

Naturalistic Observation of Attachment

[1] Introduction

This experiment is designed to look for signs of attachment as they occur in everyday, ordinary life.

[2] Protocol

Since this is an exercise in naturalistic observation it involves finding locations from which you can observe people without interacting with them—including, without them knowing that they are being observed. (Why is it important that they not know they are being observed?)

- No doubt there are many places and many ways in which to accomplish this and I encourage you to be creative and try things out. But ideas for places to start would be crowded streets—like those in downtown Brooklyn—or playgrounds.

You will need to track time in some way. For the purposes of this sort of experiment what is pertinent is to be able to track how often something happens over a specified period. You don't need a baseline, as you would for many kinds of experiment—Why not?—but you do need to be able to say how often the behavior you are observing is happening. Again, there are many ways to address this problem and I encourage you to be creative, but the one rule is that whatever you choose is what you will need to do for the length of your investigation. Some ideas are:

- Station yourself across the way from the entrance to the subway station and observe people with children as they walk to and from the station.
- Pick a particular location on the street to position yourself and observe people with children as they walk by that spot.
- Find a place from which you can watch children playing in a playground.

You will need to be able to see what the children are doing. What you will be looking for is how often the children look to their guardians, whoever their guardians may be (presumably in most cases it will be one of their parents but it does not have to be).

You will need to record how often this behavior occurs and how you record that will inevitably depend on where it is and how it is that you are making your observations. For instance

- If you are watching the subway entrance you will probably want to record how many people with children go by and then in how many of those groups it is that the child turns to look at or for their guardian before the group moves some distance away from the station (perhaps half a block away—it doesn't matter in itself, but does need to be the same distance for all your observations).
- If you are positioning yourself at a particular location on the street, then you will record how many groups of people with children go by and, of them, how many children turn to look at or

for their guardians as they pass by. Alternatively, you might follow such groups with your eye and record how many times the child looks for their guardian during the time it takes them to get to the end of the block.

- If you are watching a playground you might want to count
 - How many times a given child looks for their guardian over a ten minute period, or
 - How many children over a ten minute period pause at some point to look for or at their guardian

There are obviously many valid and reasonable ways to accomplish this sort of task. Do be creative.

[3] Variants

There are many interesting variants you can do on this experiment and I encourage you, again, to be creative.

- One is to put yourself where you can watch people walking their dogs and can record how often their dogs turn to check on them. If you combine this with observations on human children and their guardians you may, then, be able to compare how often dogs do this by comparison with how often children do
- Another is to divide the children up by age. You will obviously have to do some estimating and guessing but it would be interesting to see how this sort of behavior varies with age.
- Obviously children being carried in backpacks or rolled in strollers may be prevented from looking for their caretakers—or is it that the very act of being carried or rolled tells them what their guardians are up to? An interesting other variant might then be to compare how children in strollers act, in this respect, by comparison with how children who are walking along act.
- It's more work but also more interesting to do two or more variants in how you make your observations because this will enable you to think about what is the same and what is different in the results you obtain, and to consider why such similarities and differences might occur.

[4] Writing it Up

Once you've made your observations you'll need to write them up. Since there are many potential variants, start by explaining what it is that you did. Where did you put yourself? How did you make your observations? What exactly is it that you observed?

Record your results. This is the raw data you will have accumulated and it is usually best to put it into a table.

Explain what you observed in words—what do those raw data show?

Then explain what you conclude about the raw data. What do they show? Dependent on which particular kinds of observations you will have made you will be able to say different things about what

your data show, of course, but for this section concentrate on the *patterns* you found.

Next, put your results in the context of psychology. Knowing what you've learned about the processes of attachment, how do your data fit what you might expect? What do they suggest about how attachments form, for instance? Or about how intense attachments may be? If you have observed children of different ages, what light does comparing behaviors at different ages shed on the processes of attachment?

Finally, provide some of your own thinking about the project. What did you learn from it? Which parts, if any, surprised you, and why? Were your expectations confirmed or were you disappointed? If your data were different from what you expected, what might the explanation be? Was your thinking off the mark, or were there sufficient problems with the experimental protocol you created that you weren't able to make accurate observations? What would you change if you were to do it again? What do the data you found suggest about the next round of experiments to do?