

# Explore the relevance of attachment theory psychology essay



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As there have been many studies carried out in child development this essay will breakdown its content into the history of attachment theory and the basics of how it works. Mary Ainsworth was well known for her ' Strange Situations' study and this essay will give a brief description of the experiment and its outcome and will be critically explored. As social deprivation is still a common factor in today's society this essay will define what is meant by social deprivation and then will investigate the consequences this has on children that have been reared in that environment. It will then show a study of children raised in orphanages and institutions and demonstrate how the effects of having no attachment to caregivers can have a negative result on their development. Many studies relating to attachment throughout the lifespan and attachment in adulthood have been carried out and this essay will break down these studies and determine whether the outcomes are conclusive or not. Finally a conclusion will be given on the relevance of attachment theory and how individuals have formed and developed throughout the life course.

Attachment theory is the work of John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth. Bowlby devised the basic system of the theory which was to reform our understanding about a child's connection to the mother, and the disturbance caused through separation, deprivation and bereavement. Ainsworth's technique's made it possible to expand the theory and has contributed towards some of the new direction that it has taken up to date. Ainsworth gave the idea of the attachment figure as a secure base from which an infant can investigate the world; she developed the concept of maternal sensitivity to the infant signals and its role in the development of infant - mother

attachment patterns. Bowlby summarised that for a child to grow up mentally healthy, it needs to experience a warm, intimate and stable relationship with its mother. He accentuates on the primary carer as being female, claiming that he did not agree that dependency is established with a secondary supporter. (Bretherton, 1992). The three characteristics of attachment theory are secure attachment, ambivalent attachment and avoidant attachment. Securely attached children show the slightest distress when parted from their caregiver; this is because they feel secure and are able to depend on their caregivers, the children feel at ease in seeking out their caregiver when frightened. When a parent or caregiver leaves an ambivalently attached child, they will become very distressed. This is the outcome of poor maternal connection as the child can not depend on the caregiver when in need. Children with avoidant attachment are likely to avoid caregivers. They show no difference of emotion between a caregiver and a complete stranger. Research shows that this is the result of abusive or neglectful acts by the caregivers. (Wagner, 2009). Mary Ainsworth constructed an assessment technique called the Strange Situation Classification. (SSC). She investigated the security of attachment in one-to-two-year-olds in the 'strange situation' study to figure out the nature and types of attachment. Ainsworth created an experimental procedure observing the various attachment forms demonstrated between caregivers and infants. The infants were between 12 and 18 months old and were placed in a small room with a one way glass window so that they could be observed. Over the space of 21 minutes, managed in 3 minute sessions the following episodes were conducted; mother and infant were left alone, a stranger joins the mother and infant, mother leaves infant and stranger

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alone, mother returns and stranger leaves, mother leaves so infant is totally alone, stranger returns and then lastly the mother returns and the stranger leaves. Ainsworth's findings during this study were that the child suffered separation anxiety-the child was distressed when the mother left, stranger anxiety- avoided the stranger but was friendly when the mother was present and finally the child displayed a reaction when reunited with their mother. (McLeod, 2007). The strengths of SSC are that it is a reliable study. It delivers dependable results and has become accepted worldwide as a method for measuring levels of attachment. Although the study has positive outcomes it can be criticised that the attachment is only focused on that between the mother and child. There is no mention of the other parent or grandparents to whom children can have an attachment bond with. (Lamb, 1978) Other research has found that the same child may display different attachment behaviour on different occasions. When a child's circumstances change their attachment may also alter, if family circumstances were to become different. (McLeod, 2007)

Social deprivation can be defined as being denied suitable and responsive interaction with others, whether the denial occurred from limitations positioned on a physical ability to be in the company of others or by limitations on an emotional access to others. There are two related elements to this type of deprivation which are social and emotional neglect. Social neglect includes situations where a child is left without a caregiver or when the caregiver can not attend to the child but is present. Emotional neglect is where the caregiver denies affectionate physical and emotional contact. They ignore all signals of distress from the child and do not give any

reassurance, encouragement, comfort and stimulation. (Provence and Lipton, 1962)

Researchers have attempted to establish the effects of childrearing in socially deprived environments on child development. Studies have been carried out on the development of children from institutions and orphanages who appeared to have few social and emotional interactions compared to home-reared, securely attached children. During these studies it was found that children reared in socially deprived institutions developed differently to the home-reared children. Barbara Tizard and Anne Joseph conducted a study on orphans that lived in a clean three-storey building which looked like an institution as opposed to a house. The orphans complied with the caregivers' demands and rules resulting in the orphanage being quiet and orderly. Beds were separated from each other by glass cubicles. There was shared eating; toileting and play facilities were within a large group of children. The infants and younger children spent up to 20 hours per day in their cubicle-like cribs, which restricted their movement and resulted in solitary confinement. Even during duties such as nappy changing and bathing, social interactions were kept to a minimum. (Tizard and Joseph, 1970). As the orphans were socially deprived they had less opportunity to witness models of appropriate behaviour. They were not engaged in the usual maternal process that secure home-reared children are given. Provence and Lipton (1962) observed the poor quality of peer interaction between institutionally reared children. Their report indicated that the infants showed little interest in one another even though they had been placed closed to one another in their cribs. This therefore prevented them

from developing friendships. When compared to home-reared children, the children from the orphanages and institutions appeared to show different behaviours varying from aggression to irregular friendly behaviours. As a result of being reared in a socially deprived environment the children develop feelings of low self-esteem and a degenerated feeling of self worth, where as home-reared children, who are securely attached respond to feelings of self worth as they learn that their needs are important. Children aged 9-11 years old who had suffered severe and emotional neglect had displayed health problems. They became aggressive and developed anti-social behaviours. They were found to have poor quality peer relationships and show characteristics such as worry, fear, depression and hyperactivity. Attachment theory would conclude that lower cognitive ability and motor function would be the result for children reared in social deprivation.

