

Review

The Impact of Secure Attachment on Interpersonal Relationship: A Review

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ABSTRACT

Attachment has been defined as the psychological bond between a growing child and a caregiver. It is a relationship that develops over a period of time between a child and the caregiver, or any other significant person in the life of a child. It is characterized by intimacy, warmth, and continuity thus eventually becoming the hallmark of all other relationships in the life of a human being. Research has shown that when children experienced secure attachment during their early stages of development in life, they are likely to develop capabilities in exploring the world of interpersonal relationships. Some of the factors that contribute to the diminishing of attachment between children and their caregivers include modernism and post-modernism, family crisis, disability in the life of the mother, death of the caregiver and the scourge of debilitating sicknesses and diseases which incapacitate caregivers. And so it is not uncommon to find individuals who experienced insecure attachment in their childhood having difficulties in their interpersonal relationship as adults. Some of the manifestations of interpersonal relationship difficulty and insecure attachment include low self-esteem, anxiety, inability to trust others, unwillingness to receive help from others, dependence syndrome, aggression, and feeling unloved, among others. However, with timely and appropriate psychological interventions, some of these challenges can be overcome although more research is encouraged in the area of attachment especially in Asia and Africa.

Keywords: Attachment, Interpersonal Relationship, Self-Esteem, Anxiety, Dependence Syndrome, Aggression, Psychological Interventions

The knowledge about the existence of emotional bond between children and their caregivers has been known for a number of years but various researches in recent time has not only led to the development of the theory of attachment but has also established the reality and relevance of this theory in different areas of human lives.. This early and enduring emotional bond is referred to as attachment and it usually develops between a growing child and the caregiver, usually but not limited to the mother. According to Solomon & George (1996), a

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caregiver could be a parent or a guardian charged with the responsibility of the child's welfare and livelihood; including provision of comfort, care, guidance, as well as basic needs and emotional support. Therefore, apart from physical support such as food, clothing and shelter, children need attachment figures to provide emotional bonding and support at the early stage of development in life in order for them to have healthy interpersonal relationships with others as they grow in life.

When children lack secure attachment during their early stages of development in life, they are likely to exhibit deficiencies in exploring the world of interpersonal relationships. According to Karen, (1994, p. 51), "when a caregiver is irritable, nagging, and critical or even absent altogether, the child will not only be angry and aggressive but will also be greedy both for affection and for the things that represent affection to him/her – this will create a vicious cycle into the worldview of the child and later adult relationships". Other manifestations of interpersonal relationship difficulties arising out of insecure attachment experience include the need for approval from others, attention seeking, lack of trust and low self-esteem among others. As it was observed by Munene (2013, p. 208), "modernism and post modernism are two of the many factors that contribute to the diminishing of attachment between children and their caregivers." Other factors could be family crisis, disability in the life of the mother, death of the caregiver and the scourge of debilitating sicknesses and diseases which incapacitate caregivers.

The devastation being caused through terminal illnesses such as HIV/AIDS and cancer for example as well as the attendant psychological problems/stress in many families could be some of the factors that also contribute to the erosion of the expected bonding between children and caregivers. And so, as children experience insecure attachment, it is easily detected through difficulty in interpersonal relationships in adult life. When significant attachment figures or caregivers are lacking in the childhood stage of any person, it will lead to an inept interpersonal relationship life as adults. This is because as human beings, the presence of an attachment figure in childhood contributes significantly to the social development of the person. Without the presence of an attachment figure who demonstrates a warm and friendly relationship with the growing child, it will be difficult for such a child to know how to relate well with others since the child never learnt such skills in childhood.

The concept of attachment was first coined by John Bowlby through his work on 44 juvenile thieves in which he linked their symptoms to histories of insecure attachment (Bowlby, 1944). He described attachment deprivation as calamitous as the child has no chance to develop a true attachment. According to him, this leads to development of bitterness and mistrust on the part of the child thereby making the child to shut down his natural tendency to reach out for love and connection. Mary Ainsworth (1972) conducted studies on babies and mothers in Uganda which showed that when a mother or caregiver acts as a secure base for the child, the child freely explores the world of interpersonal relationships with a sense of security. According to Bowlby (1988), if the child is separated from the attachment figure

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and intimate emotional bonds; and if the associated sense of security is strained, it can lead to deviations from normal personality development.

Types of Attachment

Attachment can be broadly divided into two main categories: secure and insecure attachments. When the emotional bond between the child and the caregiver is successful, we have secure attachment. In other words, the child is securely attached and this provides a good template for future relationships and a securely attached child is not likely to exhibit difficulty in relationship with others. However, if there is any kind of disruption in the attachment formation process, then insecure attachment could result which may manifest in any of the following: avoidant, ambivalent and disorganized.

Secure Attachment: In order for a secure attachment to be formed between a child and the caregiver, trust has to be established between both of them. This implies that the caregiver would be there whenever the child needs him/her and there must be sufficient space for emotional expression and regulation. This will encourage the child to explore the environment, with the assurance that the caregiver will be there to act as a secure base; and as this continues over a period of time, the growing child will be more competent for future explorations and relationships. Thompson (1999) observed that children with secure attachment orientation exhibited a higher degree of excitement, agreeableness, and positive emotion while insecurely attached children manifested the opposite during interaction with their mothers.

