



# A builder of bridges

**A**IRI Hautamäki is Professor in Social Psychology at the leading university in Finland, the University of Helsinki (see [www.helsinki.fi/university](http://www.helsinki.fi/university)). Trained as a clinical psychologist, as a 25-year-old she moved to North Karelia (in Eastern Finland) with her husband, also a psychologist, to embark on an academic career and to establish the Psychological Institute at the University of Joensuu.

The University of Helsinki is the only Finnish university invited to the League of European Research Universities, an association of the best research-intensive universities of Europe. It has 11 faculties and 38,000 students. Finland is a bilingual country, and the official languages at the university are Finnish and Swedish (although courses are increasingly available in English).

## **NH: What's it like being a psychologist in Finland?**

AH: I'm a licensed psychologist, but not a practising psychologist; my tasks are research, teaching at all levels and supervision of doctoral dissertations. I am also a docent (in educational psychology) at the University of Helsinki, and a docent (psychology of women), at the University of Joensuu. Young people value the profession of psychology highly in Finland and are very interested in the subject. Psychological institutions are very selective in regard to students. The expectations are high and subsequent results excellent.

## **NH: Can you give me a flavour of your school?**

AH: The Swedish School of Social Science, where I work, is the largest Swedish unit at the University of Helsinki, in the Faculty of Social Sciences. The School offers bachelor degrees studies in social sciences, social psychology and psychology, but it is primarily a research-oriented unit. It plays an active part in international networks; because of the Swedish language, collaboration with Nordic countries has been very strong. The Research Institute coordinates ongoing research, and houses a centre for research on ethnic studies, as well as thematic research areas concerning family and developmental psychological studies, environmental studies, media and public policy studies.

Since 1995 the School has appointed

## *Nigel Hunt interviews PROFESSOR AIRI HAUTAMÄKI about life as a psychologist in Finland, and her work on attachment.*

outstanding international scholars as International Readers. During a few weeks the Reader delivers lectures on specialised academic themes, and meets with the research community. In social psychology here, there have been three Readers – Peter Coleman, Patricia Crittenden, and yourself.

## **NH: And it's an experience I've found very positive in terms of my own work, and my motivation. What motivates you?**

AH: I have always had a great interest in how the human mind works and how early interaction is internalised in different forms of self-regulation – how and why does development take place? As a family and developmental researcher, I have been fascinated with how Vygotsky and the cultural-historical school tie together the development of the child and the socio-historical development, as well as how attachment theory deepens the perspective of how the child builds up his working models of attachment in early interaction.

As a young researcher the problem formulated by the Frankfurt-School – how societal factors are mediated via the family to the individual – interested me very much, as well as Vygotsky's theses of the social evolution of the human infant. I became a family researcher, and my doctoral thesis dealt with how the social conditions of the family are reflected in family interaction and in the child's development of voluntary learning. I thought that by clarifying how societal repression is mediated to the development of the child, something could be done in regard to the St Matthew effect – 'Unto everyone that hath shall be given' – which creates cumulative deficits in the development of some children. Later, my research has expanded to the early years of development with the help of attachment theory.

## **NH: Why have you found that area so interesting?**

AH: In my studies I recognised the thesis of Selma Fraiberg, 'Ghosts in the nursery'. In spite of parents' benevolent wish to be a good parent, they were not capable of

enacting those intentions in their relationship to the child. The parents seemed to carry a psychological heritage based on their experiences that stopped them being as sensitive as they wanted to be to their baby.

Attachment theory, initially through the work of Bowlby, offers lucid and succinct concepts to describe and explain the transmission of internal models; working models of attachment, across generations. Particularly at times of stress, as the attachment system of the infant is activated, it develops sets of expectations with regard to the protective availability of the attachment figure. On the basis of parental availability at the time of stress the infant constructs their working models of attachment that will direct behaviour in close relationships. Through those ghosts that have been built into working models of the parents, earlier generations implicitly take part in care giving.

## **NH: And how far back does this go?**

AH: Benoit and Parker found an intergenerational match between grandmother's, mother's attachment pattern, and the infant's attachment to his mother in the Strange Situation. I started a longitudinal three-generational study in 1999 of how attachment is transmitted across three generations. The samples were enrolled from the local maternity guidance offices visited by all expectant mothers, and consisted of 34 mothers, 34 fathers, 34 maternal grandmothers and 34 children. The Adult Attachment Interview was used to assess attachment in pregnant mothers, grandmothers and fathers. The results indicated continuity across generations, particularly linked to secure/balanced and avoidant/dismissive attachment (see <http://sokkom.helsinki.fi/socpsyk>).

