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Empirical Data on the Ontogeny of the German Social Character and Cross-Cultural Comparisons

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Attachment theory and research derived from it

Attachment theory, developed by Bowlby (1969/1982, 1973, 1980), states that the child's tie to the mother is primary, not secondary to need satisfaction as claimed by Freudian psychoanalysis, and that it was selected in the course of evolution because of its survival value.

Bowlby developed attachment theory starting from the observation of the responses of infants and small children to major separations from the mother due to clear-cut events such as hospitalization. The child's response goes through three stages: protest, despair and detachment.

On the other hand, researchers have been using an experimental tool [002] devised by Mary Ainsworth (Ainsworth et al., 1978), the Strange Situation, which consists in standardized minor separations. Ainsworth's original sample consisted of 26 mother-infant pairs from the Baltimore area. In the Strange Situation (SS) the baby is observed in an unfamiliar setting in various combinations: with the mother, with a stranger, alone, and when the mother returns. Three groups of infants were distinguished in this standardized situation at 12 months of age: (1) group B, the largest (57%), was characterized by secure attachment: the baby responds to reunion by trying to be close to mother; (2) group C (17%), defined as ambivalent: the seeking of contact is mixed with angry resistance; (3) group A (26%), defined as avoidant, avoids the mother upon reunion. In the A group, no anger towards the mother is shown in the SS, but it is shown in other situations. Both the second and the third group are defined as anxiously or insecurely attached.

The SS is staged at 12 months of age because only by that time are two relevant innate behavioral systems fully developed in the child: attachment and fear of strangers. At a few weeks, an infant does not discriminate between strangers and familiars. Later, it smiles at strangers. At around eight months, as Spitz has described, fear of strangers is fully developed (Bowlby, 1969, pp. 324-325). Following Freud, and not Spitz, Bowlby considers these two behaviors as distinct: the child moves away from something strange because of fear, and moves towards an attachment-figure because of separation-anxiety (Bowlby, op. cit., p. 330). This seems to be the ontogeny of two of the basic patterns described by Karen Horney (moving toward, against, away from).

Home observations were also conducted by Ainsworth during the first year [003] of



life, prior to observations in the SS. Correlations were established between behaviors observed at home and those observed in the SS. The mothers of secure infants showed far greater sensitivity to the signals and communications of the infant. Mothers of group C infants were found insensitive to signals. Mothers of group A infants were found to be rejecting as well as insensitive. In particular, Main and Weston (1982, pp. 45-47) found that infant avoidance was correlated with the mother's aversion to physical contact, the mother's angry behavior and the mother's inexpressiveness.

This theory should thus direct the attention of clinicians to the widespread occurrence of separation anxiety, due not only to the major separations described by Bowlby but also to covert events such as the mother's emotional unavailability.

Mary Main, working in Berkeley, later observed a fourth group, D, characterized by disorganized behavior. This behavior appears linked to inappropriate role reversal in the relationship with the parent (Main et al., 1985, pp. 79 and 83).

The mothers' behavior has been related in various research projects (reviewed by Ricks, 1985) to the mother's childhood memories, thus leading to the empirical investigation of the *transgenerational transmission* of these patterns. Main's Adult Attachment Interview (Main and Goldwyn, 1985) has become the major research instrument in this connection. It has revealed, for instance, that the parents of many insecurely attached children have an idealized image of their parents, in contrast with painful episodes in their actual interaction with them. Instead of acknowledging this discrepancy, [004] they tend to reproduce the painful episodes with their own children (Liotti, 1991). Through this instrument, attachment research, which is basically prospective, is being integrated with retrospective data, similar to those observed by psychoanalysis.

Mary Main has also stressed that reunion responses to parents are indicative of what Bowlby calls *internal working models* of the relationship, based on previous experience (Main et al., 1985, p. 69).

Finally, Main also discusses in particular the implications of avoidant behavior (Main and Weston, 1982). Avoidance of a rejecting mother requires explanation, because, from an ethological point of view, threats of separation from the mother should activate the attachment system. Ethological explanations suggest that avoidance may function paradoxically in the service of proximity by reducing the likelihood of aggressive behavior in the performer or in the other animal. Main instead considers avoidance in humans as real avoidance of a conflictual situation, in order to maintain control over behavior and avoid disorganization (op. cit., pp. 51-54).

One constant finding in these studies is that infants' patterns of attachment with their fathers were independent of those from their mothers. Therefore, at this stage, the patterns are a property of the relationship and [005] not of the infant itself.

