Describe and evaluate research into cultural variations of attachment (12 marks)

Van IJzendoorn and Kroonenburg conducted a meta-analysis of 32 studies of attachment behaviour using the strange situation, from 8 countries. They wanted to find out if inter-cultural and intra-cultural differences exist in the findings. The findings from this study showed that secure attachment was the norm in countries, thus supporting the idea that it is ‘best’ for healthy social and emotional development. The conclusion from these findings is that a similar pattern of attachment was seen across cultures. Insecure-avoidant attachment was the next most common attachment type, apart from in Israel and Japan which are collectivist countries (emphasising the importance of the group rather than the individuals – they value interdependence). They also found that there was greater variation within countries (1.5 times greater) than between them.

Takahashi found that there was no avoidant attachment in the Japan sample, but high rates of insecure-resistant attachment. This may also be because of their child-bearing practices – Japan infants are rarely separate from their mothers, making their distress appear to classify them as insecurely attached using the strange situation.

A limitation of Van IJzendoorn and Kroonenberg’s research is that they were not comparing cultures but countries. For example, they compared Japan and the US who have different childcare practices. Additionally, within countries, there are different subcultures that all have different childcare practises. For example, rural Japan will have different practises to urban Japan. Urban Tokyo has similar distributions of attachment types to Western studies, yet the sample from rural Japan found an over-representation of insecure-resistant individuals. Consequently, this research may not provide accurate results about cultural differences and an individual sample may not be representative of a particular culture.

A further limitation of their research is the cultural bias of attachment theory. This means the theory is not relevant to other cultures as it is rooted in American culture. For example, the continuity hypothesis does not have the same meaning in America as it has in Japan. Furthermore, the strange situation defines securely attached people as being more socially competent as they develop. In America, they define competence in terms of independence. Yet in Japan, competence is defined by dependence. As a result, Rothbaum argued that the research may not be relevant to other cultures as attachment theory generally has a Western bias and therefore.

A final limitation of this research is that as it used the strange situation, it may lack validity because of cross-cultural research. The strange situation is designed by an American (Ainsworth) and developed in one country before being used in a different setting where it has a different meaning (imposed etic). When psychologists measure behaviour using the Strange Situation, they are using a technique which is based on the cultural assumptions of the technique ‘designer’. Willingness to explore is assumed to be a sign of secure attachment using the strange situation. Conversely, in Japan, a sign of secure attachment is dependence, not independence. Consequently, Japanese children may appear insecurely attached according to Western criteria but are securely attached by Japanese criteria – meaning the results may not be valid in non-Western cultures.