

The Attachment Theory: Longevity of Childhood Attachment in Adulthood

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The attachment theory suggests that emotional bonds formed in childhood significantly influence interpersonal relationships even in adulthood. This paper explores the longevity of these childhood attachments and examines how different attachment styles manifest in adult behaviors, emotional regulation, and relationships. Through this literature review, the enduring impact of early experiences on adult attachment patterns is highlighted. Additionally, the potential for change and growth despite early experiences is discussed with pertinence to scientific controversy in the field.

Introduction

Attachment theory is significant because it addresses fundamental aspects of human development: how early relationships with caregivers shape an individual's emotional, cognitive, and social development throughout life (McGarvie, 2024)¹. Understanding how attachment experiences influence mental health, relationships, and behavior in adulthood can help in both clinical and developmental psychology, guiding how we deal with and treat these issues, especially for children and families (Rees, 2007)². From an evolutionary perspective, attachment is crucial in ensuring that offspring receive the necessary care and protection to survive and develop healthily (Karakas and Dağlı, 2019)³. The concept of attachment is a constantly growing and evolving field of psychology, as researchers explore its complications, implications, and how attachment patterns are reflected in brain function and structure (Cassidy et al., 2013)⁴. The attachment theory explains the emotional bond and the behaviors that result in long-term relationships, especially between children and their caregivers (Cherry, 2023)⁵. The attachment theory proposes four, primary attachment styles: secure, avoidant, anxious, and ambivalent attachment (Benoit, 2004)⁶. Another style of attachment, which is not one of the primary four, but is similar to ambivalent attachment is disorganized attachment. Disorganized attachment, a type of insecure attachment, is used by many studies to classify behavior (Benoit, 2004)⁶. When consistent abuse or neglect occurs, it disrupts the possibility of secure attachment developing by undermining the safety and trust necessary for genuine relationships, often leading to long-lasting effects that hinder emotional and social development (Lahousen et al., 2019)⁷. This literature review will investigate the immediate signs of insecure and secure attachment in children, the longevity of attachment styles from childhood to adulthood, and whether more recent, impactful experiences in life can influence

attachment styles more than childhood experiences. This paper could contribute to the field of psychology by deepening our understanding of how attachment styles develop and change over time, especially in diverse childhood contexts. In addition to this literature, more in-depth studies and research could enhance clinical practices by offering psychiatrists and therapists new insights in working with individuals facing relationship issues and trauma. Additionally, this review could contribute to cross-disciplinary connections by linking attachment theory to other psychological disciplines, like neuropsychology and cognitive psychology, which would advance the understanding of human development.

Research Methodology

For this literature review, research articles from databases like PubMed, Google Scholar, and Web of Science were used. Some primary keyword searches include “effects of insecure attachment styles on adulthood,” “factors that affect attachment in children,” “insecure adult attachment and child abuse,” and “attachment theory.” A major limitation in the research for this paper was the lack of primary data, in addition to not conducting a systematic literature review due to the entire literature database. For these reasons, sources, published throughout the 21st century, were used. The credibility of sources was based on the scientific databases, validity of authors' credentials, and publisher reputation.

Behavior in Insecurely and Securely-Attached Children

Learning about and understanding the principles of the attachment theory is crucial for two prominent reasons, among many

others. First, secure attachment allows people to understand what the genuine qualities of relationships are—not limited to but including trust, love, and respect for boundaries (Gupta, 2024)⁸. Lessons of attachment may not only be applicable to caregiver-child relationships but also transfer into adulthood relationships (Zhao et al., 2023)⁹. Second, the principles of attachment, experimentation with, and observation of all types of attachment can be used for models that are arguably valid predictions of an individual’s long-term stability (Davis and Carnelley, 2023)¹⁰. Learning about attachment and the attachment theory can lead us to a better standard of health (Cassidy et. al., 2013)⁴.

