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## The Developmental Trajectory of Intimacy: Role of Parental Attachment in Shaping Intimate Relationships

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### ABSTRACT

This paper provides a review of intimacy in relation to parental attachment and offers a unique perspective to see how attachment plays a significant role in carving bonds and relationships in later years of life. Drawing on the Attachment theory, this paper explores early childhood experiences and care giving in relation to the formation of romantic bonds. A link between different attachment styles and how they influence various aspects of intimacy, including emotional regulation, trust and relationship satisfaction, has been pondered upon. Evidence suggests healthier relationships, closeness, support and effective coping strategies are possible only with a secure attachment style. On the other hand, insecure attachment leads to troubled intimate relationships, amounting to psychological distress and emotional turbulence. This paper also sheds light on the role of gender, cultural factors, and relationship behaviors in shaping the influence of attachment on intimacy.

## INTRODUCTION

Intimacy is characterized as "the ability to engage in genuine affiliations and partnerships, and to possess the moral courage to uphold these commitments, even in the face of substantial sacrifices and compromises" (Erikson, 1963). Erikson (1950) suggested that throughout the lifespan of an individual, ego development keeps on evolving continuously. A universal sequence of events proceeds this, outlined by epigenetic principle of maturation. Bowlby's (1969) Attachment theory posits that people inherently seek close connections with others. Hazan and Shaver (1987) formulated their theory of romantic love based on Bowlby's (1973) attachment theory. Erikson stated in his Psychosocial Stages of Development that development is a discontinuous process and happens in eight stages. The sixth stage revolves around adulthood, characterizing Intimacy versus Isolation. This helps in the formation of the virtue of Love. As stated in most of the theories of development, everything that happens in infancy and childhood gets registered with an individual and influences their personality as an adult, thus, the virtues formed during any psychosocial stage are not confined to a single stage. This involves formation of hope and will, consolidation of purpose, moving ahead to embracing a life full of love, care and wisdom.

During infancy, the child forms attachment with a primary caregiver which is furthered to other attachment figures. During adulthood, this attachment is shared with partners in the form of intimate or romantic relationships. In 1987, Hazan and Shaver probed the possibility that the bonds formed between partners in their adult relationships resonate with those formed during infancy with caregivers.

Parental attachment can be defined as an emotional connection between an infant and his caregiver (usually the mother or the father). This is true for animals as well as human beings and helps in building a sense of security in the presence of the caregiver. Infants cultivate such bonds and seek supportive relationships as adults. Attachment is an innate response and it paves way for the fulfilment of basic human needs (Flaherty & Sadler, 2011). This directs the children to have a healthy base so that they can explore, learn and understand new opportunities; form a core identity and enter adulthood without the feeling of insecurity and inferiority. This helps the child to inculcate empathy, resilience, coping strategies, sensitivity and a holistic approach to life. The development of emotional intelligence and social skills is heavily dependent on parental attachment.

Attachment in case of children, is not just associated with mental changes but also, with physical transformation as well. According to UNICEF, feeling safe, seen, soothed and secure increases

neuroplasticity, the ability of the brain to change and adapt. Early bonds during infancy result in happy and independent adults. Attachment develops in the first year of life but strengthens with time. When the emotional cues of the baby are responded to (positively) by the parent, the infant starts unravelling a sense of safety and trust on the parents. This leads to better brain development and improved regulation of emotions later in life. Overall, parental attachment plays a highly significant role in the identity formation of an individual and sets the solid ground for the type of relationships a child will have as an adult.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Insecure individuals feel they are not known by their partners well as compared to secure individuals who express that their romantic partners know them well ( Brennan & Bosson, 1998). Attachment theory can be considered the basis for shaping intimate relationships (Prager, 2000). There have been consistent studies that prove that emotional regulation, in the face of adversity, can be strategized based on the person's attachment. Someone with an insecure attachment will opt for unhealthy strategies to deal with stress whereas someone with secure attachment shows more effective ways of coping. Ineffective coping strategies trigger anxiety which lead to emotional anguish and distress on a psychological level; this makes the person unable to handle stress and deal with negative life events (Lopez & Brennan, 2000; Wei, Heppner, & Mallinckrodt, 2003). Such people either become overly dependent on others or start suppressing any negative thoughts that they encounter in order to escape them. On the other hand, secure attachment makes individuals more accommodating with their partner; they adapt more to their likes, dislikes, preferences and opinions.