(Provence and Lipton, 1962)

A study carried out by Stevens concluded that children reared in an orphanage that had many caregivers over time yet had high levels of attention and interactions from the caregivers, developed normal attachment relationships. (Stevens, 1971) During the 1970s English childcare authorities reconstructed their residential institutions so that they resembled more of a homely environment. The number of staff was increased to care for smaller mixed-age groups in an attempt to encourage the attachment of staff members to the groups of children. (Tizard and Joseph, 1970)

Bowlby believed that the attachment characteristics were carried throughout the life span right through to death. (Fraley, 2004). According to researchers <https://assignbuster.com/explore-the-relevance-of-attachment-theory-psychology-essay/>

Hazan and Shaver, the emotional connection that develops between adult romantic partners is similar to that of the attachment traits. They noted that the bonds between infants and caregivers and romantic adult partners share the same features such as both feeling safe when the other is nearby, they both share explorations together and they both feel insecure when the other is unattainable. Some adults could be anxious-resistant and worry that they would not be loved leading them to be easily disheartened and angered when their attachment needs are not met. Other adults could be avoidant, seeming not to care much about other people and not having to depend on others and allowing others to depend on them. Whether an adult is secure or insecure in their adult relationships this could be an impression made from their own attachment experiences as a child. (Fraley, 2004). As infants learn social behaviours through secure attachment bonds, the trust and praise endorsed through these bonds are believed to be the basis for the relationships that individuals build as they move from childhood to adulthood. (Bowlby, 1969). Researchers have argued that the connection between infant attachment and adult romantic attachments are only slightly related yet Fraley and Shaver (2000) state that the theory continues to influence behaviour, thoughts and feelings in adulthood and this hypothesis has remained firm for more than over a decade regardless of the different types of intimate relationships.

Attachment theory from the 70's, compared to present day has been criticized for neglecting the internal world. It has been stated that attachment theory should pay more attention to regular distortions of the child's outlook of the external world and that the internal working models

can conflict with each other. It seems that attachment theory and psychoanalysis overlap the limits of human knowledge. Both theories assume that the first years of life are the most important for the personality to develop: that the maternal feelings are a common factor in establishing the attributes of object relationships and therefore psychic development. Furthermore in both theories, early relationships implement the conditions within which certain critical psychological functions are obtained and developed. Both focus on mental and personality development and emotional disorder. (Zepf, 2006)

Attachment theory is now recognized and accepted as a lifespan developmental theory which is important in clinical practice for understanding how early bonding experiences influence psychical and emotional well-being. There is still quite a constricted understanding of what it means to be attached during adulthood. There has been no general agreement on what kind of relationships are acknowledged as adult attachments. As Bowlby (1969) based his child attachment behaviour targets on older figures that are stronger and wiser, this can appear to be deceiving when applied to the changeable attachment behaviour and the sexual nature of some adult attachments. Neither Bowlby nor Ainsworth wrote much about adults and attachment and focused most of their studies on the mother-child relationship, as they believed it had a greater influence on their development. As a result, the information foundation of adult attachment is still developing and not yet final. Early attachment experiences are carried forward and contribute towards the adult personality. Although the bond may not be as extensive, research has proven that family members, friends



and even pets provide elements of attachment. (Sable, 2008). Hazen and Shaver (1987) conducted a study of adult attachment to explore the influence of attachment quality on romantic love. In their report they found that secure attachment was related to happy, loving relationships of adults who received a caring and attentive childhood. Another study carried out by Main and colleagues (George et al, 1996) based on Ainsworth's attachment patterns is the Adult Attachment interview. This study was aimed to explore the reasons why adults behave with regards to their childhood experiences. The individuals were asked to relay their relationships with their childhood attachment figures and to bring to mind occurrences which had remained in their memories, for example, separation, loss or rejection. A description was then asked for how their parents' behaviour may have influenced their adult personality. Their security was determined by the individuals' capability to reflect on their happenings and to be able to describe them in an open and rational manner. The study resulted in finding that there is an attachment behavioural system that stays active throughout life. Although adults do not require the regular physical company of an attachment figure, as they do when an infant, they do need to know that they have trustworthy and reliable sources around when they are feeling scared, ill or just need reassurance. (Sable, 2008)

Finally, to conclude this essay, it is clear that attachment is a positive theory and the main negatives are from the studies created relating to adult attachment as they appear to be inconclusive. As attachment focuses on the importance of the amount of affection given in relationships, it seems to be the basis of all underlying problems that are surrounded in mental and

emotional reactions emitted by both adults and infants. Social deprivation does appear to create an adverse reaction to children being reared in that environment and thus emphasises and confirms why attachment bonds play an important role in children developing mentally healthily and secure and able to lead a strong and grounded life as an adult.

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