Attachment and Parenting: Building Blocks for Lasting Romantic Bonds

Prasannan G*

Department of Psychology, ST PAULS COLLEGE, India

*Corresponding author: Gopika Prasannan, Assistant Professor, Department of Psychology, ST PAULS COLLEGE, Bengaluru, Karnataka, India, Tel: 8148614919; Email: gopikaprasannan01@gmail.com

Abstract

Early attachment dynamics, formed through interactions with primary caregivers, lay the groundwork for individuals' relational patterns and behaviors later in life. Research in developmental psychology and attachment theory suggests that the quality of early caregiving relationships significantly shapes individuals' attachment styles, influencing their ability to trust, communicate, and form intimate connections in adulthood. Also, the parenting style employed by parent shapes children's development and their subsequent romantic relationships in adulthood. Research indicates that parenting styles authoritative, authoritarian, permissive, and neglectful have distinct effects on children's emotional well-being, social competence, and relationship patterns. Through a comprehensive analysis of relevant literature, this review elucidates how attachment dynamics and parenting styles serve as fundamental building blocks shaping individuals' relational patterns.

Introduction

Modern relationships deal with a variety of difficult problems that are impacted by personal, cultural, and technical developments. It is frequently linked to early experiences in addition to these impacts. Early attachment dynamics, developed by interactions with primary caregivers, establish the foundation for a person's subsequent relational patterns and behaviors. The way parents raise their children affects not only how they grow up but also how they fall in love as adults. This paper elucidates the complex relationships among early childhood experiences, parental caring behaviors, and the quality of adult love attachments by combining theoretical approaches and incorporating contemporary empirical research findings.

Theories of Attachment

Freud S [1], in his psychosexual theory, described the oral stage as the most important stage of the formation of an attachment, especially to the mother. He proclaimed that the mother's importance is "unique, without parallel, established unalterably for a whole lifetime as the first and love-object and as the prototype of all later love relations" [2]. One of the greatest strengths of psychosexual theory is that it stimulated research in other areas of developmental psychology including attachment. According to behaviorism, the attachment of infants to their caregiver was considered to be a secondary drive, but Bowlby recognized that while feeding could promote closeness between a mother and her infant, attachment is not solely dependent on feeding. Both Harlow and Zimmermann's study [3] with monkeys and Bowlby's observations of infants in orphanages indicate that infants require emotional support and physical contact in addition to necessities like food and shelter.

In the mid-1900s, the British psychiatrist, John Bowlby, established attachment theory [4]. Through his extensive research, which involved the observation of primates and

orphaned children, he highlighted the essential significance of the relationship between a parent and their child in shaping social and emotional behavior throughout one's life. Bowlby asserted that any disturbances or disruptions in this relationship could have severe and long-lasting impacts on an individual's mental well-being. Mary Ainsworth conducted a groundbreaking study titled The Strange Situation in which she watched how carers and newborns interacted in a controlled laboratory setting [5]. Ainsworth distinguished between three different types of attachment based on her observations: secure attachment, insecure-avoidant attachment, and insecure-ambivalent attachment.

According to Ainsworth MDS, et al. [5], the initial attachment style is secure attachment, in which the child uses the career as a safe and secure base for exploration and turns to them for consolation and assistance when needed. When their carer departs, securely linked children typically exhibit signs of distress; but, upon the caregiver's return, they can be comforted and allowed to continue exploring their surroundings. The youngster in the second form of attachment, known as insecure-avoidant attachment, declines to ask the caretaker for help or comfort when they are distressed or separated. When they are reunited with the carer, they could seem cold or uninterested and not actively seek out comfort or interaction. This attachment pattern usually appears when the carer does not meet the child's requirements or is continuously unresponsive. The third type of attachment is insecure-ambivalent, in which the child exhibits clinginess as well as rage when they are taken from and then reunited with their carer. These kids can be hard to console, and when their carer tries to console them, they could get angry or refuse. When a career is inconsistent in meeting the child's needs responding to them sometimes and sometimes at all the youngster is likely to develop this type of attachment [5].

Additionally, Ainsworth postulated a fourth type of attachment known as disorganized attachment, which was subsequently recognized by additional investigators [6]. When a kid in this attachment pattern is separated from and then reunited with their carer, they may behave erratically or confusedly. They may freeze, act bewildered, or even run away. This attachment type typically shows up when the carer can be both a comfort and a threat. Modern attachment theory has undergone further development and growth beyond the original work of Bowlby and Ainsworth [7]. An important advancement is recognition of how cultural and contextual factors can influence attachment relationships. Additionally, adult attachment styles have been identified through research, revealing the lasting impact of childhood attachment patterns on adult relationships and mental well-being [8].