First, we will delve into secure attachment and the types of insecure attachment. Secure attachment describes the healthy, positive bond between two people in a relationship (Lein, 2024)¹¹. For example, in a caregiver-child relationship, if the caregiver is responsive and reliable, the child feels safe and valued, is able to form healthy bonds with others at present and in the future, and is able to handle stress and challenges effectively (Benoit, 2004)⁶. Insecure attachment, on the other hand, forms when the caregiver is not consistently and actively involved in nurturing the child (The Attachment Project, 2021)¹². There are generally three types of insecure attachment: avoidant, anxious, and ambivalent. Avoidant attachment is when the child’s emotional needs are not met by the caregiver, resulting in emotional over-independence, difficulty with intimacy, suppression of emotions, reluctance to seek help or support, and mistrust of others emotional availability (Li, 2025)¹³. In adult relationships, avoidant attachment can manifest as a tendency to maintain emotional distance, difficulty expressing feelings, and a preference for solitary activities or relationships that require less emotional investment (The Attachment Project, 2020)¹⁴. Anxious attachment forms as a result of the caregiver inconsistently meeting the child’s emotional needs. This can manifest as a high and constant need of reassurance and validation, separation anxiety, fear of abandonment, emotional volatility, obsessiveness about relationships, and difficulty with independence (The Attachment Project, 2021)¹². Anxious attachment can lead to a tendency to be overly sensitive to a partner’s behavior, a constant need for reassurance, and challenges in feeling secure and trusting the stability of the relationship (Lebow, 2022)¹⁵. People with this attachment style might engage in behaviors aimed at maintaining closeness and ensuring that their partner does not leave them, which can correlate to increased conflict. Ambivalent attachment, which is similar to anxious attachment, can develop due to a caregiver’s unpredictability in addressing and fulfilling the child’s emotional demands (Guy-Evans, 2024)¹⁶. Severe anxiety about relationships, extreme dependence, difficulty with reassurance or regulation of emotions, and emotional volatility are all possible results of this attachment style (Benoit, 2004)⁶.

So, how can researchers examine these attachment styles in day-to-day life? The Strange Situation was an observational study developed by Mary Ainsworth in the 1970s to examine

the quality of attachment between children and their caregivers (McLeod, 2024)¹⁷. In this procedure, the child is subjected to absences and reunions of the caregiver and a stranger to assess the child’s reactions and emotions. Securely attached children are distressed when the caregiver leaves but are quickly comforted by the caregiver’s presence and reassurance. When the caregiver is present, the children are able to be curious and explore their environment, signifying that they feel safe and secure in their caregivers’ presence. Children with avoidant attachment feel or show little distress in separation periods and avoid or ignore caregivers when they return. These children are not keen on reaching out to the caregiver for comfort. Anxiously attached children exhibit a lot of distress in separation periods and are difficult to soothe. They are overly clingy and dependent and have difficulty being open to exploring their environment. Lastly, children with ambivalent attachment are highly disturbed when separated from their caregivers and exhibit clinginess or resistance to the caregiver during the reunion. They are difficult to comfort and express ambivalence or frustration. (McLeod, 2024)¹⁷

The Strange Situation has many variations, as researchers modify the experiment to observe the factors they are studying (McLeod, 2024)¹⁷. For example, one important component of how children’s environments may affect attachment styles could be the effect of abuse or maltreatment. A study by Finzi et. al (2000)¹⁸, employed The Strange Situation to explore how maltreatment influences attachment styles in children in comparison to those of non-maltreated children to understand the impact of abuse or neglect on emotional development. 190 children between the ages of 6 and 13 were divided into four groups: children with drug-using fathers, children who suffered physical abuse, children who faced parental neglect, and children who were not maltreated. Child Protective Service officers served as verification for the children who reported maltreatment. Based on the Attachment Style Classification Questionnaire, key results showed that maltreated children were found to have a higher occurrence of insecure attachment styles, particularly the disorganized style. Disorganized attachment is characterized by not knowing how to deal with stress because of caregiver unpredictability or inconsistency, therefore, invoking clingy, resistant, or frustrated behaviors (Drescher, 2024)¹⁹. In contrast, the control group of non-maltreated children displayed more secure attachment styles and demonstrated curiosity for exploration and effective coping strategies. These findings highlight the profound impact of abuse or maltreatment on children’s attachment styles and their emotional development. The implication is that further research must study targeted interventions to support the affected populations, including those of different backgrounds, and help them develop secure attachment in relationships (Cassidy et. al., 2013)⁴. This paper’s research contributes to the understanding of primitive experiences on attachment patterns, strengthening the call to address and mitigate the effects of

abuse on children's attachment styles, which are part of their development.