Cross-cultural studies

These studies have been replicated in different countries, and particularly in Germany by the Grossmanns, thus allowing cross-cultural comparisons. This will be the main focus of this paper.

The Grossmanns (Grossmann et al., 1985) carried out their research at first in North Germany, at Bielefeld, later in South Germany, in Regensburg. These authors also attempted to assess the infant's contribution to the relationship by applying Brazelton's neonatal test.



The distribution of the patterns of attachment in North Germany was strikingly different from that in the US:

	A	B	C
	avoidant	secure	resistant
Baltimore	26%	57%	17%
Bielefeld	49%	33%	12%

Instead, the distribution of these patterns in Regensburg is more similar [006] to that in the US.

If the ethological foundation of attachment theory is valid, the differences in distribution should be due to cultural practices. Let us take a closer look at the German results. To observations at home and in the SS, the German authors added the role of the infant's contribution and the role of cultural demands.

As regards the infant's contribution, it was shown that orienting ability at birth and maternal sensitivity make independent contributions to the prediction of attachment classifications. This confirms the importance of constitutional components stressed by Fromm (e.g. in Fromm, 1991).

As regards cultural factors, home observations showed that at 10 months the quality of holding differed in Bielefeld as compared to Baltimore: the Bielefeld mothers were generally less tender and affectionate. This correlates with the much higher percentage of avoidant children in the SS. The authors explain these linkages with the cultural demand for premature self-reliance: mobile infants are discouraged from staying too close to mother. These demands for self-reliance were not linked to other forms of maternal rejection. „The ideal is an independent, nonclinging infant who does not make demands on the parents but rather unquestioningly obeys their commands“ (Grossmann et al., 1985, p. 253). One comment to this description is that self-reliance and submission to authority are two distinct, if not actually contradictory, concepts.

The British ethologist Robert Hinde (1982) has discussed some implications of these findings. He points out that Ainsworth considers B babies the norm, [007] „to be what nature intended“; she regards infants as 'pre-adapted' to sensitive mothers. Hinde, however, points out that also animal groups are complex. There is no such thing as one optimal strategy, but rather, several „conditional strategies“. „Natural selection would act to favor individuals with a range of potential styles from which they select appropriately“ (p. 71). In the human case, also learning intervenes to produce socialization in a given culture. Hinde also adds that natural selection would favor not only protective mothers, but also mothers who promote their infant's independence (p. 74). In other words, in principle, the high percentage of A babies in North Germany is not necessarily pathological. On the other hand, there still may be an optimal strategy, and second-hand strategies with higher costs to the individual (Main and Weston, 1981).

Other replications of Ainsworth's studies were carried out in Israel and in Japan. In Israel (Sagi et al., 1985), a high proportion of C attachments (one third of the sample) was observed in kibbutz infants, but not in city infants. Also in Japan (Miyake et al.,



1985), more group C classifications were obtained than in the US. In both researches the SS was considered to be too stressful, due to the infants' inexperience with strangers. In Japan, separation had to be shortened for two thirds of the children. In Israel, nearly one-third of the sessions had to be terminated prematurely.

One factor affecting insecurity in Israeli children may be the fact that, in traditional kibbutzim, at night children stay in communal sleeping quarters and are attended by unfamiliar women (Sagi et al., 1985, p. 259).

Also the Japanese study, like the German one, showed an influence of neonatal temperament on future classification: there was a clear relationship [008] between early irritability and subsequent C classification. The infant's temperament interacts with maternal behavior in determining the outcome: the more the mother was intrusive, the more an irritable baby was likely to be classified later in the C group (Miyake et al., 1985, p. 296). Finally, as regards cultural influences, the authors point out that mother-child relationships in Japan are characterized by close physical contact, with very few separations (op. cit., p. 280). Japanese mothers thus seem to be situated at the opposite extreme from North German mothers, with American mothers somewhere in between.

Longitudinal studies

One answer to these questions may come from longitudinal studies, which show the developmental consequences of these patterns.

Longitudinal studies generally show a stability of attachment classifications. For example, Main and Cassidy (1988) found that, at 6 years, 80% of children responded to reunion with the parent in manners consistent with the original attachment pattern.

In their own longitudinal analyses, Grossmann and his co-workers (1988) – in addition to studying the relationship between the child and its attachment figure – also studied the individual in the absence of attachment figures, in which case the child's behavior is presumably governed by the internal working models based on the earlier relationship. At 5 years of age, the Regensburg children, belonging to a non-risk group, were observed in preschool. The differences in, for example, behavior patterns such as [009] isolation or hostility, between children previously classified as secure and insecure were present but statistically not very significant. Sroufe and his group, working in Minnesota (Erickson et al., 1985), found a clearer differentiation between the two groups in a high-risk sample. Presumably, high-risk children are less able to compensate for an insecure attachment relationship with the mother by a secure one with an alternative attachment figure.

