Ainsworth and Bell (1970)

*Exploration and Separation: Illustrated by The Behavior of One-Year-Olds in a Strange Situation.*

**Background and aim:** Ainsworth and Bell were interested in the interaction between attachment, exploration, separation protest, stranger anxiety and proximity seeking. They believed that this could be most easily observed in a controlled laboratory environment and therefore the strange situation was created. The aim of the study was to highlight some distinctive features of the evolutionary view of attachment, by investigating interactions between the infant’s attachment behaviour and other observable behaviours which appear in different attachment types, and furthermore noting parallels between strange situation behaviour and behaviour reported in other relevant contexts. Ainsworth and Bell suggest that this study is a useful illustration of the shifting balance between exploratory and attachment behaviour as part of the evolutionary view of attachment.

**Method:** This was a controlled observation, where infants’ interactions with their mother were observed through a one-way mirror. 56 infants of white, middle-class parents took part. 23 of them had been observed longitudinally from birth and were 51 weeks old at the time of this study. The other 33 infants were 49 weeks old.

The strange situation consisted of eight episodes in a standard order for all participants. The situation was designed to be novel enough to elicit exploratory behaviour, and strange so that it would evoke fear and heighten attachment behaviour. The room was a 9 x 9-foot square of clear floor space and also had chairs and toys. The 8 episodes were designed to measure a number of different observed behaviours including: the infant using the mother as a secure base in order to explore this strange situation; the infants’ reaction to the mother leaving – separation protest; the reaction to being alone with a stranger – stranger anxiety; and reaction when the mother returned to the room – proximity seeking. Inter-rater reliability of the observations was checked and agreement was found to be as high as 0.99.

**Results:** The children explored much less when with their mother compared to with the stranger. On the mother’s return the children interacted more with her than they did with the stranger. The children showed little distress when the stranger entered the room; this increased when the mother left, but decreased when she returned. The children cried again when the mother left them alone for the second time and this did not go down when the stranger entered. Search behaviour was greatest when left alone. The infants sought proximity with their mothers after she returned and this contact was maintained even more so when she returned a second time. This behaviour was shown towards the strangers occasionally. Some infants showed resistance to the mother on
her first return, while in the final episode over half demonstrated it, but less so to the stranger as time went on.

**Conclusions:** Exploration of a novel situation is dependent on the presence and reasonable proximity of the infant’s mother. Without the attachment figure there, exploration will be avoided and attachment behaviour will be heightened. Based on the findings of this and other studies, Ainsworth and Bell proposed that: Attachment behaviour may be increased or decreased by conditions, but we are predisposed to seek proximity to our attachment figure. Attachment behaviour is heightened in situations perceived as threatening. Attachment behaviour is incompatible with exploratory behaviour. Attachment behaviour may diminish or even disappear due to prolonged absence from the attachment figure, but is likely to re-emerge at reunion, with or without delay. There are individual differences in attachments, but this doesn’t mean there are differences in the strength of the attachment.

**Evaluation**

**Reliability and Validity:** This study was a controlled observation with a standardised procedure, with all participants being exposed to the 8 episodes. This meant extraneous variables were minimised and internal validity was high. Observed behaviours were agreed upon by observers – the study had high levels of inter-rater reliability.

**Sampling Bias and Ethnocentrism:** The participants in the study were white, middle class Americans. It is wrong to apply the findings from this study to all attachments across different cultures, as different cultures have different norms and values. The findings may not be replicated in a Collectivist culture, where a child may have more than one attachment figure. Furthermore, all caregivers in this study were mothers; therefore, the findings cannot be applied to attachments where the father is the main attachment figure.

**Usefulness of research:** Ainsworth and Bell’s research has been useful for parents and childcare practitioners. Separation from an attachment figure can be very distressing for infants; therefore, substitute care must be responsive and sensitive in order to minimise the effect of separation.

**Exam Style Questions**

Using the research by Ainsworth and Bell (1970), explain the development of attachment in babies and the impact of failure to develop attachments. (10)

Explain how the research by Ainsworth and Bell (1970), could inform the development of an attachment friendly environment. (10)