

Interview Prof. Dr. Lieselotte Ahnert

by Elly Singer

INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

Professor Lieselotte Ahnert has an impressive, rich and outstanding career in early childhood development and care. Since 2008, she has been professor of Developmental Psychology at the University of Vienna, Austria. Earlier she held professorships in Magdeburg-Stendal and Cologne in Germany.

Lieselotte Ahnert was born in 1951 and brought up in the German Democratic Republic (DDR), which was part of the communist East Europe until 1990 when Germany reunified. Ahnert studied psychology with special training in clinical psychology at the Humboldt-University in East Berlin, and received her Ph.D. in developmental psychology there. She was the first psychologist in the DDR who was attached to a network of Berlin child care centres, and who carried out scientific research on young children's attachment behaviour while sharing the care at home with child care centres. The use of out-of-home care provision was perceived as normal by the families in the DDR and had developed extensively using early child care in group settings facilitated by the state.

After the upheaval in 1989 and the reunification of Germany, Ahnert and her colleagues were forced to create new career perspectives in order to adjust to the changed political, economic and cultural situations in East Berlin. Daily lives in the former DDR around that time had generally become uncertain, chaotic and challenging, but there were also new visions and opportunities. Lieselotte Ahnert and her colleagues managed to build up a new institution in Berlin in 1991 for research, the Interdisciplinary Center for Applied Research on Socialization (IZAS), of which she was elected to be the head of until 2001 when IZAS was then dissolved. Based on IZAS, Ahnert started collaborative research with some of the western researchers who she knew from a few past conferences in Poland and Hungary. Moreover, she came in contact with American researchers and eventually got involved in studies of the National Institute of Childhood Development and Health (NICHD) in the USA. Especially important is her collaboration with Michael Lamb, who did and does ground-breaking international research in child development, specifically in child care systems around the globe, in non-traditional families, and with respect to fatherhood.

Ahnert impresses through her research, where she has based rigorous quantitative and theoretical underlined designs on multi-methodical approaches using systematic environmental descriptions, precise observations, carefully carried out interviews, questionnaires and

physiological indices. In her studies of young children's stress systems during the adaptation to child care facilities, for example, she and her team used both repeated measurements of cortisol over the day and measurement of attachment behaviours (Attachment Q Set) of the children with different providers.

Lieselotte Ahnert is one of the most exciting and creative psychologists in early childhood that combines the knowledge and experience of former East Germany with the American traditions of research. Her work excels in innovative studies on new patterns in child development at home and in child care facilities, which provides insights into motherhood and fatherhood in the 21st century.

Two research topics stand out:

(1) Attachment-related determinants of early education: Care provider-child relationships

“Research on child care reveals that out-of-home care, even for infants and toddlers, has no negative developmental consequences if child care centers meet standards of high quality. However, that does not necessarily mean that children in child care do not develop differently than children who are cared for at home, as is surprisingly often stated. Rather, care at home and care in child care centers may differ tremendously and in many ways, which in turn influences the development and personalities of children who do and do not experience out-of-home care. Research has just started to investigate those inter-individual differences. Moreover, we have taken the perspective that children in out-of-home care are not cared for by non-maternal care providers INSTEAD of their mothers, but rather that they experience a regular turn-taking routine of maternal and non-maternal providers. To evaluate the impact of out-of-home care on those children, we therefore need to represent the entire care ecology that children experience and examine the impact of both out-of-home and in-home care.”

(2) Children in families and child care centers: Developmental consequences

“Children's early education is most effective when educational activities are embedded in those social relationships that adequately tailor information and knowledge. On the basis of children's developmental levels, a care provider needs to impart knowledge in a way that challenges children, rewards them positively, and enables them to trust in their own growing competencies. Indeed, even infants can build up trusting relationships with care providers that display a number of features: infant-care provider relationships might (1) ensure security, (2) reduce stress, (3) provide positive attention, (4) assist children's foundation, and (5) support exploration. Since these relationship characteristics are well known in infant-mother attachments, in our own research we adapted measures validated in mother-child dyads to describe infant-care provider relationships. We have examined the origin and functioning of infant-care provider relationships and found that these relationships differ essentially from infant-mother attachments. Most striking are the differences in function. Whereas infant-care

provider relationships are group oriented and serve the needs of individuals in group contexts only, infant-mother attachments are dyadically orientated with an impetus on prompt responses to the child's individual needs."

See for an overview of her academic career and publications: http://www.lieselotte-ahnert.de/sets/set_start_eng.htm

THE INTERVIEW

The beginning

Q:

This interview is about your history in early childhood care and education, and how your history is related to your personal history and embedded in the social-historical context. We would like to start with your youth. How were you brought up, and what were important experiences during your childhood and adolescence?

A:

I was brought up in a family with two older brothers and one younger sister. My mother stayed at home and my father was originally a journalist for a local newspaper. After the Second World War, when teachers were needed in the German schools, however, he went to university to become a school teacher for history and politics, and eventually became the principal of a high school.

We were a nice family. My grandma (a midwife and naturopath) was also with us until she died when I was five. To me, she appeared to be a central figure of the family. My mother was her 6th child, born after her husband did not return from the First World War. So grandma was actually a widow when she gave birth to my mother, and that must have shaped her relationship to my mother quite intensively. And there was my grandpa from my father's side who was a widow as well, and loved my father very much. I remember an empathetic atmosphere in my family, which was filled with many family events on weekends and during public holidays.

I grew up in Thuringia in the 50ies, which is now the green heart of Germany. In 1945, Thuringia was freed by the Americans, but the Yalta Conference had decided to allocate Thuringia to the Russian part of the German occupation. Consequently, the Americans moved out and the Russians came in. Many academics and people who were close to the old Nazi system left when the Russian occupation came. But my parents were highly motivated to rebuild their home country. And when it was clear that teachers were needed, my father took the opportunity to go to the nearby University of Jena. I always saw him studying. He created a home office in his father's house, where we all lived. On the weekends, we were told that we must not disturb him

as he has to study, has an exam or is about to write for the local newspaper with which he still stayed in contact.