As Greenberg and Speltz (1988) point out, the linkages between infant attachment and later behavior may be complex: there may be multiple pathways leading from early attachment patterns to later conduct disorders. An important intermediate variable is that of peer relationships. As Cicchetti and Toth (1991, p. 3) point out, both externalizing (hostility) and internalizing (depression, withdrawal) disorders in children lead to rejection on the part of peers, and this, in turn, leads to later disorders.

Different types of isolation may be arrived at via different developmental pathways. Rubin et al. (1991) have described two model pathways. In pathway 1, maternal rejection – as already described above – gives rise to an avoidant attachment relationship. In preschool, A babies tend to direct aggression to their peers. This leads to isolation by peers, namely to social rejection through a negative peer relationship. This, in turn,



tends to give rise to externalizing disorders (further aggression, delinquent behavior). In pathway 2, maternal nonresponsivity, as we have seen, gives rise to resistant attachment. The C baby clings to the parent and avoids exploration. Its withdrawal leads to isolation from peers. Here, isolation is due to an insufficient peer relationship. This may later be followed by isolation by peers. The outcome may be an internalizing disorder (anxiety, [010] depression).

Conclusion

The relevance of this abundant research to social psychology must still be worked out. The Grossmanns discussed it at the beginning of their studies, but did not pursue the matter further. It is possible that in the avoidant Bielefeld children we see the early ontogeny of the authoritarian character: because of premature training to obedience (rather than self-reliance), tender feelings are repressed, and anger is not expressed towards the authority figure, but tends to be displaced onto other objects. As Hinde suggests, children may be pre-adapted to this alternative strategy, which, through the process which Fromm calls „social selection“ (Fromm and Maccoby, 1970, p. 232), may be encouraged in an authoritarian society.

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Summary: Empirical data on the ontogeny of the German social character, and cross-cultural comparisons

Attachment theory, as developed by Bowlby, and empirical research derived from it, beginning with Ainsworth's „Strange Situation“ and the correlated home observations, are described. The studies of the transgenerational transmission of patterns and of the internal working models of the relationship, as well as longitudinal studies, are reported. The main focus of the paper is on cross-cultural studies, carried out in Germany, Israel and Japan. In North Germany, as compared to the U. S., there was a higher frequency of avoidant behavior in babies. This finding has been linked with the cultural demand for premature self-reliance. It is suggested that in the avoidant North German children we see the early ontogeny of the authoritarian character.

Riassunto: Dati empirici sull'ontogenesi del carattere sociale tedesco e confronti transculturali

Vengono descritte la teoria dell'attaccamento, così come è stata sviluppata da Bowlby, e la ricerca empirica che ne è derivata, a cominciare dalla Strange Situation della Ainsworth e dalle osservazioni in casa ad essa correlate. Vengono pure riferiti gli studi sulla trasmissione transgenerazionale, sui modelli di lavoro interni e gli studi longitudinali. L'argomento principale del lavoro è costituito dagli studi transculturali condotti in Germania, Israele e Giappone. Nella Germania settentrionale, in confronto agli Stati Uniti, venne trovata una frequenza maggiore di comportamenti evitanti nei bambini. Questo dato è stato correlato con la richiesta culturale di una prematura fiducia in sé. Si suggerisce che nei bambini evitanti della Germania settentrionale noi vediamo l'ontogenesi precoce del carattere autoritario.

Resumen de datos empíricos sobre el carácter social alemán y comparaciones transculturales

En la ponencia se describen la teoría del apego, como tal desarrollada por Bowlby y una investigación empírica derivada de ella, comenzando con la „extraña situación“ de Ainsworth y las correspondientes observaciones que se refieren al caso. Se describen, asimismo, los estudios de la transmisión de modelos transgeneracionales y de los modelos que trabajan internamente como también estudios longitudinales. El argumento principal de la ponencia se refiere a estudios transculturales desarrollados en Alemania, Israel y Japón. Comparado con los EEUU, en Alemania del Norte se registró una mayor frecuencia de comportamiento esquivo en los bebés. Dicho resultado ha sido relacionado con la exigencia cultural de una prematura confianza en sí mismo. Se sugiere que en los niños en cuestión se ve la ontogenia precoz del carácter autoritario.