideas had a great influence on the way researchers thought about attachment and much of the discussion of his theory has focused on his belief in monotropy. Although Bowlby may not dispute that young children form multiple attachments, he still contends that the attachment to the mother is unique in that it is the first to appear and remains the strongest of all. However, on both of these counts, the evidence seems to suggest otherwise.

Some of the strongest criticisms have come from the feminist schools of thought, as the theory has been used to argue that no woman with a young child should work outside the home or spend time away from her baby. There was a presumption in early attachment work that the main caregiver will be the child’s mother. Bowlby’s views, particularly on monotropy, the idea of attachment to just one caregiver, usually female, have attracted controversy and criticism.

A naturalistic study which provided contradictory evidence was carried out by Schaffer and Emerson in 1964. Schaffer & Emerson (1964) noted that specific attachments started at about 8 months and, very shortly thereafter, the infants became attached to other people. By 18 months very few (13%) were attached to only one person; some had five or more attachments. Schaffer and Emerson (1964) concluded that ‘ mother’ can be male or female and ‘ mothering’ can be shared by several people. Any person who provides a great deal of stimulation and interaction can become an attachment figure, even if they are not providing food. These findings were supported in research carried out in the USA by Cohen and Campos (1974) and by cross-cultural studies of attachment.

Rutter (1978) points out that several indicators of attachment (such as protest or distress when attached person leaves) has been shown for a variety of attachment figures – fathers, siblings, peers and even inanimate objects. Critics such as Rutter have also accused Bowlby of not distinguishing between deprivation and privation – the complete lack of an attachment bond, rather than its loss. Rutter stresses that the quality of the attachment bond is the most important factor, rather than just deprivation in the critical period.

It is worth remembering that at the time Bowlby developed his initial theory, the relationship between caregiver and baby virtually always meant the relationship between mother and baby. It took later research, building on the initial discoveries, to realise that attachment theory was not exclusively about a mother-baby interaction. There are implications arising from Bowlby's work. As he believed the mother to be the most central care giver and that this care should be given on a continuous basis an obvious implication is that mothers should not go out to work. There have been many attacks on this claim:

Mothers are the exclusive carers in only a very small percentage of human societies; often there are a number of people involved in the care of children, such as relations and friends (Weisner & Gallimore, 1977).

In the UK at the time of Bowlby's work, child care was normally the sole responsibility of the mothers, so researchers were limited in the kind of observations they could make. The fact that most of the work, at least in the UK, was based on observations of babies who were exclusively brought up by

their mothers led to an initial belief that attachment was specifically a bond from the baby to their mother. Over the years, as different patterns of child care have become more common, and as child care in other cultures has been observed, it has become clear that there is nothing unique or exclusive about the baby-mother attachment.

Babies can be attached to more than one person, and can even show different styles of attachment to different people. While there are cultural variations in the way the attachment is exhibited, it appears to be a ‘ universal’ trait (Van Ijzendoorn, 2004). In some families and cultures, though, more than one person may share the job of ‘ mothering’ the child. It is possible for a child to have secure attachments to several such people. Providing the quality of care is good, and that it is provided by people who will remain the same during the child’s early life, these children will do as well as those attached to just one person. Van Ijzendoorn & Tavecchio (1987) argue that a stable network of adults can provide adequate care and that this care may even have advantages over a system where a mother has to meet all a child’s needs. There is evidence that children develop better with a mother who is happy in her work, than a mother who is frustrated by staying at home (Schaffer, 1990).

Studies have shown that fathers who have early contact with their child have a stronger attachment with them in the months following the birth. Strong attachment between father and child is shown through physical contact and while holding the child, they face each other (Klaus, Kennell, & Klaus, 1995). Interactions between mother/child and father/child are also quite different. When the mother-infant interactions are observed, the mother is seen as

nurturing and affectionate towards the infant, whereas father-infant interactions deal more with affiliation and play (Geiger, 1996). Fathers have a more physical relationship with the child while the mother’s relationship is more verbal. It has been shown that the fathers play interactions are more exciting and pleasurable to children than play interactions with the mother (Geiger, 1996).