Before the age of 3, we children were not taken to child care centers. When I was born in 1951, there was no such thing in our small community, and all young mothers regularly stayed at home. We normally started kindergarten at age 3, and seemed to not need long to adjust. Everybody knew each other, even care providers and parents knew each other long before children entered kindergarten. Consequently, the care provider—parent relationship was naturally close, so that negotiations about individual daily routines for each child were self-evident. For example, I remember hating nap times in kindergarten. So sometimes my mother or my grandmother would take me home before nap times, sometimes they would ask the kindergartners to allow me to keep playing even though the rules in early education were very strict around that time. Overall, I loved the kindergarten group, my peers and the care providers, and still today remember the atmosphere as just inspiring.

Entering primary school caused a great interruption for me, because my family moved to another town at that time. Leaving the old community, however, meant we had to leave the forest of Thuringia, the famous hill-like landscape (the so called Rennsteig) and skiing area, and a lot of other outdoor events, as well as the warm and supportive atmosphere among the people, which still today reflects the time when Thuringia used to be a so-called *Notstandsgebiet* [deprived area] almost 100 years ago. Here, there was always hunger and poverty because the agriculture was not very effective, there was only forest and no soil to grow on. The poor communities lived off craft markets, handcrafted wood and glass blowing. My family tradition, for example, reflects these experiences, as my grandfather on my mother's side was a glass blower and my grandfather on my father's side was a timberman.

Going along with this tradition, we often went to the forest during my childhood, collecting blueberries, wood and mushrooms. I already knew many types of mushrooms the different voices of the birds, which my mother perfectly imitated, and had been faced with a lot of other impressions from the forest before I entered school. So the relationship to the nature was really integrated in my family, which we all missed after we had moved.

My father took over the position as a principal of a high school in Buttstaedt near Weimar in the Thuringian plains. This was the time when the political system in the DDR was under high pressure due to a significant exodus of academics. Remember that in 1961 the wall was built up because people moved out of the country, among them a lot of teachers. In contrast, my father, a strong hearted communist, found these behaviours unfair and disloyal towards the home country, and continued to be motivated to further support the DDR. This political orientation in my family was set up: My grandfather was already one of the people who founded the communist cell in Thuringia, the so called Spartacusbund from which the later German Communist Party developed. During the Nazi time, luckily both my grandpa and my father could

escape from the Nazi's and were not sent to one of the infamous concentration camp like many of their companions. They stood by their dreams that after the Nazi time, a new community will have a great future. As the principal of our high school in Buttstaedt, my father was thus highly committed to being successful.

Our high school was a boarding school where many students from the surrounding areas went. The location near Weimar, where Goethe [famous German poet and writer, 1749-1832] lived, had significantly shaped peoples' attitudes and minds and provided a wonderful historical frame for the community. Weimar was filled with all these classical humanistic traditions so that we hardly became aware of some stupid campaigns that the communist regime initiated during my school time.

My elementary school in Buttstaedt already seemed very inspiring to me. Perhaps because of my fabulous German teacher, who also founded a theatre group in which I was very involved. Later at high school, my German teacher even made me the leader of a theatre group. This teacher would write or adjust the scripts, I would direct my peers and then we were able to perform plays from the Goethe time period or those provided by Russian writers. Furthermore, this high school (where my father was also the principal) had both a choir and a group of reciting poetry students, which I was also a member of. Moreover, from time to time, artists from Weimar Theatre came over to our school and gave courses. I remember even having passed a ballet course.

The high school itself offered even more special activities, for example, a school newspaper. My father (as a former journalist) had a newspaper produced two times a year, in which even the alumni's reported on their lives after having finished the school. In addition, reunions of the alumni took place yearly in the yard of the boarding school and very popular. Most interestingly, however, the entire school went camping in tents all together during the summer break. These class-oriented summer camps were well organised and well received, even though our teachers acted as group leaders. If a student was told that he/she was excluded from the summer camps due to misbehaviours or other failures, this was perceived as a disaster.

During the camping season, we surely gained better insights into the attitudes of our teachers, as we got to know them on a more personal level than was possible in the classroom. Camping was combined with sport activities and many events and attractions. For example, we went to the Baltic Sea and spent time on the beaches, or stayed in Saxony, where we climbed up the unusual rocks famous for this area, or we visited many of the historical facilities in Berlin, when we had erected the tents near one of the Berlin lakes.

When we approached the high school graduation, it was pretty much clear to me that I wanted to be a theatre director. But this was not easy in the DDR, and after long discussions with my father and my favoured teachers, I applied for a program in psychology (which was not easier, either).

Study and work at the university

Q:

Why psychology?

A:

I thought, if I study psychology, that might be a good starting platform to end up in a theatre. But actually this was quite naive, because the slots in the programs for psychology were one to twenty and not easier than for drama. These awkward ratios reflect the fact that the former DDR was suspicious of people like psychologists and artists who might have used their profession to criticize the state. When I applied, I was eventually interviewed with at least 50 other people and only two were accepted for that year. During the interview I was asked whether I could imagine taking over the position as a Cultural Representative of the faculty, and additionally the head of the Student Club. Still today I am convinced that I was accepted into the program for psychology at the famous Humboldt University so easily, because I accepted the position of the Cultural Representative that hardly any other applicant seemed to be qualified for.

Q:

Why did they think that you were the right person for this position? And why did you hesitate to accept it?

A:

Because of my past experiences in a variety of cultural events that I had put on together with my theatre group, the choir and the reciting poetry team, I was convinced that I could manage the position as Cultural Representative of the faculty. With regard to the head of the Student Club, I was quite ambivalent because I came from a small provincial area and knew the subculture of my peers. However, I felt quite uninformed about trends and habits of my peers in the capital Berlin, where most of my peers were also much older than me (because of the long waiting list to enter the university).

There was also a political issue of becoming a representative of the faculty. In fact, one was expected to be a member of the SED (the leading Socialist Unified Party), but I did not want that. Around that time, my siblings and I had full-length discussions with my father on what the country really could provide for the future and with which odd strategies these goals were followed. Us youngsters were quite critical, and hesitated to become members of the party, even though I was quite interested in the Marxism theory and the entire theory on societal development from a communist perspective.