A securely attached child will demonstrate confidence and resilience when confronted with peer pressure during adolescence unlike an insecurely attached child. This is because as the child grows into adolescence, the attachment experiences of the earlier years are carried over into adulthood in relating to peers and other social circumstances. And so, with a positive model of self and of others, it becomes relatively to interact closely with others - depend on them and have them depend on him/her. There is little or no struggle with regards to loneliness and acceptance by others. These are qualities of secure attachment and positive interpersonal relationship. The securely attached child grows into an adult who has a positive model of himself and of others.

Insecure Attachment: The different types of insecure attachment are as follows:

1. *Avoidant attachment:* When a caregiver consistently discourages visible and open expression of affection or distress in an attachment relationship with the child, avoidant attachment manifests is the result and this later manifest in adulthood as an individual who wouldn't want to depend on others or have others depend on him/her. He/she can be comfortable without emotional relationships, demonstrates self-sufficiency, and have preference for independence with regards to interpersonal relationship. Such an individual develops into an adult with a positive model of himself and a negative model of others and will most likely exhibit difficulty in interpersonal relationship with others whether at home or in the workplace.

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2. *Ambivalent Attachment*: Also known as resistant attachment, this type of insecure attachment arises due to inconsistency in parenting pattern on the part of the caregiver thereby creating uncertainty on the part of the child with regards to allowance for the expression of anxiety or distress. In other words, the child is not sure if his/her emotional expression will be attended to by the caregiver, and therefore finds it difficult to explore the world around him/her because of lack of assurance of safety. According to Karen (1994), the ambivalent child “tends to immature, demanding/clingy, and is easily overwhelmed by his/her own emotions”. Such an individual will most likely develop into an adult with a negative model of himself and a positive model of others. There is a high probability that this individual will experience difficulty in interpersonal relationship.
3. *Disorganized or Disoriented Attachment*: Disorganized pattern of attachment orientation occur when there are unresolved issues in the life of the caregiver thereby leaving little or no emotional space for a proper attachment formation with the growing child. This could also be as a result of threat arising from the unresolved conflicts in the life of the caregiver. “The baby is intrinsically motivated to seek safety through closeness to the caregiver but when the parent is the source of fear (and this may be the result of neglect) the paradox cannot be resolved, and the child’s faith in the world of relationships is demolished by their ‘scare giver’ and he/she is left with no coherent means of relating to other people” (Malekpour, 2007).
Disorganized attachment leads to an adult who is not comfortable in getting close to people. Even though the individual may desire an emotionally close relationship but due to the inability to have complete trust in others, the desire is not realized. Furthermore there is the fear of being hurt if closeness to others becomes inevitable due to the fact that this individual possesses a negative model of himself and of others.

Secure Attachment and Interpersonal Relationship

One of the fundamental ingredients of a happy and successful community whether at family, clan, village or city level is good interpersonal relationships. When this is lacking in any society, such a society cannot realize its full potential. Interpersonal relationship is very important in governance, politics, economic and social development since human beings are meant to be relational. It is becoming more and more evident that the kind of upbringing a person had in childhood play a significant role on how that individual will relate with others in adulthood. For example it is not uncommon to find bullying among primary and secondary school students. Some of the children who bully others in school could simply be demonstrating the kind of exposures they had in their upbringing. In addition, many children who grew up in homes where they could not develop positive self-esteem due to insecure attachments are usually the victims of bullying in our schools.

Research has shown that there is a strong correlation between secure attachment and a positive interpersonal relationship. While attachment has been described as a satisfactory emotional bond between a growing child and a caregiver, the influence of which continues even into adult life; interpersonal relationship on the other hand refers to interaction between

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two or more individuals usually characterized by closeness which can be deep and strong. According to Anderson & Chen (2002), “this relationship may vary from being brief to an enduring one but it is established on social commitment which can be brought about by love, friendship, workplace relations, living in the same neighborhood, membership of fellowship or organizations.” It can be inferred that without a secure attachment, there may be challenges in interpersonal relationship.

According to Snyder and Lopez (2007), in order for healthy relationships to be built in someone’s life, an essential pre-requisite of secure attachments at foundational level is needed. The type of model exhibited in adult attachment is an indication of the internal set of personal expectations and preferences which had guided earlier behavior as a result of the kind and degree of intimacy experienced earlier in life and so, for someone to reach an optimal level of functioning and interpersonal relationship in life, secure attachment would be a necessary foundation. It has been discovered that the release of neurotransmitters (oxytocin and endorphin) connected with stress relief and contentment is stimulated by social acts that reinforce feelings of attachment (Poqueresse, 2012). The implication of this is that there can be an inhibition in the release of such neurotransmitters if the necessary social acts are absent due to insecure attachment relationship. This may eventually lead to feelings of discontentment which is an indication of difficulty in interpersonal relationship problems.