Having an emotionally close and confident relationship with parents and experiencing this relationship as a source of support and comfort seems to function as a learning context for emotional regulation processes in later romantic relationships (Fuendeling, 1998; Lopez & Brennan, 2000; Mikulincer et al., 2003)

The capacity for intimacy, the capacity for sharing truth with another, is closely related with secure attachment and that security and truth are intertwined in many ways (Cassidy, 2001). This implies that secure attachments directly affect the sharing of intimate space between two people. Further, as stated by Reiss and Shaver, a person can not feel a level of intimacy with another person unless he or she feels understood by the other person. Ainsworth links secure attachment style with the feeling of being

understood. Security means ‘feeling understood’ and this feeling characterizes secure attachment throughout life, beginning in infancy.

There have been various studies associating attachment with intimacy but empirical evidence does not show consistency. Multifarious longitudinal studies have brought to light the fact that quality of parent-child relationship can be linked to later romantic outcomes (Conger, Cui, Bryant, & Elder, 2000; Seiffge-Krenke, 2003). Parental attachment doesn’t just play a role in explicit values of romantic relationships but also, in the embedded aspects of relationships like expectations. This comes from our beliefs and values of how ideal relationships are, which is backed by proofs from community and family (Hall, 2006). Children observe the relationship of their parents and also form their own attachment with them. This exposes them to the rules, norms and behaviours in an interpersonal relationship.

Various studies have shown a significant overall main effect of Attachment style on intimacy. People who had experienced a positive model of others were associated with greater intimacy goals and an increasing amount of self-disclosure in their friendships. Individuals who had a positive model of self would employ greater feelings of being cared for, understood and validated by their friends. As per this study, fearful individuals avoid their desire for intimacy to avoid being rejected by their friends or partners. Levels of self-disclosure were positively related to the responsive friends with Secure individuals experiencing the highest levels of disclosure from others and dismissing individuals experiencing the lowest levels of disclosure (Clack and Wilkinson, 2006).

Brassard, Shaver and Lussier (2007) in their study found that women showed higher levels of attachment anxiety and lower levels of attachment avoidance than their male counterparts. Women also faced more sexual problems in comparison to males. Parade et al. (2010) inferred that parental attachment security had a positive association with ease in forming friendships and a negative association between social anxiety and ease in forming relationships. There was a negative connection between social anxiety and satisfaction with friends and their effect was moderated by race. A surprising finding of this study was that attachment security did not predict satisfaction within friendships among the white participants and the results were true only for minorities. Parental Attachment security was a more salient predictor of social anxiety and friendship satisfaction for minorities in comparison to white participants.

A study was conducted by Ávila, Cabral and Matos (2011) in which a Portuguese sample was tested for romantic attachment based on subscales derived with the help of factor analysis like trust, dependence, avoidance and ambivalence. Quality of emotional bond correlated positively with trust which indirectly indicates that a secure attachment that has led to formation of trust in an individual, further assists in emotional regulation and fostering strong bonds in romantic relationships. The findings of this study also indicate that the influence of parental attachment dimensions related to Inhibition of Exploration and Individuality and Separation Anxiety on the romantic attachment dimensions is carried out by emotional regulation processes. If adolescents experience this sort of tension or separation anxiety as infants, they have low trust development and high dependence on their romantic partners.

Schmidt's (2012) study including a sample of US college students highlighted that non-cohabiting couples were likelier to report higher attachment scores. No significant statistical relationship was observed between the representation of attachment and the choice to cohabit with one's partner. According to VanUitert and Galliher (2012), a clear distinction can be carved out between the attachment styles of men and women. Men have been reported to show higher dismissing attachment styles as compared to women, whereas women portray more secure attachment styles than men. This study also sheds light on the negative experiences in relationships which in turn, adversely impact later romantic attachments.

A meta-analysis pertinent to changes in adult attachment styles ranging from the year 1988 to 2011 established that secure attachment was found to be declining over the recent years whilst Insecure attachment and Dismissing attachment were found to be increasing. This could be subjected to the decline in positive models of others (Konrath et al., 2014). As shown by research done on university students in Israel by Einav (2014), children relate the quality of the parenting they receive with a positive or negative view of their parents' relationship. This is manifested in their optimistic expectations of their future intimate relationships if the participants considered their parents as close and supportive in their parenting, and as having a high-quality, intimate relationship. There were children who felt that their parents' relationship reflected intimacy and closeness but also considered their parents as less invested in their parenting role. These children did not accept their parents' model of intimacy as they found it to be an ineffective parenting model.