The faculty was not irritated by my attitudes, and I became the Cultural Representative without being a member of the party. I enjoyed the challenges, but sometimes struggled with the Student Club. Here, I was caught in the middle, that is, between the students who liked

culturally interesting and politically provocative evening performances and the faculty, who did not want to come into conflict with the DDR authorities. However, the party secretary of the faculty always assured his support for whatever I organized. I invited writers and songwriters who really represented the critical front against the state, such as Wolf Biermann¹, Bettina Wegener und Christa Wolf. We invited Christa Wolf to read and discuss her book *Nachdenken über Christa T (1967)*, in which the protagonist suffers from typical problems of the daily life in the DDR, and which was therefore hotly debated.

Q:

How was the situation at the Faculty of Psychology at Humboldt-University in Berlin in general around that time?

A:

The faculty was directed by Professor Friedhart Klix, who was internationally well-known as the President of the International Society for Psychology. Like almost everybody in the DDR in a high position, he was a member of the party and involved in the system. But perhaps that was the reason that it was safe for him to be liberal. For example, he helped to get software for statistics and books from Western publishing houses, invited internationally recognized psychologists and thus represented our faculty through his world-openness and internationality. For the rest of the faculty staff, it was quite difficult to connect with colleagues in the Western world.

And not even the majority of the West German colleagues were interested in their East German counterparts. Only the left thinking colleagues of the 1968 generation were somehow interested in us. Surely, they did not want to stay in the DDR, but they wanted to know how we lived and how we received the psychological knowledge. There were also some colleagues who were born in, or had lived in their early years in the DDR and left the country with their parents, but kept some ties. These colleagues contacted us, and were encouraged to do so by our faculty.

In 1978, I became an assistant of Friedhart Klix, who held his full professorship in General Psychology. Because the subject of my Ph.D. was on thinking and mental development in children, Professor Hans-Dieter Schmidt, the developmental psychologist at our faculty, supervised my Ph.D. Schmidt was sometimes insurgent and thus appeared as *enfant terrible* at the faculty, when he for example supported the petition in favour of Wolf Biermann.²

So this faculty indeed provided a vivid academic life for us students, in which we were exposed to current psychological but also political and cultural issues.

¹ **Wolf Biermann** (born 15 November 1936) is a German singer-songwriter and former East German dissident. He is perhaps best known for the 1968 song "[Ermutigung](#)" and his expatriation from East Germany in 1976.

²In 1976, the SED Politbüro decided to strip Biermann of his citizenship while he was on an officially authorized tour in West Germany. Biermann's exile provoked protests by leading East German intellectuals.

Q:

What made you interested in thinking and mental development of children?

A:

Actually that came to me accidentally. When I still was a student, I realised that the psychology program was mainly oriented towards clinical psychology. I became aware that I would later become a psychotherapist and would deal with handicapped or people with mental disorders. As I could not imagine going into such a career, I went to the Faculty of Theatre Science and tried to change at the end of the 2nd year of my psychology program. Unfortunately, I had to accept that this was impossible, and therefore my plan was to finish psychology first in order to study drama later.

During my last year of studying psychology, however, Professor Hans-Dieter Schmidt was looking for an assistant. We all liked him as he liked to confront us with ideas in his lectures that we had never heard before elsewhere. He offered me the job that was so reputable, I could not reject it. It was also the time when I got married and my husband received a job offer in Berlin. Hans-Dieter Schmidt was supervising a research program on deviation in cognitive development, and Friedhart Klix dealt with artificial intelligence, where cognitive development caused a kind of fascination on how children think and how thinking develops and deficits overcome. From this background, it was very much appreciated how we developmental psychologist empirically worked with children. Actually, the question of how to approach these children's minds was quite complicated. I had to provide mental challenges that the children liked. We started at age 3, and increased the complexity of the challenges for the older children in order to test their limits and to explore the range of their mental capacities.

Q:

What did you learn about developmental psychology? And what kind of theories did you use? Were you introduced to the Western theories too?

A:

In developmental psychology, we were familiarised with the work of Lev Vygotsky, Alexei Leontjew, Alexander Lurija and other Russian psychologists, with German scientists who did research in childhood, like Arnold Gesell, Charlotte and Karl Bühler as well as Clara and William Stern. But most importantly, we got to know the French psychologist, Jean Piaget, of course. Piaget's structural theory was particularly prevalent for my Ph.D. But to be honest, I preferred Vygotsky's concept of the "Zone of the next development" as well as his humanistic philosophy behind it. However, in the psychology program of the Humboldt University, Piaget had been portrayed as the genius scientist on children's thinking. This is certainly true, and I thoroughly dealt with his scientific work.

We were also faced with a lot of Western theories in terms of the language development of children, which is closely linked to the cognitive development. For example, Manfred Bierwisch propagated Chomsky's language theory in the DDR (despite many obstructions) and was affiliated to the faculty (and had also reviewed my Ph.D.). In addition, Eve Clark from Stanford University and many other flagships of cognition and language acquisition made several visits to the faculty.

Research on infants' adjustment to DDR child care centres

Q:

How did you continue with your career after the Ph.D.?

A:

When my Ph.D. was completed, Professor Schmidt moved to the department of Personality Psychology and Hubert Sydow took over the department of Developmental Psychology. I was asked to stay with him even though I was really ready to gain new experiences outside of the university. I wanted to be a real professional for children for which I needed more practice. I only had few experiences in the kindergarten where I dealt with the children for my Ph.D. experiments.

I was quite lucky to find an interesting job at one of the childcare networks in East Berlin, the Prenzlauer Berg Associates of Child Care Centres, which was located in a district of a blue collar community (today this district is the hype of the town, where artists and intellectuals live). In the past, this district used to be filled with dense grey blocks of houses where little sun could be seen, but where the Berlin mentality particularly developed. In the evenings and on weekends, everybody would open the window, laughing and talking about daily life issues across the apartments. I had lived here as a student, and appreciated that I became so familiarized with Berlin relatively rapidly.

