

AQA specification for Topic 3: Attachment

- Cultural variations in attachment, including van Ijzendoorn.

◆ Key term

- **Cultural variations** in attachment are the variety of attachment types (secure, insecure-avoidant, insecure-resistant) that exist across different cultures. Research has shown the types of attachments that exist between the mother and baby are often due to different cultural child-rearing practices.

◆ Introduction

Many of the studies into attachment types, such as Ainsworth's study, have been criticised for being culturally specific, because they have mainly based their research evidence on babies that have been raised in the American culture. In order to counter this criticism, psychologists have applied the Strange Situation experiment to a variety of different cultures in order to see if Ainsworth's explanations into attachment types can be applied universally.



AN 'EYE' ON THE STUDY

Cultural studies of attachment

(Van Ijzendoorn and Kroonenberg, 1988)

Aim

- Van Ijzendoorn and Kroonenberg investigated cross-cultural variation, in order to find out if Ainsworth's classification of attachment types can be applied across other cultures, or whether it is culturally specific.

Procedure

- They carried out a meta-analysis on 32 studies that had used the Strange Situation technique to test the attachment type between the mother and the infant.
- This involved over 2000 children from eight different countries, five Western countries (USA, Great Britain, Netherlands, Sweden, West Germany) and three non-Western countries (Israel, Japan and China).

Findings and conclusions

Results – see Table 1 (below)

- **Consistency across cultures:** The overall pattern of attachment types was similar to Ainsworth's findings across all cultures. Secure attachment (Type B) was the most common in all eight countries. The lowest percentage of secure attachment was shown in China and the highest in Great Britain.
- **Difference in insecure-avoidant attachments:** There were significant differences between cultures with regards to insecure attachments. Insecure-avoidant attachment (Type A) was more common in Western cultures, with the highest percentage in West Germany; and lowest in non-Western cultures, e.g. Israel and Japan, where it was rare.
- **Difference in insecure-resistant attachments:** In the non-Western cultures (China, Japan and Israel), the results showed a high proportion of insecure-resistant attachment (Type C), in comparison to Western cultures. China was the only exception; the percentage of avoidant and resistant types was the same.



- *Variation within the same country:* Another key finding was that there was 1.5 times greater variation within the same cultures (countries) than between different cultures. For example, in the three separate sample studies from West Germany, the researchers found very different attachment types. In the only two samples taken from Japan, one study found that none of the babies showed Type A attachment, whereas the other study showed Type A to be approximately 20%, which is close to the results for Ainsworth's (1988) original study carried out in America.

Country	Number of studies	(Type B) % Secure	(Type A) % Insecure-avoidant	(Type C) % Insecure-resistant
Great Britain	1	75%	22%	3%
USA	18	65%	21%	14%
Sweden	1	74%	22%	4%
Netherlands	4	67%	26%	7%
West Germany	3	57%	35%	8%
Japan	2	68%	5%	27%
China	1	50%	25%	25%
Israel	2	64%	7%	29%
Total studies	32			
Overall average		65%	21%	14%

Conclusions

- The overall universal global pattern in attachment types seems to be similar to that found in the USA, suggesting the secure attachment type is also the norm in other cultures.
- There are significant cultural variations in attachment types, especially in terms of avoidant and resistant insecure attachments.
- There are greater intra-cultural variations (within) than inter-cultural variations (between) in attachment types between the mother and the infant.



AN 'EYE' ON THE STUDY

Japanese infants

(Takahashi, 1990)

- Van Ijzendoorn and Kroonenberg's findings showed that a high proportion of Japanese babies (27%) were classified as Type C (insecure resistant) in comparison to other countries. This was supported by a later study by Takahashi (1990), who investigated 60 middle-class Japanese infants using the Strange Situation test. He found that a relatively high proportion of attachments in Japanese infants were classified Type C (32%). One explanation is that Japanese mothers tend to keep much closer body contact throughout the day with their infants. Japanese infants are rarely separated from their mothers, left alone, or left with a stranger at such an early age. Therefore, a Japanese infant would have found some parts of the Strange Situation technique (separation from mother or being with a stranger) extremely distressing because of the unusualness of such an experience. The Japanese infants' response of displaying high levels of separation anxiety appeared to demonstrate an insecure attachment, but may, in fact, have been due to the unfamiliarity of the experience.



AN 'EYE' ON THE STUDY

German infants

(Grossman and Grossman, 1991)

- Van Ijzendoorn and Kroonenberg's findings showed that the German infants had the highest Type A (insecure-avoidant attachment) classification (35%) in comparison to the other countries. This is further supported by an earlier study by Grossman and Grossman (1991), who studied German infants using the Strange Situation test and found that 52% were insecure-avoidant, whereas 35% were securely attached (compared with around 65% in the USA). The high percentage of German infants showing insecure-avoidant attachment can be explained in the different approach to child-rearing practices. German child-rearing practices emphasise **interpersonal distance** between the parent and the infant. German mothers encourage their children to be more independent and encourage non-clinging behaviour from early on, more so than other cultures. This may explain why most German babies were less affected by the mother's absence; they were less inclined to display proximity-seeking behaviour or separation anxiety when the mother left the room in the 'Strange Situation' experiment.

