

Mary ainsworth and  
john bowlby  
psychology essay



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Attachment theory is based on the work of Mary Ainsworth and John Bowlby. John Bowlby laid the foundation for the theory. He worked with children and through his interaction with mothers and their children, he discovered family interaction pattern has an impact on the child's behavior and development which set the stage for his work. His ideas presented the importance of the mother and child interaction.

Mary Ainsworth expanded on Bowlby's theory when she joined Bowlby's research unit. She observed mothers and their children and she postulated the attachment style, namely secure, avoidant and anxious attachment.

Secure attachment is characterized by infant being more cooperative and easily appeased when they are separated from their mothers. Insecurely attached resistant infants are characterized by being more distraught when they are separated from their mother and they continue to be agitated at their mother's return and half of the infants directed their unhappiness at their mothers. Insecurely attached avoidant infants are characterized by not feeling distraught when their mothers leave them. They continued to feel ambivalence towards their mothers by rejecting her when she returned. The disorganized attachment infants are unsettled at separation from their mother because being in close proximity with their parents trigger the same feeling of fear and distraught in them.

A survey of population has deduced 56% of the participants to be of secure attachment, 24% to be avoidant attachment and the remaining 20% to be of anxious/ambivalent attachment. Similar study done by other researchers

obtained the composition of attachment type in a similar region. (romantic love conceptualized as an attachment process)

The characteristics of a secure attachment style in a relationship would be a relationship that is happy, built on trust and affectionate, on the other hand, avoidant style is characterized by shying away from intimacy in relationship, and the vacillation of emotions and prone to jealousy, lastly, anxious attachment style is characterized by being obsessed with the object of their affection, a strong desire to be together with someone, and they also display some of the characteristics of avoidant attachment such as jealousy, and vacillation of emotions. (romantic love conceptualized as an attachment process)

The different attachment style have different mental representation of how their relationship should be. This may lead to the formation of self-fulfilling prophecy where they have certain assumptions and their assumptions in turn affect their behavior and thereby the final outcome of the relationship. (romantic love conceptualized as an attachment process)

## **What shapes attachment style**

Does parent-child interaction style really shape the attachment pattern of the child when he or she is an adult. Many researchers have set out to explore this.

The salient point is whether attachment style is shaped by the environment , due to mother and infant bonding , a result of genetics or all three. There have been support for all.

Researchers who studied the genetic component of attachment have discovered that participants with double copies of the A1 allele of the DRD2 dopamine gene scored higher on attachment anxiety than those with one copy or none of it. Avoidant attachment was associated with the TT pattern of alleles on the serotonin HTR2A receptor gene. (lifted.) However, study has shown that gene only accounts for 20% of the differences in attachment anxiety and avoidance. Longitudinal study has suggested that having certain gene might be linked to acquiring a particular attachment style in a particular type of social setting. A study done by Torgersen et al, has suggested that genetic plays a bigger role in the attachment pattern of adult, whereas environmental factors is more critical in infants. ( genetic correlates of adult attachment style)

In one of the few longitudinal study done by Vivian et al which set out to explore if mother and infant bonding have an impact on friends and romantic attachment in the same adult 20 years later. The researchers followed the participants from the time they were 18 months old till they were 20 years. They found out that the quality of the care giving that participants experiences at 18 months old forecast anxiety that they might experience with their partners but not in relation to friends. Interestingly, the study did not find a relation with attachment to either parents for participant in adulthood. One theory could be that the when the participants were young they would turn to their parents for support and security; however, as participants grow older, they would turn to their friends and romantic partners for support. This is not to dismiss the role of parents as attachment figure because the attachment with parents is the prototype that

participants learn from and set the tone for their interaction with significant others in their adulthood. However there is caveat in this study,( root of adult attachment: maternal caregiving at 18 months predicts adult peer and partner attachment)

An earlier study done on attachment with a nationally representative sample also found the same conclusion. They did not find a very strong relation between parental bonding and the attachment style of child. The researchers administered a parent-child relationship scale to the participant where 3 components of the parent-child relationship was assessed, namely, warmth, over-protectiveness and consistency.

Parental warmth correlated positively with secure and anxious attachment. Paternal over-protectiveness correlated positively to secure attachment, whereas maternal over-protectiveness correlated positively to anxious attachment. Parental consistency was found to have no relation to attachment style.

Finally, it is worthy to bear in mind that the correlation for these components on the parent-child bonding has a correlation albeit a weak correlation, of not more than 0. 11.

The researchers did find support that unpleasant event in childhood might threaten the bonding process between parents and child which eventually causes insecure attachment in adult. Thus the experiencing of adversity in childhood is more critical to the formation of insecure attachment pattern in adulthood.