The Prenzlauer Berg Associates of Child Care Centres supervised 50 childcare centres (plus two centres for children with special needs) at that time. The head was a paediatrician, and responsible for the health of these children, who were even medically treated in the child care centres if they got sick. I became the head psychologist for that association, which was unusual and occurred for the first time in the DDR that a psychologist did that work, besides the early education professionals.

In the beginning I supervised the special education section, did developmental testing and supervised the staff in caring for those children. Here, I also worked with social workers with whom I aimed to involve the families of these children in the developmental problems. Two days per week, I was involved with these children with special needs. The other days during the week, I was called to the regular child care centres where I advised adaptation processes for new

children, for children with developmental delays, for conflictual care provider—parent relationships, for children of underprivileged and mentally ill parents etc. As I appeared to be the helper in the need, I got more veritable insights into the work of the centres than the official education professionals. Their job was to evaluate the early education provisions of the centres so that the care providers were steadily exposed to their ratings and criticisms. This was not the case during my visits when we talked about problems (with the children and the care) and how we might resolve them.

Relatively soon, journalists approached me to learn about the challenges of my work because I was the first psychologist in the childcare centres of the DDR. And when this information got through to the media, other professionals approached me, and offered exchange and cooperation. The Universities in Leipzig, for example, wanted help in launching a program for their students, specialized in psychology of the early years in order to prepare them for a career in child care centers in the future. And this initiative got a lot of support as the extensive childcare provision in the DDR war ready for those professionals.

Q:

Were many mothers of young children working outside of their families in the 80ies?

A:

Yes, almost everyone. The status of a stay-at-home mother was neither appreciated nor financially sound for the families in the DDR. Everyone should help the new communist society to grow, and every family needed to live on double incomes.

Q:

Were your own children also going to the child care centre?

A:

No, my oldest child, my daughter, was born not quite healthily. I was very cautious of putting her into out-of-home care, and hired a nanny. And when my son was later born, the nanny was still there even though this was quite unusual and hard to make work.

Q:

Was research a part of your responsibilities at the child care network?

A:

Because I was the first one in the DDR in such a position, the head of the Prenzlauer Berg Associates of Child Care Centres created a work profile for me, which did not include research, unfortunately. He was of the opinion that I had done enough research and should now apply my knowledge in the practice. However, the association already served functional purposes as practice partners for the IHKJ (Institute for Hygienics in Childhood and Adolescence) which did research in DDR child care centres, i.e. also in the centres of the Prenzlauer Berg Associates. I was also in charge of providing the conditions that they needed for their research studies.

Q:

What type of institution was the IHKJ? And how did it happen that you eventually carried out research there?

A:

IHKJ was an adjunct research institution of their Ministry of Health dealing with wellbeing and mental health of the children in all institutions of the DDR which were relevant for children, i.e. schools, kindergarten, child care centres (including crèches) and children's homes. Whereas the Ministry of Health was also responsible for early education in the crèches, the Ministry of Education was responsible for education in kindergarten and in schools. This explains why the IHKJ staff consisted of multi-professional teams of paediatricians and hygienists, but also pedagogues and some psychologists.

Just as I started to set up a study for the IHKJ at Prenzlauer Berg, the IHKJ was faced with severe problems regarding the question why infants are more frequently sick when they enter childcare at age one compared to children who entered child care before that age. This was an important question, as the government had just introduced a one-year maternal leave to stabilize the labour forces solving the issue of young mothers who were highly unreliable due to the frequent sickness of their infants.

Q:

So children who started at the age of one had more problems than younger babies?

A:

The government had hoped that if the mothers stayed at home longer after the delivery, it would reduce the rate of children's infectious diseases. But after the one-year maternal leave law was released, it got worse. Thus, the IHKJ received the order from the ministry to explore the causes. However, the IHKJ staff was convinced, that they had done everything to keep the children healthy in the child care centres, and that the problem might be a psychosomatic one for which only psychology could help. For that reason, they hired me.

Q:

How did you approach this quite complex and difficult question?

A:

Surely, this problem was totally new to me because it was neither in the scope of my past research (which was on cognitive and language development) nor of my education (which dealt with child development literally from age 3 on because research of early childhood had just emerged in the Western countries and this knowledge was hardly available in the East when I finished university). However, I was convinced that if they let me do research, I would find it out.

Firstly, I made clear that we would need video techniques for effective and valid research. However, video technique was a magic word in the DDR around that time because this was only available in the Western world; even in the former Soviet Union, video technique was not produced.

It is a long story of how I eventually was able to use this technique in 1985. It took me almost two years to find out how to cope with this challenge which demanded Western currency that the ministry did not want to spend for an ambitious young researcher. My first application and calculation of 5.000,00 West Mark failed. But the secretary in the ministry who must have realized that I was really serious advised me to make the proposal much bigger and to involve the director of IHKJ. The review (with the signature of my director) eventually ended up in a 25.000,00 West Mark calculation, including a video studio besides the “mobile reportage unit” that I had actually strived for. We got the reportage unit, but nobody took care of the studio anymore.

Secondly, I was quite certain of a research design which would not only include the child care settings but the family setting, too. I took the opportunity to discuss this idea with my colleagues at IHKJ, as well as at the University of Leipzig (a two-hour drive away from Berlin) where I offered a lecture series on “Psychology of Early Childhood”. Eventually, Gerhardt Lehwald, with whom I supervised some master theses in Leipzig, brought Ainsworth’s “Patterns of attachment”, the classic book on attachment, for me from a conference in Amsterdam.

With high excitement, I read this book and based my research design on the background of the children’s attachments, which they brought from home and developed in the child care setting. In 1988, we started with the Strange Situation Procedure (SSP), and carried it out before the children came to the child care centres. We repeated the SSP five months later to see if the mother-child attachment had changed. And we also did a third SSP with the care provider after the children appeared to have adjusted, in order to study whether the care provider had become a familiar [attachment] figure for the child.

Moreover, we were even able to invite the childcare provider from the third SSP to play the so-called Stranger in the first SSP, because we knew which child care providers would be responsible for which child, even before these children entered child care. So knowing that the Stranger from the first SSP might become a mother-like figure later on, we were able to test to what extent this occurred (by comparing the first with third SSP). At the end, we also estimated how similar the attachments developed with a care provider as compared to the mother of the same child were.