Effects of Childhood Attachment Styles on Adult Life

Childhood attachments can have significant effects on adult attachment styles. Difficult family relations and the consequences of insecure attachment are impactful both physically and mentally, hindering individuals from living a healthy, normal life (Rees, 2007)². A longitudinal study by Widom et al. (2018)²⁰, aims to prove that childhood experiences have an effect in current attachment styles. Individuals with fairly normal, healthy childhoods were reported to have secure attachment and more stable coping mechanisms and relationships. Individuals with reported and recorded childhood maltreatment showed insecure attachment styles of anxious, ambivalent, and disorganized (Brenner, 2018)²¹. Anxiously attached individuals were linked to higher levels of anxiety and depression and heightened emotional reactivity and difficulty managing stress (Muris et. al., 2000)²². Individuals with avoidant attachment were associated with both physical and mental health problems including suppressing emotions and other health complaints (Mikulincer and Shaver, 2012)²³. Individuals with disorganized attachment were characterized by confusion and a lack of clear strategies for managing relationships and emotions, leading to poorer overall health outcomes (Beeney et. al., 2017)²⁴. In addition, different types of abuse are significantly related, and early parent-child relationships and traumatic childhood events play an important role in the formation of personality disorders (Bahmani et. al., 2022)²⁵. Findings of one study show that childhood maltreatment of various contexts (e.g., sexual, physical, emotional) are broadly correlated with the presence of adult personality disorders in individuals who reported being abused in childhood (Tyra et. al., 2009)²⁶.

In an article by Fraley and Roisman (2019)²⁷, development is broken down into four lessons, the first of which is most applicable to the longevity of attachment styles from childhood to adulthood. It claims that adult attachment styles seem to originate from earlier interpersonal experiences, such as parental relationships. In one longitudinal study, parents and children were observed over time from the age of 1 month to 18 years. When the children were assessed, researchers found that those who exhibited insecure attachment at age 18 were more likely to have less supportive parenting than those who were categorized to have secure attachment. These new adults had a higher probability of coming from dysfunctional families, characterized by parental depression, absence of one or both parents, substance abuse, and lower quality relationships in adolescence. Longitudinal investigations have proved associations between multiple aspects of children's caregiving environments and their attach-

ment styles later in adulthood, providing a valid perspective on the stability and endurance of primitive attachment styles (Cassidy et. al., 2013)⁴.

Relevance of Childhood Experiences

Although childhood experiences can be extremely impactful, other experiences can be more or equally influential than caregiver-child experiences in determining attachment styles. John Bowlby, a British psychologist, thought that the first connections children make with their caregivers have such an impact that it lasts throughout their lives (Cherry, 2023)⁵. From an evolutionary perspective, he proposed that attachment helps keep the infant close to the mother, which boosts the child's chances of surviving (Karakas and Dađlı, 2019)³. While behavioral theories argued that attachment is something learned, Bowlby and others believed that children are born with an inherent need to form bonds with their caregiver, proving that the caregiver-child attachment is an innate, foundational instinct (Cherry, 2023)⁵. To understand why children are so prone to forming attachments, the factor of impressionability is important to consider when researching attachment styles. Impressionability is defined as the degree to which individuals are susceptible to being influenced by others (Gwon and Jeong, 2018)²⁸. In an article by Gwon and Jeong (2018)²⁸, they discuss the heightened impressionability children and adolescents have because they are in a period of discovering self-identity and their mental set. In these formative years, when impactful, traumatic experiences like maltreatment occur, individuals are more likely to carry their behaviors and attachment styles later on in life and can create a cycle of intergenerational trauma (San Cristobal et. al., 2017)²⁹.

