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From security to attachment: Mary Ainsworth's contribution to attachment theory

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FROM SECURITY TO ATTACHMENT

MARY AINSWORTH'S CONTRIBUTION TO ATTACHMENT THEORY

LENNY VAN ROSMALEN

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FROM SECURITY TO ATTACHMENT

MARY AINSWORTH'S CONTRIBUTION TO ATTACHMENT THEORY

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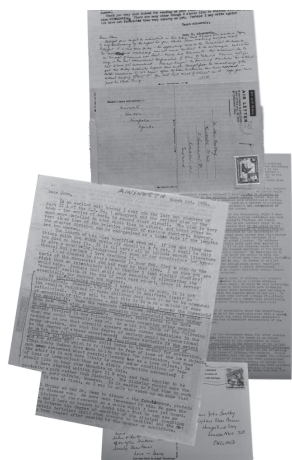
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PROLOGUE

Over the past decades, it has become increasingly clear that the contribution of Mary Ainsworth (1913-1999) to attachment theory has been underestimated. John Bowlby has been regarded as the founder of attachment theory, with Ainsworth providing some empirical evidence for the theory and designing the Strange Situation Procedure with which to measure the quality of attachment relationships. Few authors (cf. Bretherton, 2003) have described how Ainsworth also offered important theoretical insights that partly shaped attachment theory. However, when writing about Ainsworth, authors usually take her time with Bowlby or her Uganda study as a starting point. Not much is known about her early work. In this thesis, we explore Ainsworth's years in Toronto, where she studied and worked from 1930-1950 under and later with William Blatz, and we argue that this experience shaped her later work with Bowlby and attachment theory. We will trace back the roots of Ainsworth's contribution to attachment theory and add a new perspective to its historiography.

Chapter One describes the separate developments of Blatz and his security theory, of Bowlby and his mother-child separation studies, and of Ainsworth's early education and work at the University of Toronto. When Ainsworth subsequently took 20 years of theoretical and practical experience with her from Toronto to London, where she worked with Bowlby from 1950-1953, we see how Blatz's security theory was integrated with Bowlby's attachment theory in the making. Ainsworth continued to collaborate with Bowlby on the development of attachment theory when she worked independently in Uganda and Baltimore. It becomes clear that Blatz's influence was significant and that he left his marks, through her, on attachment theory.

Chapter Two explains the Strange Situation Procedure and its attachment classifications in detail. Today, it is one of the most widely used instruments in developmental psychology, making it possible to typify the caregiver-child relationship within a time frame of 20 minutes.

Chapter Three traces back the roots of the Strange Situation Procedure, and shows that while it seemed a novel and unique instrument when the first results were published in 1969, in fact many researchers had been carrying out similar procedures. However, we argue that the Strange Situation Procedure stood out from the other instruments because of its combination of Ainsworth's extensive working experience on security measures with Blatz, and the connection with Bowlby's evolutionary-based attachment theory. This difference may have accounted for its success.

Chapter Four reports on a replication study of measuring security through using little-known security questionnaires developed by Ainsworth when working for and later with Blatz. She carried on refining them until the early 1960s. As discussed in the other chapters in this thesis, Ainsworth's experience in designing instruments to measure

security proved important when designing the Strange Situation Procedure. We asked a Dutch sample of 247 students to complete both the pioneer questionnaire measuring security designed by Ainsworth, and a present-day questionnaire measuring attachment style, the ECR-RS (Fraley, Heffeman, Vicary & Brumbaugh, 2011). Results show that it is possible to construct a reliable and valid security measure on the basis of Ainsworth's original items.

The appendix consists of an article on René Spitz and Harry Harlow, researchers in the field of mother-child separation in humans and monkeys. Ainsworth referred to the work of both, met Harlow several times and corresponded with him. Harlow's work was one of the inspirations for Ainsworth's design of the Strange Situation Procedure.

Taken together, this thesis will broaden the general picture of Ainsworth's contribution to attachment theory and add to a better understanding of its roots.