Q:

Could you find an explanation for why children who started as one-year olds were more often sick than the younger ones?

A:

It appeared quite clear to us, that the sickness patterns were related to the characteristics of the emerging attachments of a child. The system is more sensitive at the age of one than earlier. Around the first year, a child has learnt that there are just a few figures to rely on, maybe only the mother, which reflects a natural selection process. Separations from the(se) figure(s), and confrontation with unknown substitute figures, cause stress and make the child vulnerable for illnesses. However, if a child is much younger, the selection process is not yet in place, and if the child is additionally confronted with more care givers from birth - which is the case in other cultures – separation stress is sometimes not even apparent.

In contrast, if children are separated at age 2 or at age 3, we can rely on the child's capacity to understand what is going on and by what time the mother will return. This all means that we need an age-dependent understanding of the attachment processes in order to set up adequate adjustment programs when children enter child care.

Q:

Was the attachment theory compatible with the ideology of the DDR?

A:

This is a good question! In the DDR, the attachment theory was first seen as a way of preventing mothers from emancipation. Moreover, attachment theory was even rejected as an endogenous-biological theory which ignores the human nature to act consciously in contrast to instinctively.

We therefore never spoke about attachment theory when we did our research. Instead, we always discussed how children receive strangers and how they integrate the interactions with them in their experience. Until today, I am convinced that the attachment theory can also be framed that way.

Q:

How did the practitioners perceive the results of the adaptation study?

A:

The consequence for us was that we urgently needed good adaptation programs, where the separation from home should be smoothed out. Although it was not in the purpose of the childcare system around that time, my colleagues at IHKJ, who were responsible for early education in the DDR crèches, already worked on this issue.

However, the regular situation for these adaptation programs was bad, because the children entered child care class-wise. Adaptations were carried out mainly in September when the oldest kindergarten children had entered school. In September, it was therefore the peak time for adjusting the children to the centres with 5, 10, 15 children and 5, 10, 15 mothers accompanying their children to the centres at the same time.

Not surprisingly, there was a big resistance against those programs in the DDR, before the fall of the wall. So, the practitioners perceived the consequences of our adaptation study as stressful for themselves, as they were under the surveillance of mothers of the new children. We had to explain them that the entire system would need to be changed if we wanted to successfully adapt young children.

After the fall of the Wall in 1989

Q:

How did the fall of the Wall influence your work?

A:

The IHKJ was evaluated by the Ministry of Health of the BRD [the old Federal Republic of Germany] for which we prepared a workshop showing our research designs and outcomes. We already realised that the evaluation commission was quite astonished by the fact that we had based our research on contemporary methods and theories, like video techniques and attachment theory. Nonetheless, IHKJ had to close down. My staff and I lived on the so called “transitional money”, which was given to many intellectuals in Berlin to find new arrangements since many institutions like ours were closed, even the Academy of Science of the DDR.

But after the Ministry of Health of the BRD had evaluated the IHKJ, my department and the neighbouring department on children’s health received an offer to continue with our research if we could found a new institution. At the same time, the University of Leipzig offered me a grant for my second PhD, *die Habitation*³. I eventually declined the offer from Leipzig and founded a new institution with my former team, the Interdisciplinary Centre of Applied Socialization (IZAS), which we opened in 1990 and closed it down in 2000. More than 15 people elected me to be the head of IZAS, and we agreed that I would do the kick off period and then rotate the leadership. But that never happened.

Q:

How could you continue with your research after the IHKJ was closed?

A:

The new German Ministry of Family Affairs gave us the basic finances to run the IZAS, that is, the rent for the rooms, the telephone, the salaries for the director and the secretary. All other staff had to be paid with additional funding from elsewhere. Thus, we wrote applications and got grants from the DFG (German Research Foundation) for two projects, the Senate of Berlin, and the Ministry of Education and Science.

³ In Germany this second PhD is obligatory in case you want to opt for a professorship.

Q:

Did you feel that you had to fight for an own identity?

A:

We felt like pioneers, and got a lot of feedback on how we aimed to contribute to the new societal situation. For us, it was easy to work on an own identity since we represented an authentic research group of the former DDR, on which we based our growing competencies. For example, when the “Commission on Research of the Social Changes across the Upheaval” was founded in 1992 to support research which was to explore how the DDR people cope with the profound social changes, we were the only research group out of 18 which applied for funds, and provided the requested research. We studied how the families that we knew already before the upheaval coped with the new circumstances, explored the work-family-life balance, marital satisfaction and parent-child relationships, in order to describe how these families functioned at that time.

This political upheaval was indeed like an earthquake for us. Nothing worked like it had in the past anymore: our daily lives and the working environments had remarkably changed, the school and the health care system, as well as laws and tax regulations, insurance etc. were newly set up or adjusted. And the children of the DDR families moved out of the central attention of their parents, which also resulted in a decline in the attachment quality.

Q:

What kind of research did you carry out regarding early child care?

A:

At that time, we worked on adaptation processes into child care again, based on the framework of attachment. Although we knew the classical Ainsworth book on attachment by heart and knew how to carry out the Strange Situation Procedure, we were not experienced on how to rate it. It was Karin Grossmann from the University of Regensburg who trained us to code the attachment patterns and to properly transfer the theoretical perspectives to them. This was very important for the acceptance of the established attachment researchers who later provided rechecks on our video tapes as it is usual before the publications of this type of data. Furthermore, we involved cortisol measures in a newly designed adaptation study (supported by the DFG⁴) during which we learnt much about the children’s stress processes. We also carried out a study for the Ministry of Health on the daily lives of infants who were and were not taken into child care centres⁵, and benefited immensely from my experiences and contacts within the child care system in Berlin.

⁴ Ahnert, L., Gunnar, M., Lamb, M. E., & Barthel, M. (2004). Transition to child care: Associations of infant-mother attachment, infant negative emotion and cortisol elevations. *Child Development*, 75, 639–650.

Q:

How did you become involved in cooperative research with the US?

