14.3: What is meant by “theoretical context”?

The second step in understanding a theory is to identify the theoretical tradition from which the theory emerged or within which it is currently situated. Often we can gain more appreciation of the goals and constructs of a theory when we know about the theory’s general precursors, or what the theorist was reacting against or trying to supplement or replace. It can be difficult for students to figure out the theoretical context of a specific theory. Often the authors do not explicitly identify the root theoretical traditions, and students are not familiar enough with the history of psychology to know the “lineages” of specific theories or theorists, nor do they have mental models of the range of families of psychology that are elaborated enough to allow them to recognize that specific terms, such as “drive” or “trait” or “appraisal” or “reinforcement,” are important clues to a theory’s larger context. In fact, this process is often students’ first introduction to the idea of “families” of theories or theoretical traditions, like constructivism or social learning theory or motivational theories of fundamental needs or trait personality theories. Here, classes or readings on the history of psychology would be helpful (e.g., Cairns & Cairns, 2006), although students should not be surprised if alternative accounts of the history of a field are provided by narrators representing different traditions (e.g., histories of the field of motivation provided by Edward Deci and Bernard Weiner at AERA in 1990).

Understanding Ainsworth: Theoretical context.

Luckily, Ainsworth (1979) is explicit about the theoretical tradition upon which her work builds. In fact, the first word in her 1979 paper is “Bowlby” as in “Bowlby’s (1969) ethological-evolutionary attachment theory implies that it is an essential part of the ground plan of the human species— as well as that of many other species—for an infant to become attached to a mother figure” (p. 932). Ainsworth tells readers directly that her theoretical and empirical work relies on the previous work of John Bowlby. At this point in the class, we usually pause to “understand” Bowlby and then return to “understanding” Ainsworth—a task made easier once we have analyzed Bowlby.

Understanding Bowlby: Goals and theoretical context.
John Bowlby’s theory of attachment (Bowlby, 1969/1973) was focused on the question, stated in colloquial terms, “Why do infants love their mothers, and why do mothers love their infants?”. Posed in a more scientifically exact manner, his question was, “Why do infants form attachments to their caregivers, and why do caregivers form attachments to their infants?”. As pointed out by Ainsworth, Bowlby approached these questions from the theoretical context of ethological and evolutionary traditions. Ethology, sometimes considered a sub-topic of zoology, focuses on the study of animal behavioral processes in their natural contexts; and evolutionary psychology focuses on the role of natural selection and survival in shaping the current functions of human behavior, cognition, and neurophysiology in adapting to changing physical and social environments. When considering attachment from these perspectives, Bowlby was focused on two issues: (1) What is the function of caregiver-infant attachments in allowing infants to survive to reproductive age? and (2) What are the kinds of species-wide biobehavioral systems (initially called “instinctual response systems”) that typically guarantee the normative formation of attachments between infants and caregivers?