

USE OF THE STRANGE SITUATION IN ATTACHMENT RESEARCH

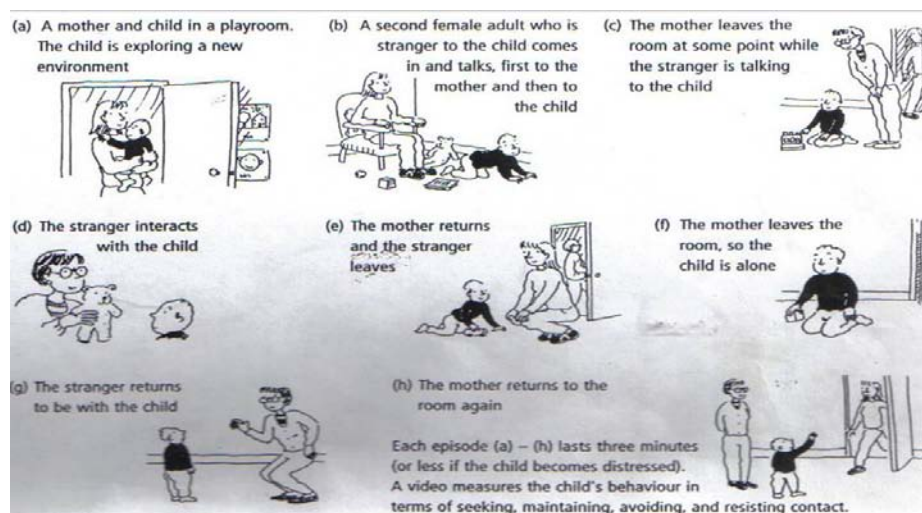
Introduction

Schaffer (1993) defines attachment as “a close emotional relationship between two people, characterised by mutual affection and a desire to maintain proximity (closeness).” The importance of forming attachments was recognised by **John Bowlby**, who saw the first attachment we form as being vital for healthy development, since it acts as a **prototype** for all other relationships. Bowlby called this the ‘**internal working model**’.

The first attachment that is formed is usually between the **mother and infant**, and the importance of this relationship has guided most of the research that has been done in this area. The main method of studying attachment is called the ‘**Strange Situation**’.

What is the “Strange Situation” and how has it been used in attachment research?

In order to study attachment, Ainsworth & Wittig (1969) devised a **controlled observation technique** they called the “Strange Situation” (SS). The SS is a **laboratory** with a set arrangement of furniture and attractive toys. Because the infants have to be mobile, they are typically aged between 12 and 18 months. The procedure is designed to record the *quality* of attachment, rather than the *amount* of attachment. There are **eight episodes** all together. With the exception of the first, in which the mother and infant are shown to the laboratory by a researcher, each lasts for **three minutes**, *unless* the infant becomes distressed.



Hidden observers take **four** measurements of the infant's behaviour:

1. **Willingness to explore** (how readily the infant explores the SS environment)
2. **Separation anxiety** (the unease the infant shows when mother leaves the room)
3. **Reunion behaviour** (the infant's reaction to the mother when she returns)
4. **Stranger anxiety** (the infant's response to the stranger)

In her first study using the SS Ainsworth looked at 26 mother-infant pairs. Using the SS, Ainsworth discovered that **three** distinct attachment types could be identified. These are called **secure attachment**, **insecure avoidant attachment**, and **insecure resistant attachment**. These three attachment types are described in detail in the next section.

How can the "Strange Situation" be evaluated?

Ainsworth's research using the SS has increased our understanding of social and emotional development in children, and the SS is the most commonly used way of studying attachment. Its use of a **standardised procedure** means that the method can easily be replicated by other researchers. However, the SS methodology has been criticised in several ways:

1. **Observer bias** (Observers seeing what they **expect** to see given that they know what the research is about)
2. **Reliability** (The infants should **consistently** behave in the same way each time it is placed in the 'Strange Situation')
3. **Validity** (Research shows that infants can be securely attached to one parent, but not to the other. Therefore, the 'Strange Situation' might only tell us about the child's attachment to the person it is with at the time it is tested, rather than its overall attachment type)
4. **Methodological shortcomings** (Could the 'Strange Situation' be replaced with something that doesn't require the complex procedure?)

5. **Artificiality** (the issue of low ecological validity) and **ethics** (putting infants in 'strange situations' can be stressful for them)

6. **Correlational research:** Ainsworth's research shows a strong correlation between maternal sensitivity and attachment types. She believes that the relationship is causal. However, just because two things are correlated, it does not *necessarily* mean that a change in one thing causes a change in another