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

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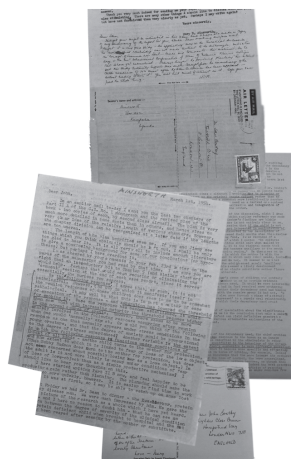


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EPILOGUE

After conducting the Baltimore Study, Ainsworth stayed on at the Johns Hopkins University until 1975, when she moved to the University of Virginia (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991). There she was first appointed Visiting Professor, and then Commonwealth Professor from 1975 until her retirement at age 70 in 1984. During this time she carried on teaching developmental psychology, and continued to conduct and publish her own research, while supervising the research of graduate students (Bretherton, 2003). Even after her retirement, however, she continued to be professionally active until the early 1990s, remaining involved in coding Strange Situations, but also helping to develop a coding system for children older than age two, and learning to code the Adult Attachment Interview (George, Kaplan & Main, 1984), since attachment research was moving beyond infant classifications into the preschool years, adolescence and adulthood. Apart from that, Ainsworth extended attachment theory in the sense that she studied attachments and affectional bonds other than the ones between parents and children (Ainsworth, 1989). All through the 1980s and early 1990s Ainsworth kept publishing articles. Her long-distance interaction with Bowlby continued until Bowlby's death in 1990.

Mary Ainsworth died in Charlottesville, Virginia, on 21 March 1999, at the age of 85. Her legacy, however, lives on. Ainsworth was delighted to see many people become interested in the concept of attachment and contribute to its further development (Ainsworth & Marvin, 1995). Many of her former PhD-students have made a name for themselves in research and/or in the clinical field, among them Inge Bretherton, Jude Cassidy, Patricia Crittenden, Mark Cummings, Mark Greenberg, Rogers Kobak, Michael Lamb (who, in turn, got Alan Sroufe interested in attachment theory), Alicia Lieberman, Mary Main, Robert Marvin and Everett Waters. Ainsworth did not have children of her own, but she referred to her (former) PhD students as her "academic family". One of these, Robert Marvin, together with his wife Cherri, cared for Ainsworth during the last years of her life.

In hindsight, Ainsworth's research methods were ahead of their time. In the 1960s and 1970s, when Ainsworth was conducting some of her most important research, she found it nigh impossible to obtain grants. American research psychologists didn't understand why she insisted on time-consuming home observations, necessarily resulting in small samples, or why she would be concerned with both individual and group response patterns (Main, 1999). Probably for the same reasons, her awards also came later in life. In 1998, just months before her death, the American Psychological Foundation presented Ainsworth with the Gold Medal Award for Life Achievement in the Science of Psychology. No better way to round off this thesis than with part of their statement:

“Perhaps the most exciting aspect of Ainsworth’s many contributions is that their impact continues to grow. There is no other theory of development that guides as much current research as attachment theory... Although she began with the study of infants and their mothers, her work is now important to researchers within a variety of disciplines examining infants and fathers, family systems, children beyond infancy, child and adolescent social behavior, childcare practices, developmental psychopathology, adult romantic relationships, grief and bereavement, emotional and clinical practice.” (American Psychological Foundation, 1998, p. 870).