Role of Primary Caregiver in Developing Attachment Styles: The formation of a secure attachment in infants is heavily influenced by the mother's attentiveness and responsiveness to her baby's cues and needs [5,9]. This means that when a mother consistently and sensitively responds to her infant's signals and provides appropriate care, it contributes to the development of a secure attachment relationship between them. However, when the mother is unresponsive or inconsistent in responding to the infant's signals, it can result in an insecure attachment style [5]. Insecure connection, according to Mikulincer M, et al. [10], can lead to behavioral abnormalities, mental health problems, and problems interacting socially and emotionally.

Improved interactions and a closer link between mother and child are fostered by mothers who use techniques like extended nursing, baby wearing (keeping the baby close while sleeping in the same room), and co-sleeping (sharing a bed with the baby). The mother's constant presence and proximity may offer the perfect environment for nurturing interactions that strengthen the bonding process. According to a study by Zayas V, et al. [11], an individual's attachment styles in romantic and peer relationships as adults are significantly influenced by the quality of the mother's caregiving during the child's 18 months of life. According to the study, adults with secure attachment styles are more likely to have moms who were attentive and responsive to them when they were 18 months old. On the other hand, people who experienced less compassionate care from their mothers when they were 18 months old had a higher chance of growing up with insecure attachment patterns [11]. Research has shown that fathers who actively participate in their children's care, such as playing with them, holding them, and attending to their signals and needs, have children who are more likely to form a secure attachment, even though the father's contribution to attachment development may differ from the mother's [12].

Studies have shown that adults who report their biological parents' divorce are more prone to insecure attachment styles, according to research by Mickelson KD, et al. [13]. Similarly, researchers have discovered a correlation between early contextual stressors like father absence and low socioeconomic status and self-reported measures of insecure attachment styles in adulthood, as evidenced by the study conducted by Chisholm K, et al. [14]. The development of attachment styles among orphans is a multifaceted and complicated matter. Studies have revealed that orphaned children are more prone to insecure attachment styles due to their early experiences of inconsistent or disrupted caregiving. Children living in institutions, lacking consistent and responsive caregiving, are more likely to develop insecure attachment styles. Several studies have shown that

children who experienced institutional care but were later placed in a stable, loving, and responsive family environment can develop secure attachment styles [15, 16]. However, children who were adopted or placed in foster care at older ages, or who experienced multiple disruptions in care, may be at greater risk of developing insecure attachment styles [17]. Nevertheless, the effects of orphanhood on attachment development may vary depending on various factors. For instance, the age at which the child experienced the loss of their primary caregiver, the duration of stay in institutional care, and the quality of care provided after placement can all have an impact. Early experiences of caregiving can have a profound and lasting impact on attachment development, but early negative experiences may be mitigated by later positive experiences [18].

Antecedents of Attachment Style: Our comprehension of how much genetics and environmental factors contribute to differences in attachment security between individuals remains incomplete. The study conducted by Picardi A, et al. [19] explored the role of genetic and environmental influences on attachment styles in young adults through a twin study. The results indicated that genetic factors were more dominant in determining attachment security than environmental factors. First-borns were found to have a higher tendency towards secure attachment style, while last-borns had a higher tendency towards anxious attachment style [20]. First-born children receive more attention and nurturing from their parents, as they are the only child for some time [21].

Relationship between Parenting Styles and Attachment Styles

Diana Baumrind, a developmental psychologist, proposed the theory of parenting styles in the 1960s. Parenting styles are typically classified into four categories: authoritative, authoritarian, permissive, and neglectful. Authoritative parenting involves a balance of warmth and control, with parents setting clear rules and limits while also being responsive and supportive of their children's needs. Children of authoritative parents tend to develop a secure attachment style, characterized by a sense of security and trust in the caregiver. Authoritarian parents enforce strict rules without being emotionally responsive to their children. Children of such parents tend to develop an insecure attachment style, often an avoidant attachment style. Permissive parents are indulgent and lenient with their children. Children of permissive parents tend to develop an insecure attachment style, often an ambivalent attachment style [22]. Neglectful parenting is characterized by low warmth and low control, with parents being uninvolved and neglectful of their children's needs and children tend to develop an insecure attachment style, often a disorganized attachment style [6].

Attachment Style and Intimate Relationship

According to attachment theorists, children form their views about their deservingness of acceptance and affection (known as attachment anxiety) and their beliefs about how responsive other people are (known as attachment avoidance) during their early interactions with carers. The effectiveness of these early caregiver-child interactions, according to Mikulincer M, et al. [23], influences the development of internal working models, which are generalized mental models. These internal working models serve as cognitive frameworks that people use throughout their lives to understand and manage their relationships. People rely on these generalized models to assess and interpret the dynamics of their current relationships, which perpetuates the attachment system, which develops based on these early experiences.