There was a predominance of avoidant-dismissive attachment, particularly among fathers, coupled to a lower than expected frequency of secure attachments. The predominance of avoidant-dismissive attachment has been linked to cultural preferences of early independence. Independence and self-reliance has been necessary in rural contexts in Finland, in

order to survive the hard winters and economic hardships, in the scarcely populated areas. Parents of normatively avoidant children offer protection against real danger, but direct communication and sharing of feelings are restricted. Parents respond to the child's negative affect (anger, fear, pleas for comfort), when this signals real danger, but consistently reject what seems to be 'unnecessary' affect – cries for help, or anger, when the parent thinks that the child is safe. This means that the child learns to inhibit negative affect, coupled to early affective self-regulation.

Finnish are an industrious population, with a homogeneous culture, which emphasises self-reliance, predictability and hard work. They also have the highest male suicide mortality in Europe, especially young Finnish males. The same avoidant strategy, with which Finns have learnt to protect themselves from the risks of the long, cold winters and a difficult geopolitical position, may create specific psychological risks such as disorders related to the inhibition of affect.

Even if the external dangers have decreased, the amount of 'securas' has not increased, and the traditional Finnish avoidant-dismissive attachment is still the predominant one. In our study, mothers and fathers often expressed the wish to be more emotionally expressive and tender with their children than their parents had been. But at least three generations may be needed to transform benevolent parental intentions to do better than one's own parents from the level of semantic statements to the procedural level – to be enacted as factual sensitive responsiveness to one's own baby.

**NH: Regarding your achievements in psychology, what are you most proud of?**

AH: My research has been cross-disciplinary, at the crossroads of social psychology and educational science. The focus has been on how societal influences are mediated by the development of the individual through familial socialisation processes. My work has been innovative in the sense that I belonged the generation of young researchers who built up relationships with psychological researchers in the Soviet Union. We introduced to Finnish academic psychology Vygotsky, Elkonin, Galperin and the Cultural-Historical school. Currently, the Cultural-Historical school is an important

paradigm. Since 1996 I am an Academician, a Full Foreign Member of the Academy of Pedagogical and Social Sciences in Russia.

In the 1990s I introduced theoretical thinking about attachment in Finland. With the help of Patricia Crittenden, we now have a group of well-trained attachment researchers in Finland. The in-depth, time-consuming assessment methods of attachment research require extensive training before any research can be conducted.

My role in the research community has been that of a bridge-builder. I have been building bridges between the cultural-



historical school and Anglo-American learning environment and developmental research. By introducing attachment theory to academic psychology, I try to bridge academic research and developmental and clinical psychological practice.

**NH: Where do you go from here?**

AH: If I get funded, I will follow up the children and families in my three-generational study, in order to study the intra-individual stability of attachment, but also to analyse the transmission of attachment across three generations. I'll continue publishing results from this study, the psychological processes which mediate the transmission of working models of attachment from parent to child in early interaction.

As I am 58 years old, it is time to start integrative writing, do a research-review, bind together all those theoretical threads that started from the cultural-historical school, and gradually landed at attachment theory. I have lived through an inspiring time in the history of psychology, being

trained in positivistic thought, gone through the student movement and *Positivismusstreit* [positivism], the Frankfurt school and the cultural-historical school, and back to family interaction in early infancy, in which affective neuroscience presents interesting new integrative models between dyadic interaction and affect regulation, paralleled by the growing brain developing neurological pathways to process emotions.

**NH: What about your attachments to your own family?**

AH: In my personal life, my extended family is my greatest achievement. As I experienced divorce as a child, I tried, through my psychological studies and research, to better understand familial and developmental processes. I wanted to build up a family in which children could flourish. With the benign help of my husband, we have four children, now grown-up, as well as three grandchildren. They make me very happy. Our family has a house and a boat, at Hanko Cape by the sea, where we gather every summer. We just enjoy being together. As I sit on the red smooth granite rocks, seeing my grandchildren building a hut among the wild roses and curved dwarf pines, I feel very grateful, as expressed in the song of Violetta Parra: 'I want to thank life, which has given me so much. It has given me joy; it has given me sorrow, so that I can distinguish the evil from the good.'

My third grandchild was born yesterday. Looking into her eyes, I could see a succession of mothers passing, my grandmother, my mother, myself, my daughter; life went on. A poem, written by the Finnish female writer, Eva Kilpi passed through my mind:

*As grandmothers die,  
they become flowering meadows,  
and some grandmothers become trees,  
singing and whispering to their  
grandchildren,  
protecting them from rain and wind,  
they spread their boughs to create huts  
of snow to shelter them.  
But before that they are passionate.*

**NH: Is there anything you would like to add about your work or yourself?**

AH: In order to live up to the stereotype of the Finnish avoidant-dismissive respondent in the Adult Attachment Interview, it's time to say 'no'.