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A Tribute to Mary Ainsworth: What there is still deeply to admire about her work

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The Theory of Mary Ainsworth

- “To the extent that the mother has been sensitively responsive to the baby’s communications and mother–infant interaction has been characteristically harmonious, the baby is able to use his mother as a secure base from which to explore even an unfamiliar situation, but responds to the stress introduced by the separation episodes with heightened attachment behavior, relatively uncomplicated by ambivalence and not blocked by competing, defensive, proximity-avoiding behavior” (Ainsworth, Bell & Stayton, 1971, p. 49).
- Tolstoy’s remark “Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way” (cited in Ainsworth, 1977a, p. 19).

The Findings of Mary Ainsworth

- Looking for attachment universals in Uganda she found substantial individual differences in infant-mother relationships (attached, non-attached, and anxiously attached infants in terms of using mother as secure base for exploration)
- Individual differences in infants to separation and reunion sequence (Ainsworth & Wittig, 1969).
- Discovers maternal sensitivity to infant signals as key determinant of quality of attachment (Ainsworth, 1967)
 - Perceived and correctly interpreted social signals (intentions)
 - Attuned interactions (timing, mood) leading to mutual delight
- Correlation of sensitivity to security in SSP was **0.78**
- Meta-analytic studies find much smaller effects (**0.24 – 0.32**)
 - Atkinson et al., 2000; Goldsmith & Alansky, 1987; Wolff & van Ijzendoorn, 1997)

Admirable Ideas of Mary Ainsworth

- **Modesty** of theorization: unlike Bowlby she is not providing an overarching (omnibus) theory of human behavior but a theory restricted to **mother-infant** relationships
- Individual differences is rooted in **adaptation of one human being to another** rather than nested in the capacities of a primary driver of the relationship
- **Pragmatic and practical**: Offers ways of coping with parenting; can't reinforce the infant out of making demands but rather can construct mental structures in the infant that will self-regulate these.
- Mother's **recognition** and respect for **infant's agency** improves **quality of infant's exploration** (not just quantity).

Psychoanalytic Ideas of Mary Ainsworth

- Adopted **psychoanalytic focus** on inner structure and processes forces focus onto inner organization maintaining attachment relationships (neurophysiological, subject to developmental change)
- Communicative and relational role of close bodily contact
 - she cited Freud's statement that the mother in **stroking, kissing, and rocking** the baby is fulfilling her task "**in teaching him how to love**" (Ainsworth, 1969b, p. 972)
 - she referred to Winnicott "who considered physical **holding** as so 'basic a form of loving' that he extended it to cover the total environmental provision" (Ainsworth, 1969b, p. 978).
- Drawing on her Ganda study, she tentatively proposed that, under certain conditions, sucking and rooting are precursor attachment behaviors that may become tied into the attachment relationship

Some conceptual reasons why are more recent findings less sensitive to sensitivity

- **Sensitivity** for Ainsworth is not a maternal attribute but rather it is a **relational construct**
- Circular causation: there is no separation of **dependent** and **independent** variable (an *interactive spiral*)
 - She refers to the infant-mother unit as “*an interacting spiral*”
- Interactive behaviors have a **communicative function**
 - Talks of “*behavioral conversations*”
- Ainsworth considers **dyadic harmony** and the organized whole of a relationship (a gestalt)
 - She distinguishes between **measurement** and **assessment** where the latter is about noting patterns of behavioural descriptions

Implications for measuring sensitivity

- **Sensitivity** for Ainsworth should be measured naturalistically (Pederson & Moran, 1996; Pederson et al., 1998; Pederson et al., 2015) **r=0.51-0.65**
- Observations should be **prolonged** to provide multiple opportunities for a **range of reactions** (e.g. distress signals)
- **Home** observation allows for the **contextualization** of behaviour (meaning)
 - Is baby's reaction to mother reading to her because this does not normally happen
- Measurement should be **repeated**
 - Reduce **noise**
 - Checked for **reliability** between coders
- Measurement should be backed by narrative description
- **Examples** should be given to justify each rating

The Methodology of Mary Ainsworth

- Descriptive, longitudinal, observational study in an era strongly biased to Skinnerian and Hullian theory and to the virtues of objective, laboratory research.
- A cluster of skills
 - Her dissertation research on Blatz's security theory → a framework for the concepts of safe haven and secure base (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991).
 - Early clinical work (projective techniques) cultivated a search for patterns of responses, rather than single indicators of a concept.
 - Her observational skills were fostered during her work with Robertson on hospitalized infants
 - Field work in Uganda primed to identify phenomena that transcend cultural differences

The Methodology of Mary Ainsworth

- Theory driven observations
 - Ethology → emphasis on interaction as communication (sensitivity is sensitivity to signals)
- Small sample research (two main studies Uganda and Baltimore totaling N of 52)
- “back-and-forthing” between antecedent and outcome
- Simple statistics

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Thank you Mary Ainsworth for
all this and also for the great
students you produced!!

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