Outline and evaluate research into cultural variations in attachment (12 marks)

Rothbaum’s study into differences compared the responses from Japanese mothers and American mothers. The study involved fourteen mothers from Tokyo, Japan and fourteen mothers from Boston, USA being interviewed on how they perceive their child’s behaviour. The main difference that was found between each of the cultures was the interpretation of a secure attachment and the reason for a child’s distress. Rothbaum found that the Japanese mothers considered obedient, emotionally closed and interdependent infants as evidence of a secure attachment; when the Japanese mothers were asked how their child would react if they were separated, the main response was that the child would be extremely distressed and this was due to the need for amae, a loving bond between the mother and infant, and the need for closeness. On the other hand, when Rothbaum interviewed the American mothers and found that they perceived a secure attachment as when the child is able to be independent and self-achieving. The interview also found that the general belief amongst the American women was that the child’s distress was due to the need for attention, rather than a strong loving need for their mother.

A weakness to Rothbaum’s study is that is lacks internal validity as there may have been investigator effects. The interviewer was a female graduate and so the interviewee may have been intimidated by the woman’s intelligence and so there the answers given by the mothers may have been due to social desirability. Therefore, the results may be inaccurate. Furthermore, only twenty eight mothers took part in the experiment and this is not enough to draw conclusions that can be generalised to wider population. Moreover, the American mothers and the Japanese mothers were collected from the same area, Tokyo and Boston. Henceforth, the study lacks population validity as the interview may have been researching into sub-cultures who’s beliefs couldn’t be applied to a wider population.

Another limitation to the study is that all the variables were not controlled and so extraneous variables may have influenced the results. Rothbaum sought out mothers from Tokyo, Japan and Boston, USA; however, he did not take into account whether the attachment was impacted by factors such as the infant attending day-care, or coming from a large family with siblings. Therefore, there may have been confounding variables affecting the results.

Van Ijzendoorn and Kroonenberg did a meta-analysis study where they compared the results from strange situation experiments from eight different countries. They found that the highest secure attachment percentage was from the United Kingdom, whereas China had the lowest. They found the most common form of attachment in all of the countries was secure attachment which suggests that this form of attachment is the healthiest for the infant’s development. The study also found that there was a high rate of insecure avoidant attachments; Grossman et al suggested that the high rate was due to the high value for autonomic behaviour in German culture. On the other hand, in the Japanese culture dependency is viewed positively and so the infant cannot be accurately labelled as insecure due to the expectations of the culture. Furthermore, Van Ijzendoorn and Kroonenberg discovered that there were greater differences within the culture than in comparison to other cultures, this indicates that the culture being measured doesn’t apply to the entire population and there may be sub-cultures within the country that were not taken into consideration.

A limitation to Van Ijzendoorn and Kroonenberg study is that the information gathered from the results cannot be fairly compared as only one study was done in the UK and China, therefore, the study lacks ecological validity because if the study was repeated the results may differ and only one sub-culture was tested in the study and so it can’t be generalised to the entire country. The experiment done in the USA has been repeated multiple times and there are eighteen experiments to base the findings; therefore, the results are more reliable because the strange situation is a standardised procedure and so the experiment was the same for each of the American participants. However, the differing numbers of studies would make the findings of the meta-analysis inaccurate, as the comparisons are imbalanced.

Another weakness to the study is that the experiment is a western design and so would be more suited to western cultures rather than other cultures, for example Tronik et al found that the infants in the efe culture spent up to 60% of their day with people who are not their mother. Therefore, if the strange situation experiment was to take place in this culture the results would be very different to that which is seen in America, and being alone with strangers is the norm for infants in this culture. Hence, the infant may show signs of an insecure attachment based on western definitions but have a secure attachment to the caregiver based on the cultures perception. Thus, the test would have to be more suited to the culture in order to measure attachment more accurately.