Childhood adversity such as abuse, and serious neglect correspond highly with a negative attachment style. (Adult attachment in a nationally representative sample) Parents might be better off divorcing if they are fighting a lot as they tend to be unable to meet the child's demand for attachment and this can lead to attachment anxiety in the child. Conversely a study done by Olivas Stoltenberg found no major contrast in attachment style between children of divorced and married parents. (relationship of attachment style to personality factors and family interaction patterns) Also children growing up in an impoverished family tend to have insecure attachment as opposed to children that grown up in a more financial stable family. It could be postulated that the stress cause by financial situation would result in inconsistent style. (Adult attachment in a nationally representative sample)

It could be postulated that child-rearing pattern has an impact on the outcome of a child's attachment style. Daughters who were brought up by secure attached parents have a higher likelihood of reporting a secured attachment style versus daughters who were brought up by parents who are insecure attached. Parents who are securely attached in the study reported using an authoritative style of parenting which could have contributed to the development of secure attachment in their daughters. In contrast, college students who are of the avoidant style were disinterested in having children and they advocated for harsher discipline to be meted out with their children if any. (parents characteristics linked with daughters' attachment styles)

Looking at the various theories, one would be hard-pressed to determine what is the definite cause of insecure attachment.

The various studies seem to point to different conclusion with regards to what really determines attachment style. Could it be that researchers are placing too much emphasis on attachment style being an inherited trait when attachment is actually a result of unique interaction between the individual and the situation? (romantic love conceptualized as an attachment process)

As with many mental disorder that have been studied, attachment pattern may be thought of as a genotype with some being more predisposed to insecure attachment due to the environment that they grow up in and the people that they meet in their adulthood which causes this trait to be part of their phenotype.

### **Is attachment style stable or does it changes throughout the life course**

Will a college student with an avoidant attachment style shies away from relationship even after she meets a nice guy with secure attachment style.

Suggesting that attachment style is unstable and evolve with age seems to be contentious. However, in a nationally representative sample study of adult attachment, there has been some suggestion that this may be the case. There is a higher percentage of adult participants with secure attachment as compared to younger college-going adults. What could explain the discrepancy between the 2 groups?

An assumption that could be made is that insecure adults attachment style was shaped by the relationships they experience in their life. Their attachment style changes as they met partners with secure attachment style

who are able to give them a sense of stability and support. The other conjecture is simply due to cohort effect. College-going young adults are growing up in a time of high divorce rate and parental divorce rate has been shown to correlate negatively with secure attachment.

The theory that our experience and maturity can shape our attachment style does bear some weight. When answering questionnaire on parents interaction, young adults tend to see their parents in a good light as opposed to the older populace who were more critical of their parents. The young adults could be doing so to prevent themselves from experiencing the cognitive dissonance that they might experience in their relationship with their parents, whereas older adult who are more mature are able to distance themselves from the relationship and recognize the negative aspects of their relationship with their parents. ( Adult attachment in a nationally representative sample)

### **What is the role of attachment in relationship and why is it beneficial for individuals to have attachment security?**

Study has shown that young children and infants who have caregivers who are sensitive to their needs displays less sensitivity to the stress hormone cortisol when they meet with stress and researchers have postulated the importance of attachment security as a mechanism to help individuals cope with the stress in their daily life.

In an experiment conducted by the researchers, men who were working on stressful tasks and received help from their romantic partner reported lower cortisol sensitivity as compared to men who received no help or help from



stranger, interestingly, women did not report the same result. Thus attachment with romantic figure has an important role in the modulation of stress.

The activation of the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis function which is involved in psychological disorder such as mood disorder, depression has also been showed to have a connection with attachment system as study has found that it is triggered during relational stress.

The insecure attached participants are found to experience greater physiological sensitivity. Anxious and avoidant exhibited more rapid heart rate and higher blood pressure when they were apart from their romantic partner while they were engaging on a stressful task. There have been no other similar study that has studied the effect of HPA on adults but studies on infant with insecure attachment shows increased HPA sensitivity during period of stress. We are able to infer that an adult's attachment style will predict his physiological stress reaction, prior, during and subsequently after conflict with their romantic partner. (dating couple attachment style and pattern of cortisol reactivity and recovery in response to a relationship conflict)

There is also a difference in the way individual perceive their romantic partners' anxiety. Adults with anxious attachment were more accurate in the prediction of their partners anxiety as compared to adults with more secure attachment style. Anxious attached adults were equally distressed at their partner's anxiety as they are highly sensitive to emotions of others and themselves.

However, adults with avoidant attachment were less accurate at gauging the anxiety of their partners, it could be that their partners disclosed less to them or that avoidant adults blocked out information that they find threatening to them. Avoidant attached adults also feel angry at their partners when their partners are unusually distraught. As a result, avoidant attached individuals are not as effective as the attachment style when it comes to supporting their partners through difficult time. (attachment orientation and reactions to anxiety expression in close relationships)

## **How attachment influence romantic relationship?**

Why is attachment anxiety getting such a bad reputation with regards to romantic relationship?

Many research have been done to investigate if attachment style has any influence on relationship with peers, romantic partners and even proneness to depression.

Attachment style has been linked to relationship satisfaction and the longevity of the relationship.

Secure attachment style has been linked to a higher satisfaction with the quality of relationship with romantic partners and lower rate of breakup and divorce. People with a secure attachment have developed an internal locus of control which enables them to deal with problems head on thus the lower divorce and break-up rate.