Fathers make definite contributions to infant development and are now spending more time with their children than in many past decades. Studies begun by Kotelchuk in the 1970s assumed that if an infant had formed an attachment to its father it would reveal itself in separation protest (Kotelchuck, 1976). Twelve-month-old infants (and, subsequently, 15, 18, and 21 month old infants) protested whether left alone by mother or father, showed positive relief on reunion, and lost the drive to explore in the interim. When separated from only one parent, half preferred the mother, 30% preferred the father, and 20% showed no clear preference. Spelke (1973) and colleagues elaborated these findings for highly involved fathers, finding that their infants protested less overall, and showed delayed separation protest in general. Still, there is no definitive data for 6- to 9-month-old father-infant pairs, when the most vigorous maternal attachment behaviour is in evidence (Bowlby 1969). Cohen and Campos (1974) did show that although 10-month-olds showed preferences for their mother as “ secure bases” after brief separations, fathers were clearly preferred over strangers, giving credence to the fact that infants did attach to fathers hierarchically and differentially.

In an important study of attachment classification of mothers, fathers, and their infants, Steele, Steele, and Fonagy (1996) analysed father and mother differences in the Strange Situation Procedure. They found that the mother's Adult Attachment Interview scores influenced (but did not predict) the father-infant experience. This suggests that fathers and infants form unique states of mind concerning attachment in ways that influence each other. Additional evidence regarding this unique state of mind can be found in Ferketich and Mercer's (1995) investigations of paternal attachment in experienced and inexperienced fathers. She found no difference between experienced and inexperienced fathers with regard to the intensity of their attachment, indicating that the love relationship formed with subsequent infants is as unique as the first.

Lamb's landmark longitudinal study (Lamb, 1977) of mother-infant and father-infant attachment was begun in 1974 to try to categorize the unique components of father-infant attachment. Home observations of 7, 8, 12, and 13 month-old infants revealed no preference for either parent on attachment behaviour measures. This changed in the second year of life, when boys showed preferences for their fathers and girls showed no consistent preference for either parent. Lamb (1977) concluded that earlier claims of a hierarchy among attachment figures, with the more proximal caregiver becoming preferred, were not upheld by home observational data. Furthermore, Lamb observed that when infants in the study were stressed, attachment behaviour increased and they organized their behaviour around whichever parent was more proximal. Interestingly, when both parents were present, 12- and 18-month-olds turned to their mother, whereas at 8 and

21 months, there was again no preference. Thus, if there is any hierarchical period, it is relatively short-lived and may not endure.

Abelin’s (1980) work on the father as a “ significant other” for older autonomy-seeking toddlers (as they feel the need to be more separate from the mother) may explain why the hierarchical period may be short-lived. He suggests that at approximately 18 months, toddlers develop the capacity to observe the father’s appreciation of the mother as distinct from their own appreciation of her. Lamb speculated further that the father’s interest in play may enhance their importance and that when such a characteristic is missing, (Abelin, 1980) infants develop clearer preferences for their primary caregiver. Overall, the infant-father connection is enhanced by paternal involvement, although mothers still are the preferred attachment figure in most families in which she provides the bulk of intimate care. Nevertheless, early and powerful attachments between infants and fathers have been seen in a vast amount of studies.

In the past, psychologists studying the development of children focused almost exclusively on children’s relationships with their mothers. Today, they have come to agree that fathers play a unique and crucial role in nurturing and guiding children’s development. Many experts now believe that fathers can be just as nurturing and sensitive with their babies as mothers. In the UK at the time of Bowlby’s work, child care was normally the sole responsibility of the mothers, so researchers were limited in the kind of observations they could make. The fact that most of the work, at least in the UK, was based on observations of babies who were exclusively brought up by their mothers led

to an initial belief that attachment was specifically a bond from the baby to their mother.

Over the years, as different patterns of child care have become more common, and as child care in other cultures has been observed, it has become clear that there is nothing unique or exclusive about the baby-mother attachment. Babies can be attached to more than one person, and can even show different styles of attachment to different people. Mothers tend to be relied upon more than fathers for the comfort and security components of attachment, primarily because they are usually the infant’s main caregiver. Babies also form attachments to their fathers, who tend to be just as responsive to their babies’ bids for attention as mothers. When fathers spend more time with their babies, they get to know exactly what each of their baby’s signals mean. This familiarity allows fathers to respond sensitively.