

ATTACHMENT: STRANGE SITUATION

Outline and evaluate Ainsworth's Strange Situation method

The Strange Situation method was proposed by **Mary Ainsworth** as a way of measuring how infants respond to separations and reunions with their caregiver. It allows psychologists to identify different attachment styles seen in young children such as secure, insecure-avoidant, or insecure-resistant. This is measured using a standardised procedure in a structured observation in order to assess and measure the quality of attachment. The observation is carried out in an artificial setting designed to appear as a normal waiting room/ playroom. It has 8 pre-determined stages. In stage 1 the mother and child enter the playroom, and in stage 2 the child is encouraged to explore the room. In stage 3 a stranger enters and attempts to interact with the child, when in stage 4 the mother leaves, leaving the stranger in the room with the child. In stage 5 the mother re-enters the room and the stranger quietly leaves. In stage 6 the mother leaves the child alone in the room, when in stage 7 the stranger returns and attempts to comfort the child, before the final stage 8 when the mother returns. Ainsworth was measuring a number of variables during the procedure; **separation anxiety** (child's anxious response when the mother leaves the room), **stranger anxiety** (child's anxious response when the stranger enters the room), **proximity-seeking/ safe base behaviour** (child actively seeks closeness to the mother or tries to find comfort in where she was seated after leaving the room), and **reunion behaviour** (child's ability to seek solace and calm when reunited with its mother). Ainsworth & Bell (1970) used this method to assess a group of American children and found 70% to be securely attached.

One strength of the Strange Situation method is it is considered to be **reliable** allowing for easy replication because of its standardised procedure. All participants go through the same 8-stage process. This method has been replicated and many studies have found similar results to Ainsworth. In addition, **Bick et al (2012)** demonstrated high **inter-rater reliability** of the Strange Situation, with observers agreeing on infant attachment classifications 94% of the time. This high level of agreement confirms the procedure's consistency and **objectivity** in measuring attachment behaviours under controlled conditions.

However, one weakness of the Strange Situation method is that as it is conducted under artificial conditions it lacks **ecological validity** as it may not represent the attachment types when observed in more naturalistic settings. The procedure has also been criticised for its **internal validity** with regard to how it measures the key variables, it could be that the children are displaying personality characteristics/ temperament not attachment types. Another weakness of the Strange Situation method is it raises **ethical issues** using children in the procedure and creating a situation which deliberately instigates anxiety. This causes psychological harm and mental stress for the young children in the procedure.