A:

Five months after the wall had fallen, Michael Lamb (Head of the socio-emotional department at National Institute of Health in Bethesda/Washington D.C.) approached me via Heidi Keller from the University of Osnabrueck, with whom I already stayed in contact before the upheaval. Keller and Lamb (with his family) spontaneously drove from Osnabrueck to Berlin, during the Easter season, to meet me.

I told them about our research done at the IHKJ, and that we had just founded an own institution (IZAS) to be able to continue. Because they were so encouraging, I asked them whether they would be willing to serve on the scientific board of IZAS. Since then, Michael Lamb and Heidi Keller served on that board, and kept being interested on how our research went. Once a year, Michael Lamb would come and would also invited me to his department to speak about the current research at IZAS. In fact, Michael suggested to extend our behaviourally designed research on child adjustment to bio-psychological approaches, especially in these young ages. That was how my interest in the stressful processes during children's adaptation to child care started to develop.

Stress research in child care

Q:

Why did physiological measures quicken your interests?

A:

Observations hold priority in my research, even until today. We rate behaviours as well as emotions when we analyse video tapes, even on microanalytical levels using computer based procedures. Those ratings are to be interpreted in the context in which they emerge, however. For example, crying after the mother has left has another psychological meaning than crying after a peer has taken a toy away.

Together with cortisol or heart rate measures, you learn to interpret these behaviours from the contexts in which they occur and how severe they might be for young children who do not speak yet. We also learn how fast a child can regulate itself in those contexts, and whether it can go back to playing and exploring intensively or whether there is still tension.

Behavioural ratings alone might not capture these meanings and regulations to their full extent. Specifically, when it comes to children who are adjusted to a care ecology which expects them

⁵ Ahnert, L., Rickert, H. & Lamb, M. E. (2000). Shared caregiving: Comparison between home and child care. *Developmental Psychology*, 36, 339–351.

to keep calm, and to not anger the social environment. My main interest in using physiological measures, beside observations, is thus caused by my ambition to provide valid interpretations of the behavioural results.

Q:

How was your stress research acknowledged by the scientific community?

A:

Actually very good. The first time, I reported the data at Lamb's department at NIH, but I was quite insecure as how to interpret them. These data contradicted the current literature. Surprisingly enough, Michael Lamb became hooked and eventually suggested to involve Megan Gunner from Minnesota University, the flagship of stress reactivity in children.

Q:

Why did your study contradict the research at that time?

A:

Attachment researchers around that time were convinced that a child who is securely attached is also protected against stress. But our data showed that these children, if separated from their mothers, were stressed at the same level as children who are insecurely attached⁴.

Q:

But isn't it hard to define the levels of stress in young children?

A:

It is indeed difficult, because there are no reliable norms in children of different ages that set the benchmark in heart rate or cortisol values which might be considered stress indicators. The stress system is set up individually, so that each child might react differently according to its specific biology. As a consequence, we need to take baseline measures from each individual before we explore stress situations. Moreover, in order to comprehensively explore stress processes, we need repeated measures over the day.

Q;

When you showed that separation is stressful, did these data serve as arguments against out-of-home care and working mothers?

A:

The opponents of child care used this research as central arguments.

Q:

Did you respond to that or did you think that's not my business how people use my data?

A:

No matter how the ideology goes, predominantly, we have to bring evidence based facts to this topic. However, I am quite sensitive as to how my research is used (and that of the other stress

researchers). I have spent a lot of time in round-table discussions to explain the stress reactivity of young children. And of course, a child around its first year is really sensitive with regard to separations from the mother. We cannot ignore these processes.

Although the conclusions can be drawn quite differently we should not strive to avoid any stress during childhood. I am convinced that the stress system is a beautiful dynamic system in order to make us capable to cope with challenges. We need to know how we can manipulate this system in a way that will benefit us. Firstly, we thus have to clarify under which conditions the child stress system is most challenged. Research in child care has already shown that child stress patterns are dependent on the quality of child care. That means that we have to be committed to a high quality of child care. Secondly, not every child is able to balance stress under any circumstances. That means we need professionals who counsel parents according to the child's vulnerability (for example, preterm children are seen as more vulnerable than children born at term).

Research on the daily lives of children in child care

Q: Wouldn't it be about time to examine how children's lives are across an entire day in child care instead of only focusing on the adaptation?

A:

Absolutely. One of our big projects was supported by the German Ministry of Family Affairs in 1992 about the daily lives of Berlin infants and toddlers. Here, we made comparisons between children who went to childcare (child care group) and those who did not (home only group)⁶.

We recruited the children based on the birth register of Berlin. So we invited about 70 families with their 12-18 month olds, half of them with child care attendance and the other half without. My team was equipped with a very extensive observation method based on a beep system, in which every 20 or 35 seconds a beep came out of headphones telling you to observe 20 seconds and during the other 35 seconds to mark the following categories on a sheet: where's the child, who's near, who's far away, does the child communicate, interact and with whom and how, etc. Based on this large data set, daily routines and activities of the children in child care and at home were registered. There was also a special focus on emotional expression: whining, crying, smiling etc.

We then paired the children (one from the child care group and one from the home only group) and matched them with regard to age and social background, and according to their waking hours. Moreover, we cut the times of these pairs according to the child who went to the child care centres in three parts: the time before the child went to child care (Time 1), when the child attended child care (Time 2) and the rest of the day (Time 3).

⁶ Ahnert, L., Rickert, H. & Lamb, M. E. (2000). Shared caregiving: Comparison between home and child care. *Developmental Psychology*, 36, 339–351.

As a result of this procedure, we were able to compare what a child experienced when it was in child care compared to the time when he and his counterpart was at home. We also questioned what a mother did before the child was brought into child care compared to a mother who stayed at home with her child, and which caregiver behaviours a child experienced in child care when at the same time, the counterpart stayed at home.

As a result, we found that a child's experience with the care providers' behaviours of communication, attention, being near and soothing etc. were incredibly lower compared to a child's experience with his mother's behaviour, who stayed at home with him at the same time.

Q:

Was this result really such a surprise?