Mizrahi et al.(2016) in their longitudinal study ascertained that men's display of their sexual desire marked reduced relationship-specific insecurities between both partners but the same was not true for women, when women opened up about their desires, it barred the reduction in the relationship-specific

difficulties of their partners. Display of sexual desires was also a differentiating factor for attachment formation between the couple as when men displayed their desire, it benefitted the attachment between the couple whereas a parallel could not be drawn in the case of women.

Stroud et al.(2016) highlighted that less involvement in sexual activity was marked by greater emotional regulation difficulties. These emotional regulation difficulties also played the moderator between attachment avoidance and sexual activity. In a study examining adult attachment and perceived closeness, it was found that individuals with attachment anxiety tended to feel less close in their relationships. They often sought more time together, desired greater affection, and disclosed more personal information, all in an effort to feel that their relationship was close. In contrast, the opposite patterns were observed in individuals with avoidant attachment, who showed less desire for closeness, affection, and self-disclosure (Hudson and Fraley, 2017).

Most men and women in a college sample were involved in isolating, restricting, monitoring and controlling behaviours in their respective intimate relationships, where such behaviours are detrimental to the fruitful relationship between the couple. Also, there was a positive relationship between restrictive engulfment and anxious attachment style but no such association between restrictive engulfment and avoidant attachment style. Relationship satisfaction was negatively associated with restrictive engulfment and anxious and avoidant attachment. It was also noted that both the attachment styles viz, anxious and avoidant attachment jointly accounted for a 10% variance in relationship satisfaction. There was a negative effect of insecure attachment styles(avoidant and anxious attachment) on relationship satisfaction. Relationship satisfaction also had a negative effect on restrictive engulfment among college students.Yet another finding was that restrictive engulfment mediated the association of insecure attachment styles and restrictive engulfment (Ezgi Toplu-Demirtaş et al., 2018).

Tyolo et al. (2022) in their study from a South African university found a positive association between love styles and attachment behaviour, a positive association between intimacy and passion and between intimacy and commitment, and between passion and commitment. It was also affirmed that attachment style did not predict love styles and attachment behaviour in intimate relationships.Insecure attachment styles were dominant among the African American college students(Smith, Shepard and Williams, 2023).

Wang and bin Shuib (2023) in their study noted significantly low levels of association between attachment anxiety and avoidant social anxiety. On the contrary, a moderate association was prominent between attachment anxiety and social anxiety among college students.

## CONCLUSION

The findings from various studies consistently underscore the critical role of attachment styles in shaping intimate relationships and emotional regulation. Individuals with secure attachment are more likely to experience a deeper sense of closeness in their relationships, characterized by effective emotional regulation, mutual understanding, and self-disclosure. Securely attached individuals tend to employ healthier coping strategies when faced with stress, and their relationships are marked by trust, intimacy, and emotional support. In contrast, those with insecure attachment styles, whether anxious or avoidant, often struggle with emotional distress, ineffective coping mechanisms, and difficulty in forming or maintaining close relationships. Anxiously attached individuals tend to crave more affection and time together, but their efforts often lead to feelings of emotional dissatisfaction. Avoidantly attached individuals, on the other hand, tend to withdraw from emotional intimacy, preferring independence and self-reliance, which can hinder relationship closeness.

The influence of early parental relationships on attachment styles and subsequent romantic outcomes is significant. Secure parental attachments foster emotional regulation skills that are carried into later romantic relationships, while insecure parental bonds contribute to difficulties in trust and dependence in adult relationships. Moreover, attachment styles shape expectations, behaviors, and the overall dynamics within romantic partnerships, including the ability to share intimate thoughts and desires, the willingness to disclose personal information, and the level of emotional investment.

Gender differences also emerge in attachment patterns, with women generally exhibiting higher levels of attachment anxiety and lower avoidance compared to men. This may affect relationship dynamics, including intimacy and sexual satisfaction. The studies also highlight the varying effects of attachment on relationship satisfaction, especially in terms of behaviors like restrictive engulfment and emotional regulation difficulties.

In conclusion, secure attachment serves as the foundation for healthy, intimate relationships, whereas insecure attachment styles can create barriers to closeness, emotional regulation, and relationship

satisfaction. Understanding the role of attachment in intimacy and emotional regulation can inform interventions aimed at improving relationship dynamics and individual well-being, especially in contexts such as romantic partnerships, friendships, and parent-child relationships. Further research is needed to continue exploring the nuanced ways in which attachment influences relationship quality, particularly in diverse cultural and demographic contexts.

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