

Mary Salter Ainsworth

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Mary Salter Ainsworth, (born December 1, 1913, Glendale, Ohio – died March 21, 1999, Charlottesville, Virginia), was an American Canadian developmental psychologist best known for her contributions to attachment theory, including the Strange Situation Procedure for assessing individual differences in attachment.

Ainsworth was the eldest of three daughters. When she was five, the family moved to Toronto, Canada. Ainsworth's parents were graduates from Dickinson College and valued education. A weekly trip to the library was a regular event for Ainsworth and her family. At 15, Ainsworth read *Character and the Conduct of Life* (1972), by the American psychologist William McDougal. The book inspired her to study psychology.

In fall 1929, Ainsworth entered the University of Toronto, where she studied psychology. She also completed both her master's (1936) and Ph.D. (1939) at the University of Toronto. While there, Ainsworth researched the relationship between attitudes and emotional responses under the supervision of Sperrin N. F. Chant for her master's thesis. She studied personality development and attachment under the supervision of William E. Blatz for her doctoral dissertation. Blatz was known for his theory of personality development, called security theory, which articulates the importance of a secure reliance on parents to healthy development. After graduation, Ainsworth remained at the University of Toronto as an instructor for three years.

Ainsworth's experiences at the University of Toronto led her to devote her career to research relevant to personality development in young children.

In 1942, Ainsworth joined the Canadian Women's Army Corps (CWAC) where she became an Army Examiner. Her duties were to administer tests, interview, and provide counseling with the goal of matching female army recruits to the jobs within the army to which they were best suited. After World War II ended, Ainsworth briefly served as the Superintendent of Women's Rehabilitation in the Department of Veterans' Affairs before returning to the University of Toronto as an Assistant Professor of Psychology. While an assistant professor, Ainsworth continued her work on security theory, co-directing a research team with Blatz that focused on developing scales to assess security in various areas of life. Ainsworth met her husband, Leonard Ainsworth, during this time.

The couple relocated to London for L. Ainsworth to complete his doctoral work. Ainsworth accepted a research position at the Tavistock Clinic directed by Dr. John Bowlby. Together, Bowlby and Ainsworth studied the effect of separation from the mother in early childhood on personality development. The time spent at the Tavistock Clinic was pivotal to Ainsworth's later career. It was at the Tavistock Clinic that she decided that naturalistic observation was the best way to explore problems in personality development.

Ainsworth relocated Kampala, Uganda with her husband in 1953. There, Ainsworth conducted the Ganda Study using naturalistic observation. Ainsworth observed 26 mothers and 28 infants across nine months. Based on observational data from the Ganda Study, Ainsworth began to describe the signs of attachment development and formulate ideas about the quality of infant to mother relationships relative to individual differences. After two years in Africa, Ainsworth relocated to Baltimore, Maryland, where she accepted a position as a lecturer at Johns

Hopkins University. She became an associate (1958) and then full (1963) professor of developmental psychology at the university. She continued her work with John Bowlby on Attachment Theory during this time. She and her husband divorced in 1960.

Ainsworth launched the Baltimore Study, modeled on her earlier work in Uganda, in 1963. The study included monthly home visits to 26 families for 12 months after the birth of a child. Visits included naturalistic observation and qualitative description of mother-infant interactions during feeding, play, and distress episodes. The final observation occurred in Ainsworth's laboratory, and it consisted of a standardized mother-infant separation and reunification procedure called the Strange Situation. The procedure allowed Ainsworth to observe each infant in a stressful situation. She discovered that infants' reactions to the Strange Situation could be predicted by the qualitative observation of maternal sensitivity and harmonious interaction that had occurred over the previous 12 months. Three patterns of individual differences in attachment were observed: securely attached, anxious/avoidant, and anxious/resistant.

Ainsworth's work expanded Attachment Theory and inspired others to conduct longitudinal attachment studies in the United States, West Germany and Israel. In 1975, she joined the faculty at the University of Virginia, became Commonwealth Professor of Psychology in 1976 and retired as professor emeritus in 1984. Ainsworth received the American Psychological Association's Gold Medal Award for Life Achievement in the Science of Psychology in 1998. Ainsworth published over forty papers and books across her career including *Child Care and the Growth of Love* (1965) with John Bowlby, *Infancy in Uganda* (1967), and *Patterns of Attachment: A Psychological Study of the Strange Situation* (1978) with Mary Blehar, Everett Waters, and Sally Wall.

Further Reading

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