A:

No, it did indeed not come as a surprise to us. But we were quite surprised that the mothers of child care children did much more during the time when they were together with the children than the stay-at-home mothers (at the same time). This suggested a compensation, to an extent, in which children who went to child care had no significant decrease in experiencing communication, attention etc. with an adult over the entire day as opposed to children who had stayed at home.

From this study, we thus learnt that reality is far away from the idea that parents would put their children into childcare and lower their motivation and activities with the child, in general. The opposite seems to be true: Parents who take their children to child care try to compensate and invest in what they think the child has missed in that time. These parents even try to provide emotional inputs, which are not easily available in child care. As a consequence, times after child care were often used for emotional exchanges by parents of child care children.

We also realised that the children in child care hardly cried and whined throughout the day. But the moment the mothers picked them up, they did extensively, as if these children wanted to appeal to their mothers to get her full attention. However, the mothers mostly interpreted this as their children had not been feeling well during the entire time in child care.

Research on multiple caretaking

Q:

Did this intensive research in child care encourage you to reflect on child care providers' engagements?

A:

Over time, the focus of my research moved more and more towards multiple caretaking and multiple attachment relationships, even though we started out from the mother-child attachments, exploring the basic mental representation of the child (with the mother seen as

the primary figure). We study how different the mother-child attachment is from secondary attachment figures, e.g. father-child attachment, child attachments towards a child minder in family child care or towards the care provider at a child care centre.

Q:

Do you think that the mother-child relationship is more profound than any other relationship?

A:

Yes, there is much evidence showing that “mother nature” helps this mother-child relationship to be most effective based on a bunch of hormones that are released during pregnancy and after delivery. And on the behavioural side: When we observed the children with their mothers and other providers, we were able to differentiate what expectations and what experiences such a child addresses towards different persons. And this was apparent despite the fact that all these attachment relationships themselves are unified by relevant core features such as enjoying closeness towards the mothers and these other providers.

Q:

So instead of a generalised attachment system, you discovered different behavioural systems based on different relationships and situations?

A:

It might be both, even though attachment research is still irresolute on this issue. But if we think of our own mental organisation of relationships you easily realise that you can feel very close to a one person and very distant to another one at the same time. This would speak for differential aspects of multiple attachments whereas the way we feel close to some persons might point to a generalised attachment system.

Q:

You specifically compared mother- and care provider-child relationships. What purpose do those comparisons serve?

A:

The qualities of public childcare systems have often been rated based on comparisons with maternal care. But it has been proven to be the wrong approach. Children in public childcare are separated from their mothers for only a certain time-period during the day. Their mothers remain their mothers and they know that even if they are only one year old; and the care provider is seen as being different in his or her function. Therefore, we wanted to find out what is different and which potential lies in the new relationship emerging with non-maternal caretakers. For that reason, we also changed the measure for relationships and applied the Attachment Q-Sort to explore attachment much broader with more facets of relationships than this is possible during Ainsworth’s Strange Situation Procedure.

Q:

What did you find?

A:

We already saw that childcare providers aim to focus on assistance for children's activities and support child exploration, whereas mothers do much better in regulating emotions and keeping the child calm, sometimes even away from exploration. And not surprisingly, children contribute to these differences by addressing their emotions more towards the mother than towards a care provider, and are more compliant with a care provider than the mother. This does not necessarily mean that something is good or bad, but rather demonstrates the functions of different relationships in different contexts.

Sensitivity in dyadic relationships and in group settings

Q:

In a meta-analysis, you introduced the concept of 'group-related sensitivity'.⁷ When did the idea of this concept occur to you?

A:

Actually that concept is the result of my experience in the former DDR child care centres, which relied on a strong emphasis on group activities. Here it was classified as non-professional if a care provider would individualise interactions with the children. There was a strong impetus on group activities and doing something together. It appeared quite obvious to me that if you have to organise a group, you need a strong focus on the group dynamics and how to use them.

During discussions with colleagues from West Berlin child care centres, these observations were confirmed from their perspectives too. Thus, when we worked on the meta-analysis, not surprisingly, we could not get a picture out of the various data before we decided to differentiate care providers' sensitivity in dyadic and group oriented.

Q:

What does 'group-related sensitivity' really mean? Are at least dyadic interactions the base for sensitivity, no matter if these interactions take place in groups or not?

A:

Clearly, dyadic interactions are also the foundation in care providers' activities. However, the durations of these interactions might not only be shorter and often interrupted in groups, they might even be selective and functionally different than when observed in one-on-one situations with an individual child. That is, group-related sensitivity does not operate only on a lower level

⁷Ahnert, L., Pinquart, M., & Lamb, M. E. (2006). Security of children's relationships with nonparental care providers: A meta-analysis. *Child Development, 77*, 664–679

than dyadic-related sensitivity. We might observe qualitative differences in the dyadic interactions in the sense that care providers may support children in engaging in group activities, playing together, and interacting with the peers using verbal expressions like *doing something together, helping each other* etc.

Implementing research into practice

Q:

What actually happened to the DDR crèches after the upheaval?

A:

The new social politics in the reunified Germany were highly motivated to dissolve the DDR child care system because it did not fit in with the traditional German family concept, which recommend to care for the children at home until age three. However, the local governments learnt that they could not change everything in East Germany at the same time. If they wanted to integrate the DDR people into the new labour market, they had to make sure that the children were looked after. So, the different patterns of the provision of out-of-home care in West and East Germany, which were already known before the reunification of Germany, were kept long after the reunification: In the East, 60% of the children under three attended child care; in the West between 20% (West Berlin) and 2% (Bavaria).⁸

These contrasts, however, began to level out when the Federal Ministry of Family affairs started to extend the child care system in West Germany, in 2007. Today, every child from one year on has the right, by law, to attend out-of-home care.

Q:

Your research in the DDR concluded that the increase of illnesses in children after the introduction of the one-year maternal leave was related to separation and attachment problems. How was that insight implemented into practice?

A:

The psychologists at IHKJ had just started to work together with early educators on adaptation programs, which were new to the centres in the DDR. But the practitioners were not ready for it. We were quite lucky when the upheaval came, as it led to a comprehensive child care reform, at least in Berlin, based on relicensed processes for all DDR care providers in which we had the chance to explain the children's needs from an attachment perspective too.

