

The Strange Situation

Mary Ainsworth (1971)

A controlled observation procedure used to classify attachment behaviour in mobile babies and toddlers.



Mary Ainsworth with a mother and toddler

The seven stages of the Strange Situation

- 1 The caregiver encourages the child to explore.
- 2 A stranger enters the room.
- 3 The caregiver leaves the child with the stranger.
- 4 The caregiver returns and the stranger leaves.
- 5 The child is left alone.
- 6 The stranger returns.
- 7 The caregiver returns.

What the Strange Situation measures

- Proximity seeking — how close the child stays to the caregiver
- Secure-base behaviour — regularly visiting the caregiver while exploring
- Separation anxiety
- Stranger anxiety
- Response to reunion

Strengths of the procedure

- Very good inter-rater reliability
- Good predictive validity

Weaknesses of the procedure

- May be culture-bound
- May be confounded by infant temperament



The child's response to reunion at stages 4 and 7 is the most important behaviour measured.

Type A (insecure avoidant)

Child explores and does not visit the caregiver. They show no distress at separation and when in the presence of a stranger, and don't need calming on reunion.

Type B (secure attachment)

Child explores but regularly visits the caregiver. They show mild distress at separation and when in the presence of a stranger, but are easily calmed on reunion.

Type C (insecure resistant)

Child is clingy and does not explore the room. They show great distress at separation and when in the presence of a stranger, and are hard to calm on reunion.

Reference

Ainsworth, M. D. S., Bell, S. M. and Stayton, D. J. (1971) 'Individual differences in Strange Situation behaviour of one-year-olds', in H. R. Schaffer (ed.) *The Origins of Human Social Relations*, Academic Press.

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