Individuals with a secure attachment style tend to have positive expectations of their partner and themselves and are comfortable with emotional intimacy and dependence, which can result in more satisfying and stable relationships [24]. They tend to experience satisfaction and high levels of commitment in their romantic relationships [25,26] and demonstrate superior conflict management and resolution skills in their romantic relationships as opposed to those with insecure attachment styles [27].

In contrast, individuals with an insecure attachment style may struggle in their intimate relationships. Anxious-ambivalent individuals may fear abandonment or rejection and display clingy or demanding behaviors. The study by Campbell L, et al. [28] found that individuals with higher levels of attachment anxiety perceived more conflict and less support in their romantic relationships, compared to those with lower levels of attachment anxiety. Additionally, those who had an anxious attachment style tended to escalate conflicts. Avoidant individuals may avoid intimacy or emotional closeness altogether and prioritize independence over the needs of the relationship, preferring to steer clear of conflicts [27].

Parenting Styles and Intimate Relationship

People who grew up in households with authoritative parents, who were both caring and responsive while also setting clear rules and boundaries, are more likely to have healthy attitudes and behaviors in relationships. This may include having a positive self-image, good communication abilities, and the capacity to manage conflicts constructively, ultimately leading to fulfilling and lasting romantic relationships. Individuals who were brought up by authoritarian or permissive parents may encounter challenges in their romantic relationships. Those with authoritarian upbringing, marked by a lack of responsiveness

and excessive control, may face difficulty with being assertive and establishing intimacy in their relationships, resulting in feelings of loneliness and inadequate emotional support. On the other hand, people raised by permissive parents, characterized by insufficient structure and boundaries, may encounter issues with commitment and responsibility in their relationships, leading to unpredictable and tumultuous partnerships [29,30].

Emerging adults with authoritative mothers were more likely to compromise in their romantic relationships compared to those with authoritarian mothers. However, those with authoritarian mothers reported greater commitment to their partners. Authoritative parenting was associated with greater compromise in romantic relationships, but less commitment. Authoritarian parenting was not found to be associated with either compromise or commitment [31-33]. The study suggests that parenting styles continue to have an impact on romantic relationship quality during emerging adulthood.

Conclusion

Understanding the impact of early childhood experiences on attachment formation is crucial for comprehensively addressing the complex issues that arise within contemporary relationships. By recognizing the developmental origins of relational patterns, individuals and couples can work towards healing past wounds, fostering secure attachments, and building stronger, more resilient partnerships in adulthood. Furthermore, people can intentionally adopt healthier attachment styles and parenting practices to break the cycle of negative relational patterns and provide a more caring and supportive environment for their children. Through self-awareness, reflection, and intentional effort, individuals can transcend the limitations imposed by their past experiences and pave the way for more fulfilling and satisfying relationships, both for themselves and for future generations.

References

1. Freud S (1905) Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality. Standard Edition 7: 123-246.

2. Freud S (1914) On Narcissism: An Introduction. Standard Edition 14: 67-102.

3. Harlow HF, Zimmermann RR (1959) Affectional Responses in the Infant Monkey. Science 130(3373): 421-432.

4. Bowlby J (1969) Attachment and Loss: Attachment. 2nd (Edn.), Basic Books, New York, 1.

5. Ainsworth MDS, Blehar MC, Waters E, Wall S (1978) Patterns of Attachment: A Psychological Study of the Strange Situation. Lawrence Erlbaum, Oxford, England.

6. Main M, Solomon J (1986) Discovery of an Insecure-Disorganized/Disoriented Attachment Pattern. In: TB Brazelton, et al. (Eds.), Affective Development in Infancy, Ablex, Norwood, New Jersey, pp: 95-124.

7. Cassidy J, Shaver PR (2016) Handbook of Attachment: Theory, Research, and Clinical Applications. 3rd (Edn.), Guilford Press, New York.

8. Bartholomew K, Horowitz LM (1991) Attachment Styles among Young Adults: A Test of a Four-Category Model. J Pers Soc Psychol 61(2): 226-244.

9. Ainsworth MDS, Blehar MC, Waters E, Wall SN (2015) Patterns of Attachment: A Psychological Study of the Strange Situation. Psychology Press, New York.