On the other hand, insecure attachment style has been linked to a lower satisfaction with the quality of relationship with romantic partners and higher

rate of breakup and divorce. People with an insecure attachment have developed an external locus of control which results in them giving up the moment they experience any obstacle.

## **How attachment anxiety affect relationship with romantic partners?**

Attachment style researchers have incorporated Erikson's stages of psychosocial development into the attachment theory to provide a more holistic view.

Affectionate relationship requires one to let one's guard down and be vulnerable to their partners. It is essential that adults have a strong sense of self-identity in order for them to form meaningful relationships. Recent studies have illustrated that adults with a strong sense of self-identity are more satisfied with the intimacy in their relationship. It can be postulated that children who grow up with a secure attachment would have a stronger sense of self-identity as they have a secure base to return to whenever they go about to do their exploration. In comparison, children with insecure attachment would experience distraught and mistrust at doing self-exploration which in turn affects their ability to build up a strong sense of self-identity. It could be suggested that children with an insecure attachment would grow up with a weaker sense of self-identity which could hamper their relationship.

Individuals with anxiety attachment appraisal monitoring system are positioned at a lower threshold and they are more responsive to cues of threats in their relationship. In relation to this, they place more emphasis on

acts that would signify rejection from their partners than acts that signify support. Anxious attachment individuals would as a result behave in ways that support their negative expectations of relationship ( perception of conflict and support in romantic relationship) where should I put this paragraph?

Research has shown that adults with anxiety attachment responds more strongly to angry faces as compared to people with a secure attachment. The fMRI of adults with attachment anxiety was shown to be highly activated in the amygdale region which corresponds to a heightened sensitivity to fear of being reproach in social relationship.

Adults with anxiety attachment also demonstrates greater neural response when presented with ' happy faces' as compared to secure attachment adults. The areas of the brain in such processing are related to the comprehension of facial emotions, facial mimicry or the judgment of affective social distance.

It has been postulated that people who desire to achieve intimacy in their relationship but have misgivings of others, would devote unwittingly more resources to the judgment and assessment of facial response on other humans to aid in facial mimicking responses. Facial mimicking responses are associated with increased liking and rapport by the other party.

Perception people with attachment anxiety have of themselves and others

Attachment anxiety individuals are prone to regret the decisions they make in close relationship. They often vacillate when it comes to matters of the

heart. Being prone to regret, means that they are less satisfied with their relationship than secure attachment adults. They are also susceptible to being in and out of relationship which is a function of their inability to remove regret from the decision making process. As a result they mull a lot when it comes to relationship issues and may make choices that are considered to be unwise and experience greater ambivalence consequently. (Attachment anxiety uniquely predicts regret proneness in close relationship contexts)

## Part 2

Anxious attachment adults put more weight on the evaluation of daily events that go between their partners and them. When conflicts arises, they have less optimistic view of the relationship and view themselves as less satisfied with the relationship and their partners. Their relationship should feel more turbulent as they make judgment of the quality of the relationship based on their daily events as opposed to evaluation based on far-sighted goals.

Anxious attachment individuals tend to view more conflicts in their relationship, a view not necessarily share by their partner. They also tend to have less optimistic view of their relationship on days when squabble occur as compared to how their partner feels. They also experience higher level of anguish when discussing conflicts with their partners despite how indubitably their partners act towards them.

They tend to feel that their partners do not see them in a good light on certain days when they read too much into relationship cues. As a result, they would feel aggrieved, and react in a negative manner towards their

partners. They tend to feel that their partners give them less emotional and physical support, which need not necessarily be the case, For example, during childbirth, women with attachment anxiety would rate the emotional support provided by their husband as less than satisfactory as compared to secure attachment women. Interestingly, Anxiety attachment adults rate themselves as being less supportive towards their partners even when their partners do not feel the same way. (perceptions of conflicts and support in romantic relationships; The role of attachment anxiety)

## **End note**

Looking at the various studies, we can see how detrimental the working model of relationship can be for people with insecure attachment style.

In a time when divorce rates are on the rise, it is imperative that more research more done to understand what can be done to help people develop secure attachment and also develop a more effective working model of relationship style.

## Limitation

The jury is still out as to what really cause attachment pattern in adult and is attachment pattern stable ? What we do know is that insecure attachment can be detrimental to romantic relationship. The study that has been conducted have primarily focused on the white majority in American. It is uncertain if study on attachment pattern and relationship style can be generalized to a broader population. It will be beneficial if a similar study is carried out with population in Asia. The study has only been carried out with 'normal' population, it will be interesting to carry out the study with

population with psychological disorder to study if psychological disorder will have any confounding factors on attachment patterns.

It is interesting to note that researchers have recruited primarily college students or readers of newspapers for their attachment studies. Would there be a result bias because of the participants' characteristics. Participants who were recruited have some form of education and would tend to be of higher socio-economic status. What about the population with low education and low SES? Have they been unrepresented by the study?

The predominant form of data collection in attachment study was through self-report and the various scales such as close relationship scale and attachment anxiety scale.

There is always the possibility that participants might be inaccurate with reporting due to social desirability.

Finally, It will be a good point for future study to do a longitudinal study on attachment to determine if parent-child interaction can shape the attachment pattern and relationship style of adult.