When the Berlin Senate was committed to balancing out the uneven provision of child care in the town, and opened up new child care centres in West Berlin to compensate the deficits in the past, there was a good situation for innovative features in the child care system. Following

⁸ Ahnert, L., & Lamb, M. E. (2001). The East German child care system: Associations with caretaking and caretaking beliefs, children's early attachment and adjustment. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 44, 1843–1863

this, together with a team around Hans-Joachim Laewen from West Berlin, we provided courses and programs on how to adjust young children to child care and how to reduce the stress.

Q:

As a psychologist you can measure stress. But as a psychologist, it's quite hard to know how you can handle it, for instance, in a group setting. According to my experience that's something practitioners often know much better. Did you work together with practitioners?

A:

Our approach has always been to analyse how professional care providers naturally handle certain situations. Especially highly experienced care providers rely on a lot of good practices which are not explicitly known, and which they apply intuitively. It is then worth generalising those practices and verifying them, in order to turn them into instructions and suggestions for younger and less experienced care providers. This is what we always do when we finish a study.

Q:

Can you give an example of the advice you have given based on your research to regulate stress in young children entering child care?

A:

We found out, for example, that it is very difficult for a strange person to soothe a child that has been expecting his own mother and not another person. By measuring heart rate and observing child's and care provider's behaviours at the same time, we detected behaviours which helped the child with the regulation. We found out that our intuitive tendency to put a desperate child on our lap and get close to it and to soothe with bodily contact might be not always the right way. During the first days of adaptation, the better way was to keep a distance, and maybe to move the attention of that child to a new toy or to other children. In sum, close bodily contact can be very helpful in time, but not at the very beginning of the relationship.

We also learned that both mothers and children benefit from having their mothers with them during the adaptation. Adaptation is an important period where the mother can gain trust to the childcare facility and the care provider can get to know the mother a little bit more. Unfortunately, when the mother returns to work, the children normally start being stressed again, and the adaptation program seemed to be ineffective. There is truth in that. However, our research could demonstrate that the mother-child relationship could be kept more stable if the mother were involved in the adaptation. Thus, the adaptation program can certainly protect the mother-child relationship, whether it is helpful in building up the care provider—child relationship under the supervision of the mother (which was the original idea), is, however, questionable.

Q:

How do you communicate your findings in general to policy makers or people at a policy level?

A:

In Germany as well as in Austria, I have been invited by the Federal Government, political campaigns, or study commissions of a certain party many times to write an expertise with regard to many issues of child care. Because public childcare is a really sensitive subject for these countries, I have also informed the parliaments on special issues, for example, children's stress. I learnt that the policy makers are specifically interested in the children's view, well-being and development, which is essential for the next generation.

I also wrote a book for policy makers, practitioners and the young families based on the international, as well as my own, research on motherhood and public child care for young children⁹. The book is prepared for popular-scientific discourses, and I get a lot of invitations to hold talks on it.

Q:

In the Scandinavian countries, Australia and New Zealand you see a lot of action research, that is collaborative research of academic researchers and practitioners. They are trying out hypotheses and finding out whether some pedagogical approach can be tried out in practice. Are you involved in that kind of work?

A:

I am really very interested in the basic mechanisms of the children's needs, which has a lot to do with the quality of care that they need. I would love to do this type of collaborative research with practitioners. However, I have not had a chance to do this yet.

Looking backwards and in the future

Q:

We talked about your own childhood, when your mother was at home and taught her children in the woods. Nowadays, children are faced with various challenges and enter into child care facilities quite early. How do you evaluate this development?

A:

Childhood in our societies has changed tremendously since I was a child. Specifically, early childhood became so different that many professionals assume that the increasing rates of attention deficits, learning disorders, emotional dysregulation and aggression are caused by the changing patterns of early socialization.

Clearly, our present societies demand high flexibility from the families. The families, in turn, have luckily responded with better task sharing between the parents and gender solidarity. But

⁹ Lieselotte Ahnert (2010). *Wieviel Mutter bracht ein Kind? Bindung – Bildung – Betreuung: öffentlich und privat*. Berlin: Springer Spectrum.

the present societies also created an image of a child who is active (from the very beginning), autonomous and personally contributing to its own development. This has forced the children today into individuation earlier and more intensively, and exposed them to various contexts which are marked by contrasts and transitions. Overloads are most possible, specifically in young families.

Q:

You have recently turned your research back to families. But why are you studying fathers now?

A:

Fatherhood is an underexplored area of research, at least in psychology. And fatherhood has changed much more than motherhood in our modern societies, with fathers who want to be involved much more in the raising of children than the fathers of my father's generation, who were proud of their bread winner function. So my interest in this issue is how fathers shape the lives of their children and whether they are helping the children in coping with the new challenges more efficiently than mothers.

Q:

What did you find out so far?

A:

We collected a lot of empirical data for over three years and we are now about to analyse the data. In general, we see that fathers are much more dependent on marital satisfaction, partnership quality and family context than mothers. If a mother is, for example, gatekeeping, the father has no chance to be a father and to develop in fatherhood. However, many mothers today cannot afford gatekeeping if they want to pursue a professional career. Then, they are more open to including their partners into the child care, which really provides benefits for the children. Fathers act and communicate in a different way with children as mothers do, which might broaden children's experience on social behaviours.

Q:

Do you believe that public child care can release the pressure of the high flexibility in families today? How can we prepare child care for this challenge?

A:

We still have to improve the current quality of public child care. In order to target this goal, we need more research. Children who are attending child care develop differently to those who are not attending because development is shaped by context. From this perspective, public child care takes on great responsibility for the next generation.

Furthermore, it must be our duty to tell parents how their children will perhaps develop in public child care or with child minders versus only being at home. More research must enable us to manage individualised consultations for parents who are seeking help with regard to child

care. I like the vision of future psychologists, who are specialized in early development, who counsel the parents in terms of the care program tailored in favour of their children (as I sometimes did when I served for the Prenzlauer Berg Associates of Child Care Centres in East Berlin).