10. Mikulincer M, Shaver PR (2007) Attachment in Adulthood: Structure, Dynamics, and Change. Guilford Press, New York.

11. Zayas V, Mischel W, Shoda Y, Aber JL (2011) Roots of Adult Attachment: Maternal Caregiving at 18 Months Predicts Adult Peer and Partner Attachment. Social Psychological and Personality Science 2(3): 289-297.

12. Grossmann K, Grossmann KE, Fremmer-Bombik E, Kindler H, Scheuerer-Englisch H, et al. (2002) The Uniqueness of the Child-Father Attachment Relationship: Fathers' Sensitive and Challenging Play as a Pivotal Variable in a 16-year Longitudinal Study. Social Development 11(3): 307-331.

13. Mickelson KD, Kessler RC, Shaver PR (1997) Adult Attachment in a Nationally Representative Sample. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology 73(5): 1092-1106.

14. Chisholm K, Carter MC, Ames EW, Morison SJ (1995) Attachment Security and Indiscriminately Friendly Behavior in Children Adopted from Romanian Orphanages. Development and Psychopathology 7(2): 283-294.

15. Dozier M, Peloso E, Lewis E, Laurenceau JP, Levine S (2008) Effects of an Attachment-based Intervention on the Cortisol Production of Infants and Toddlers in Foster Care. Dev Psychopathol 20(3): 845-859.

16. Smyke AT, Zeanah CH, Fox NA, Nelson CA, Guthrie D (2010) Placement in Foster Care Enhances Quality of Attachment among Young Institutionalized Children. Child Dev 81(1): 212-223.

17. Van IJzendoorn MH, Juffer F (2006) The Emanuel Miller Memorial Lecture 2006: Adoption as Intervention. Meta-Analytic Evidence for Massive Catch-Up and Plasticity in Physical, Socio-Emotional, and Cognitive Development. Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry 47(12): 1228-1245.

18. Fraley RC, Roisman GI (2019) The Development of Adult Attachment Styles: Four Lessons. Current Opinion in Psychology 25: 26-30.

19. Picardi A, Fagnani C, Gigantesco A, Toccaceli V, Lega I, et al. (2011) Genetic and Environmental Influences Underlying the Relationship between Parental Bonding and Anxiety Disorders: A Population-Based Study. Child Psychiatry and Human Development 42(5): 682-695.

20. Bayraktar F, Yahsi N (2016) The Relationship between Birth Order and Attachment Style among Turkish Young Adults. Journal of Child and Family Studies 25(8): 2404-2411.

21. Dunn J, Kendrick C (1982) Siblings: Love, Envy, and Understanding. Harvard University Press, Cambridge.

22. De Wolff MS, Van IJzendoorn MH (1997) Sensitivity and Attachment: A Meta-Analysis on Parental Antecedents of Infant Attachment. Child Dev 68(4): 571-591.

23. Mikulincer M, Shaver PR (2003) The Attachment Behavioral System in Adulthood: Activation, Psychodynamics, and Interpersonal Processes. Advances in Experimental Social Psychology 35: 53-152.

24. Simpson JA, Rholes WS, Nelligan JS (1992) Support Seeking and Support Giving within Couples in an Anxiety-Provoking Situation: The Role of Attachment Styles. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology 62(3): 434-446.

25. Frei JR, Shaver PR (2002) Respect in Close Relationships: Prototype Definition, Self-report Assessment, and Initial Correlates. Personal Relationships 9(2): 121-139.

26. Tucker JS, Anders SL (1999) Attachment Style, Interpersonal Perception Accuracy, and Relationship Satisfaction in Dating Couples. Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin 25(4): 403-412.

27. Simpson JA, Rholes WS, Phillips D (1996) Conflict in Close Relationships: An Attachment Perspective. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology 71(5): 899-914.

28. Campbell L, Simpson JA, Boldry J, Kashy DA (2005) Perceptions of Conflict and Support in Romantic Relationships: The Role of Attachment Anxiety. J Pers Soc Psychol 88(3): 510-531.

29. Bowlby J (1973) Attachment and Loss: Separation: Anxiety and Anger. Basic Books, New York, 2.

30. Baumrind D (1991) The Influence of Parenting Style on Adolescent Competence and Substance Use. Journal of Early Adolescence 11(1): 56-95.

31. Cho PLY, Ong AS, Cheung HS (2020) Parenting Styles and Romantic Relationship Quality: The Mediating Role of Compromise and Commitment. Journal of Child and Family Studies 29(8): 2117-2131.

32. Baumrind D (1966) Effects of Authoritative Parental Control on Child Behavior. Child Development 37(4): 887-907.

33. Darling N, Steinberg L (1993) Parenting Style as Context: An Integrative Model. Psychological Bulletin 113(3): 487-496.