Fact sheet 1.11 Ainsworth, and Schaffer and Emerson's theory

Learning aim E2.1.2: Ainsworth

Learning aim E2.1.3: Schaffer and Emerson

Mary Ainsworth

John Bowlby influenced Mary Ainsworth's research following his theorising on a child's predisposition to develop an attachment behavioural system which seeks the availability of their familiar caregiver when they become distressed or are separated. Mary Ainsworth was a member of Bowlby's research group and drew on these findings, setting up laboratory experiments to observe children's behaviours in a number of situations when separated from and then subsequently reunited with their main caregivers.

The main stages of the study were:

1. Parent and baby enter room.
2. Parent remains inactive, baby is free to explore room.
3. Stranger joins parent and baby.
4. Parent leaves room.
5. Parent returns, settles baby and stranger leaves.
6. Parent leaves and baby is alone in the room.
7. Stranger returns and interacts with baby.
8. Parent returns again and stranger leaves.

Ainsworth's attachment theory has become very popular for social researchers and used extensively in research. The findings have been found to be potential predictors of later developmental outcomes including education, social relationships and mental health (stress indicators).

Schaffer and Emerson

Schaffer and Emerson's research was very much influenced by the work of Mary Ainsworth. Their study expanded on the work of Ainsworth through conducting observations of everyday interactions with children and different caregivers. While Ainsworth's studies focused on the type of attachment a child formed with their caregivers, Schaffer and Emerson focused more on the broader social environment in which attachment relations developed. Their findings demonstrated that children could form attachments to different caregivers and the quality of the attachments varied, depending upon factors such as the caregiver's availability and responsiveness.

These studies have been instrumental in informing social researchers not only of the importance of the social interactions between others but also the impact of the type of the attachment a child may have and the effects on their emotional development.

Further reading: Grossman (2002) explored quality of attachments formed and in predicting quality of attachment into adolescence as well as the role of the father in the attachment relationship.

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