A good attachment between a mother and a child enables the child to freely explore the world of interpersonal relationships with a sense of security which eventually guarantees proper development of interpersonal relationships in adulthood (Ainsworth, 1972). In her work with children, Melanie Klein developed theories about early mental processes; how they develop and how they are reflected in later life. She was able to see the child’s relationship with the mother in a new light and she concluded that the child’s early relationship with the mother lives within the child and becomes a template for future relationships (Karen, 1994). An interesting work done by Bowlby between 1936 and 1939 which involved collection of 44 children aged between six to sixteen years brought out some critical observations. Most of these children were involved in stealing and other vices while some of them were depressed, hyperactive, and affectionless (Karen, 1994). Even though these children displayed these undesirable qualities, the problems they exhibited were traced to their caregivers. The parents of these children had attitudes and behaviours that were disturbing such as extreme anxiety, cruelty, and sentimentality. Others were involved in drunkenness and violent domination over the children. This made Bowlby to infer that such undesirable qualities in caregivers like irritability and nagging has a way of making the child angry and aggressive which later creates an attitude of greed for affection and for any other thing that represents affection to the child such as sweets. And so, Bowlby concluded that one main environmental factor that is very crucial in a child’s relationship life is attachment.

So far, the emotional bond between a child and a caregiver has been shown to persist beyond childhood and further research has proven that babies with secure attachments are likely to become competent during childhood. In their research, as reported by Hoffman., et al, (1988,

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p. 190) Matas, Arend, and Sroufe, (1978) discovered that “toddlers who had been rated as securely attached at both 12 and 18 months dealt with their academic problems with an enthusiasm rarely shown by toddlers who had been rated earlier as having ambivalent or avoidant attachments. When the children reached the final problem which was too difficult for them to solve, it was observed that securely attached toddlers were less likely to throw tantrums and more likely to accept help from their mothers than were toddlers with insecure attachments.”

Similar results appeared among some three-year-old children who played a game with strangers in their homes. The game involved timing the children to build a tower by putting together wooden rings on a peg. The children that were securely attached began the game with enthusiasm and even increased their effort when they fell behind but those children who were insecurely attached were hesitant to start and when they fell behind, they tended to give up (Lutkenhaus, Grossmann, & Grossmann, 1985). The links between secure attachments and later competence have been traced even further. Among a group of four-year-olds, those with secure attachments during infancy showed less emotional dependence on their nursery school teachers (Sroufe, Fox, & Pancake, 1983). They were competent, confident, and sought their teacher’s assistance only when a task was clearly beyond their capabilities. The four-year-olds with insecure attachments behaved quite differently. They seemed to need frequent contact, approval and attention from their nursery school teachers and clung to them so closely to the extent that the relationship interfered with their play with other children. While such behaviour is not necessarily caused by insecure early attachments, it is predicted by them (Sroufe et al, 1983).

As children grow up, attachment patterns acquired during the early years of life are exhibited through their adult relationships (Grossmann et al, 2005). “Those well attached become secure adults who exhibit low anxiety and avoidance; are comfortable with intimacy, willing to rely on others for support, and are confident that they are loved and valued. Those who were insecurely attached tend to be preoccupied (anxious-ambivalent) adults who exhibit high anxiety, low avoidance, have an exaggerated desire for closeness and dependence in addition to heightened concern about being rejected” (Munene, 2013, p. 212).

In a similar way, adult attachment studies conducted by Shaver and Hazan (1988) showed that the nature of the attachment relationship in the original families (families of origin) determined whether the adults exhibited secure, avoidant, or ambivalent attachment in their romantic relationships. A qualitative study conducted on the staff members of a particular organization by Olawale (2014) showed that a significant percentage (63%) of the staff membership linked their experiences of interpersonal relationship difficulty in adult life to the insecure attachment experiences they had during childhood. Some of them reported that they experienced inability to get along with others, feeling of being unloved by others, fear of rejection and inability to trust others, etc. And so it has both been inferred and established through various research efforts that attachment pattern has profound effect of interpersonal

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relationship. More importantly, secure attachment contributes to positive interpersonal relationship life whether at home, in the workplace and in the society at large.

CONCLUSION

Human beings can be described, not as mechanical machines but as relationship oriented. Despite our professional competence, there is still a need for relational competence and the family is the building block of any nation. A number of individuals fail to reach the fullness of their potential in life not because of professional incompetence but possibly because of difficulties arising out of limitations in their relationship with others. The theory of attachment has contributed in no small way in helping to discover and describe the different types of emotional bonding which usually begins at childhood and forms the template for future relationships. It has further revealed the critical importance of the emotional well-being of a human being in enhancing the overall well-being of such an individual. A positive interpersonal relationship whether at home, in politics and governance, workplace and neighbourhood will contribute significantly in promoting harmonious relationship in the different life contexts. However, a foundation of secure attachment will promote and guarantee the positive interpersonal relationship needed to oil the engine of psychological well-being of our society thereby contributing to the raising of happy and prosperous generations.

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