However, in Fraley and Roisman, the second lesson highlights the effects of socialization-selection asymmetries. This concept suggests that children are impressionable to society and often change their perspectives to conform with the larger population (Knoll et. al., 2017)³⁰. This can display how multiple influences to the child's attachment style are possible. But, as they grow older, they develop the autonomy to select the people and relationships they surround themselves with and are predicted to have increases in social skills and attachment security at ages 16 and 18 (Allen et. al., 2002)³¹. Furthermore, the authors suggest that impressionability is actually what allows children to be influenced by multiple people, which can help account for outliers. For example, some children who have less than ideal childhoods still develop secure attachment even later in life, therefore proving that "foundations are not fate" (Fraley and Roisman, 2019)²⁷.

Conclusions and Limitations

Key findings from this review were that abused children were more likely to exhibit insecure attachment styles, particularly the disorganized style. In contrast, non-maltreated children displayed more secure attachment styles and behaviors (Finzi et. al., 2000)¹⁸. Furthermore, caregiver-child relationships and primitive traumatic experiences can affect relationships, mental health, and physical health later on in adulthood, even leading to personality disorders (Tyrka et. al., 2009)²⁶. These findings demonstrate the significant impact of maltreatment on children's attachment styles and individual development. Other key findings bring up controversies in the field: whether childhood experiences are more impactful than more recent experiences in an individual's life.

This research contributes to the field because it adds to the understanding of how impactful and significant childhood experiences are to the life individuals lead as adults. This paper addresses gaps in the longevity of attachment styles or the long-term effects of insecure attachment. It contributes to refining the attachment theory, underscoring the importance of preventative strategies, and acknowledging the diversity of backgrounds that can cause trauma. Most importantly, this research and others may improve therapeutic practices, providing new tools for clinicians working with children, families, or adults dealing with relationship issues or trauma.

Further research would expand our limited understanding of how attachment manifests in different cultural or socioeconomic contexts and not just Western-centric dynamics. In addition, there is limited research on how childhood attachment styles affect adulthood, and further research could broaden this scope (Fraleay and Roisman, 2019)²⁷. Although the psychological aspects of attachment are well-studied, there is still an incomplete understanding of the neurobiological processes of attachment behaviors. Such further research may address how the brain processes attachment-related stimuli or how attachment affects brain development.

In this investigation of attachment styles, multiple limitations could have affected the results reported in this article. As this was a literature review, active, experimental data was not obtained, making manipulating variables, observing the consequent effects, and replicating the research process difficult, which can lead to skepticism about results and findings (Haddaway, 2020)³². In addition, the populations from whom data in subjectively selected papers cannot be assumed to be representative of the entire population (Haddaway, 2020)³². The lack of active experimentation and results emphasizes this and does not account for outliers or variations in the general trend observed (Haddaway, 2020)³². Second, the findings from this investigation were greatly dependent and supported by other work in this field, meaning that there could be unknown researcher bias in the acquisition and analysis of the supporting evidence (Haddaway,

2020)³². The validity and scientific relevance of the attachment theory has long been debated and questioned (Thompson et. al., 2022). The attachment theory has also been undermined due to its inability to account for human resilience and for undermining or oversimplifying relationships (Mehdiabadi, 2023)³³. This paper's focus, however, is the attachment theory and its prevalence in childhood and adulthood, but because of the skepticism about the attachment theory, this research could be unscientific to many critiques. Lastly, among the main limitations for this project was the paucity of research in this specific application of the attachment theory, its longitudinal effects into adulthood, and interventions, which manifested in the lack of abundant supporting evidence.

Studying attachment theory can provide valuable insights into how early attachment experiences shape adult life, and integrating findings across these domains may offer a more comprehensive understanding of the attachment-adulthood relationship. This is beneficial to improving mental and physical health, therefore improving quality of life. This field requires more research in theoretical clarifications and the science behind the attachment theory and clinical intervention treatments (Cassidy et. al, 2013)⁴.

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