◆ Explaining the differences for cultural variations for types of attachments

- At face value, Van Ijzendoorn and Kroonenberg's cultural research showed a high proportion of infants from Japan, China, Israel and West Germany as having an insecure attachment (Type A or C). It would be wrong to assume that infants in such cultures are less securely attached to their mothers than in other cultures, demonstrating that replicating the Strange Situation test in other cultures is inappropriate. Explanations for cultural variation in attachment types point to another reason – cultural differences in child-rearing practices and attitudes.

◆ Evaluation

Strengths

- ✓ **Population validity.** A strength of Van Ijzendoorn's (1988) study is that it has high population validity. This is because it involved studying a large sample size of over 2000 children, from within different cultures and between different cultures. This means we can make general statements about attachment types within and between cultures, both for collectivist and individualistic cultures. For instance, secure attachments are the most common across all types of cultures. Therefore, the findings have high external validity.
- ✓ **Study was ethical.** Another strength of Van Ijzendoorn's (1988) study is that it did not raise any ethical issues. This is because the researchers analysed secondary data (meta-analysis) to investigate the findings of studies using the Strange Situation test in different cultures. This means the researchers were free from potentially causing psychological harm, as would occur if the researchers conducted the Strange Situation test themselves. Psychologists have argued it is unacceptable to place babies and their mothers in stressful situations just to test the infants' attachment type. Therefore, Van Ijzendoorn's meta-analysis study is an appropriate method to use when investigating cross-cultural differences in attachment behaviour.

Weaknesses

- ✗ **Uneven sample.** Van Ijzendoorn and Kroonenberg's meta-analysis has been criticised because of the limited number of studies in some countries. Although the meta-analysis was carried out in eight countries, the range in sample size between Western and non-Western cultures was not evenly distributed because there was a very limited sample coming from non-Western countries. For example, 27 of the studies were from Western countries and the remaining five were from non-Western countries. Only one was from China, two from Japan, and two from Israel. This means that there is a problem of generalisation from a limited sample about cultural variation in attachment types.
- ✗ **Cross-cultural studies suffer from imposed etic.** Van Ijzendoorn and Kroonenberg's research on cross-cultural variation has been criticised for suffering from an **imposed etic**. This is where a culturally specific idea is wrongly imposed on another culture. This is because the Strange Situation technique was developed in America, to test attachment behaviours based on American cultural norms, and is not appropriate for making cross-cultural comparisons of attachment types. For instance, Ainsworth, an American, assumed that the mild 'separation anxiety' was an indication of secure attachment. However, Takahashi (1990) suggested that in non-Western countries (collectivist cultures) such as Japan and China, infants are rarely left alone or with a stranger. Therefore, this unusual experience would account for the extreme distress response it caused in the Strange Situation test. This does not mean the Japanese infants had an insecure attachment with their mother but shows different child-rearing practices. This means the Strange Situation technique may be low in ecological validity because the findings might not give a true reflection of cultural variations in attachment and as a result, van Ijzendoorn and Kroonenberg's meta-analysis study may be inherently flawed.
- ✗ **Internal validity questioned.** Van Ijzendoorn and Kroonenberg's meta-analysis research in cross-cultural variation has been criticised for possibly having low internal validity. This is because the Strange Situation test may not be an accurate 'measuring tool' to determine mother-infant attachment types. Although the infant-mother relationship has a strong influence on attachment types, there are other factors that can affect attachment relationships. Kagan (1984) argued that the baby's temperament (personality) can also determine this. Some babies do not require the mother's maternal interest, which makes it difficult to establish an attachment bond and this will affect how the mother responds to the infant. Also, children who have been in daycare may display 'insecurely-avoidant' behaviour because they are used to being separated from their mother, and not 'insecurely-avoidant'. This means that Van Ijzendoorn and Kroonenberg's findings may be flawed, because the Strange Situation test may actually be measuring the difference in temperament between cultures, rather than infant-mother parenting style.

Practice exam questions

1. In van Ijzendoorn's cross-cultural investigations of attachment, which one of the following countries was found to have the highest percentage of anxious-avoidant children?

Circle **one** letter only.

A. China

B. Germany

C. Great Britain

D. Japan

[1 mark]

2. Explain what is meant by the term 'cultural variations'.

[2 marks]

3. Describe the procedure of one study into cultural variations in attachments.

[4 marks]

4. Explain one criticism of research into cultural variations in attachments.

[3 marks]

5. Describe one or more studies that have investigated cultural variations in attachments.

[6 marks]

6. Discuss research into cultural variations in attachments.

[12 marks AS, 16 marks A-level]