

Mary Ainsworth: Our Guide To Attachment Research

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In 1973 Klaus had the opportunity to visit Mary Ainsworth for the first time in Baltimore. Klaus had received a Ph. D. in experimental and comparative psychology in 1965, and Karin had looked for some years at psychological studies that were based on behavioral observation and guided by evolutionary thinking. Working at an Institute of Zoology in Germany, we were exposed to European ethology, which Klaus thought to be a most natural basis for developmental psychology. Some of Karin's work became eventually incorporated into a book by our mentor Bernhard Hassenstein (1973). The work motivated Karin to switch from mathematics to psychology for her master's degree, and Klaus to prepare for longitudinal research based on Bowlby's thinking and Ainsworth's research. At first, in Germany of the early 70s, we could not actually imagine to do what Mary Ainsworth did: Going directly into the homes of families and doing unabashed direct observations.

Mary Ainsworth gave Klaus more than encouragement. She carefully explained to him the bases for the Baltimore observations which had developed from her Uganda field studies in the later 50s (Ainsworth, 1967). Inge Bretherton acted as the stranger in the strange situation, Mary Blehar, Dick Tracy, and Sylvia Bell added to the demonstrations and explanations, and Mary Main looked at the exploratory side of the attachment - exploration balance (Main, 1973; Grossmann, Grossmann & Zimmermann, 1999). In many hours of discussion Mary Ainsworth convinced me that the potentials of

attachment theory for human development were well founded. Her enthusiasm and her dyadic concept of observable maternal sensitivity to the infant's communication "infected" Karin who immediately embarked on a year long observational pilot study with 6 highly cooperative mother-baby pairs. With Mary's continuous encouragement we ventured on our first longitudinal study in 1975 in Bielefeld, Northern Germany, which started as a replication of Ainsworth's Baltimore project, in order to show that her findings were robust across national and perhaps even cultural boundaries. Observing maternal and paternal sensitivity instead of asking parents about their child-rearing attitudes became such a central and important cornerstone of our research that we extended and adjusted her scale to all ages of the children from newborns to six-year olds. In a letter responding to a preliminary manuscript of our 1985 publication (Grossmann, Grossmann, Spangler, Suess, & Unzner, 1985), she expressed her satisfaction that we had replicated her "maternal sensitivity to the baby's signals" approach in that our home observations were written down in protocols instead of predetermined categories. Of course, she was happy to see our replication of her findings regarding the relation between maternal sensitivity and infant pattern of attachment. Our study, though, became known more because of the high percentage of insecure-avoidantly attached infants (Grossmann, Grossmann, Huber, Wartner, 1981) than for its many confirmations of Ainsworth's findings with a larger sample.

Although Mary Ainsworth never came to Germany, we had many opportunities to discuss our research with her either at various SRCD conferences, or during visits with her in her Charlottesville home. However, in contrast to Ainsworth's admirable stamina and endurance after transatlantic flights to England, as attested by Joan Stevenson-Hinde, I (Klaus) suffered more from exhaustion at 1 or 2 a.m. in the nights of arrival days. Two sterling Jefferson cups as a present from Mary to us are testimony to the generous servings of whisky during such extended nightly conversations.

In 1985 we were visiting scholars at Steven Suomi's Laboratory of Human Ethology at NIH. We piloted for physiological assessments of infants in the strange situation (Spangler & Grossmann, 1993). Mary Ainsworth came to stay with us in our apartment in Bethesda when she visited Marian Radke-Yarrow and Carolyn Zahn-Waxler to help with their analyses of the videotapes of attachment behavior of children with mothers suffering from bipolar depression. At that time, our second longitudinal project in Regensburg, Southern Germany, was on its way giving rise to more thorough discussions. A former student of mine, Ulrike Wartner, lived in Charlottesville and became a close friend of Mary's. Ulrike returned to Germany and replicated the enormously influential findings by Main, Kaplan & Cassidy (1985) about continuity of attachment quality from 1 to 6 years of age in our second longitudinal study in Regensburg (Wartner, Grossmann, Fremmer-Bombik, & Suess, 1994). The videotapes of the 6 year-reunions were analyzed in Charlottesville, and upon one of our next visits, we were surprised to hear Mary sing a German children's song about "Räuber Hotzenplotz" which she had picked up from one of the children. Mary Ainsworth was always eager, very fast, and excellent in learning all the newly devised assessments of patterns of attachment at preschool age, six years or based on the Adult Attachment Interview.

Karin participated in the first workshop by Mary Main on the Adult Attachment Interview in Charlottesville in 1985. Mary Ainsworth took part, and I (Karin) will always remember how Mary Ainsworth made us see the analogy between the interviewee's responses to the AAI questions and the babies movements in the Strange Situation during reunion: The responses of some mothers would turn away from the attachment questions and would focus on other topics, like the legs and

attention of the baby. Some mothers would address their attachment feelings openly and be cooperative with the interview format as well, exploring their thoughts around the question. Some mothers got caught so much in their attachment feelings and current anger that they remained focused on the topic hardly attending to the interview situation, like the baby that cannot separate again after his attachment system is aroused. This image of the organization of thoughts around the attachment issue has guided us in our research on the older children (Grossmann & Grossmann, 1991). Having observed maternal sensitivity to the infant's signals during the first year in Bielefeld, we could now show that a mother's state of mind, when the child was 6 years old, with respect to attachment was already reflected in her observable interactions with her baby 5 years earlier (Grossmann, Fremmer-Bombik, Rudolph & Grossmann, 1988).

In 1989 we were privileged to convince the University of Regensburg to convey a honorary doctoral degree in Developmental Psychology to John Bowlby. This was to follow, two years later, by an equal acknowledgment of the admirable work towards a deeper understanding of human development through empirical research by Mary Ainsworth. Unfortunately, already in the early 90s, Mary Ainsworth did not dare to accept such a strenuous invitation. It would have meant numerous additional visits to and presentations at different academic institutions who had eagerly invited her for public appearances. Attachment research had, by then, gained acceptance in Germany, to which we are proud to have contributed.

We owe our guide to attachment research, Mary Ainsworth, more than gratitude. She was always challenging our thinking, stimulating, deeply sympathetic, and very supportive. During one of our long conversations, she told us that she would have rather liked to write a book on the concept of maternal sensitivity, which to her was the central issue in attachment development. During our many years of attachment research, we recognized in what profound way she was right. Sensitivity to a person's needs, from infancy to adulthood, has become the central issue for our own conceptualizations. It was to be the central mind-set of attachment theoreticians and attachment researchers who were not just applying quick and readily available research methodology, but who developed life-long perspectives of attachment development (Grossmann, 1995; Grossmann,

Grossmann, & Zimmermann, 1999). Mary Ainsworth's notion that correct interpretations of signals and prompt and appropriate responses are the very essence of psychological security throughout development have become the most important guideline in our research, even in language discourse in adulthood (Grossmann, 1997; 1999).

We presently are in the process of analyzing the interviews with our by now 22 year old Bielefeld "children" about their friends and romantic partners. The quality and manner of their language discourse does indeed relate significantly to their mothers' sensitivity to their communications as infants 21 years earlier. Mary Ainsworth's intellectual power, her insights, her generosity, her admirably succinct, precise and vividly clear descriptions of the functioning of the attachment system will guide us further, even in her absence. Her outstanding sophistication and the stylistic elegance of her prose about attachment and its place in human development and conduct has been a rare and beautiful experience indeed. It has become part of our own lives, but we already miss her personal esteem and engaged involvement in our pursuit of longitudinal attachment research.

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