

A Systematic Review of Attachment Pattern in Indian Studies: Exploring the Effects of Cultural Risks and Resources

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ABSTRACT

The combination of evolutionary and attachment theories have supplemented the explanations for the variations in attachment styles in different cultures. These theories attribute the cause of such differences to the presence of risks and resources in these cultures; accordingly, cultures with low risks and more resources tend to have a higher prevalence of secure attachment. The objective of this systematic review was to explore the variations in attachment patterns in Indian studies. Scopus and Sোধganga databases were used to select the studies. The content analysis of these studies was carried out. The findings support the normative hypothesis; that is, the secure attachment was found more prevalent than the insecure attachment. The results suggest that most of the studies on attachment consisted of adolescents and adult samples belonging to the middle-income group, and it reveals a gap in attachment literature of this region for older populations and those below the poverty line. This review contributes to the debates and discussions on the evolutionary theorizations of attachment patterns.

Keywords: Attachment style, Evolutionary psychology, Normative hypothesis, Human development, Systematic review

Bowlby and Ainsworth propounded the attachment theory to describe the relational bond that emerges in infants through their interaction with caregivers. Hazan and Shaver (1987) used this theory to explain the romantic attachment among adults; consequently, widening the scope of this theory from infant and child to adult attachment. Based on attachment theory, theorists developed four different types of attachment styles: secure, preoccupied, dismissing, and fearful (Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994). Some initial studies conducted in the western context had found the prevalence of secure attachment over insecure attachment; however, other examinations outside of western context had failed to support this (Mesman, Van IJzendoorn, & Sagi-Schwartz, 2016). Van IJzendoorn (1990) and Mesman et al. (2016), based on their observations of these variations, advanced the normative hypothesis, which claims for the prevalence of secure attachment over the insecure attachment in cultures with adequate resources.

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Some theorists combined the claims of evolutionary and attachment theories to explain why, in some cultures, the normative hypothesis was the norm but not in others. Mesman et al. (2016) reasoned such discrepancy to result from cultural variations such as differences in parenting strategies (e.g., multiple mothering) and the environmental stress (low availability of essential resources). Other theorists elaborated on these explanations, for instance, Belsky, Steinberg, and Draper (1991) provided an evolutionary hypothesis of socialization; and Chisholm (1996) provided a synthesis of life history method and attachment theory. These evolutionary perspectives link the ecological stresses, parenting, reproductive, and mating strategies to explain variations in attachment styles.

These evolutionary perspectives claimed the environmental risks and resources to be an essential determinant of attachment patterns. In regions where cultural stress is high, such as less availability of resources (Belsky et al., 1991) and high rates of mortality and fertility (Chisholm, 1996), at such places, individuals will choose quantity over quality of their offspring. They will prefer mating over parenting. Thus, high competence and lack of resources lead to a situation that favours early maturity and reproduction. This condition demands an attachment strategy where the individual can easily detach from the attachment figure for reproductive purposes. Thus, insecure attachment becomes the norm in these cultures.

Several studies support the claims of evolutionary perspectives on attachment. For instance, Mesman et al. (2016) provide a narrative review of cross-cultural studies on the attachment pattern of infants. Their analysis reveals that in most of the cultures, secure attachment is the norm. However, they observed deviance from the normative model in cultures where the ecological stress was high. In these cultures, insecure attachment was more prevalent.

Similarly, Schmitt et al. (2004), in their cross-cultural study, found support for the normative hypothesis. In another paper, Schmitt (2008) reports the strong support for both the evolutionary hypothesis of attachment, i.e., evolutionary theory of socialization of Belsky et al. (1991) and Chisholm's (1996) attachment and life history synthesis. His findings reveal a negative correlation between dismissing attachment style and human development index (HDI), self-esteem, life satisfaction, and democracy, supporting the theorization of Belsky et al. (1991). The findings also reveal a negative correlation between secure attachment style and the indicators of mortality such as infant mortality rate, HIV/AIDS prevalence, child malnutrition, and low birth weights, as well as with high fertility rates, thus supporting Chisholm's (1996) theorization. This evidence substantiates the claims of evolutionary theories.

Besides culture, gender, and age also moderate attachment patterns (Van IJzendoorn & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2010). As far as gender variations are concerned, males tend to be more avoidant in their attachment style, and the females tend to be more anxious or preoccupied. The meta-analysis by Del Giudice (2011) provides convincing evidence in this respect. Del Giudice's (2009) review indicates that among infants and younger children, there are no sex-related differences; however, the sex difference begins to emerge from middle adulthood. Del Giudice and Belsky (2010) have reasoned this to be the result of adrenarche, which leads girls to be more anxious in their attachment and boys to be more avoidant. Regarding age Chopik, Edelstein, and Fraley (2013), in their study exploring the age-related attachment variations found that young-adults scored higher on anxiety than middle-aged and older adults and the middle-aged adults scored higher on avoidant

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attachment than younger and older adults. Thus, age and gender are essential determinants of attachment style.

These findings of the variations in attachment patterns come from studies majorly conducted in the western context. We have a limited understanding of the attachment patterns in the South Asian region. Some of the systematic reviews and meta-analysis, such as Mesman et al. (2016) and Del Giudice (2011), did not have studies from South Asia. This absence could be because of the lack of attachment studies in this region. Regarding the attachment studies from India, Jaiswal (2014) has noted that there is a dearth of studies on attachment in the Indian context. The sample from India in Schmitt et al. (2004) study was a small sample of college students. Del Giudice (2011) has found differences in the results of samples of college students and community samples. These differences raise doubts about the generalization of findings consisting only of student samples (see Jaiswal, 2014). This study aims to fill this gap by conducting a systematic literature review of the existing studies on attachment from India.

India, roughly, has moderate cultural risks and resources. It ranks 130th on the HDI index, which lies somewhere in the middle, and the life expectancy is 68.8 years at birth (UN, 2018). The poverty rate in India is 21.2% (World Bank, 2019a), and the infant mortality rate is 30 infants per 1000 births (World Bank, 2019b). These values place India on a moderate risk range. Thus, it is expected that secure attachment will be more prevalent than the insecure attachment, particularly among the middle and upper-middle-income group. However, it is expected that insecure and particularly the avoidant attachment will be more prevalent among the lower-income group.

Some theorists have reasoned collectivist self-construal to play a role in the prevalence of insecure attachment, particularly the preoccupied attachment style. Collectivist cultures differ from individualistic cultures as in the former, the self is construed in interdependent terms, while in the latter, it is construed in independent terms (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Schmitt et al. (2004), in their cross-cultural study, found East and South Asian cultures, marked by the high collectivist orientation of self, to have a higher prevalence of anxious attachment. Indian culture, like Japanese and other East Asian cultures, is a collectivist culture (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Triandis, 1989). Thus, if interdependency is the reason for the prevalence of preoccupied attachment style among insecurely attached individuals, then this should also be true in the case of Indian studies.

This review aimed to explore how attachment pattern varies according to culture (region), age, gender, and economy in the Indian context. Specifically, this study was aimed at reviewing the Indian studies on attachment to answer the following questions:

- What are the general characteristics of attachment research in Indian studies?
- Does the pattern of attachment styles in these studies support the normative hypothesis?
- How does the attachment style vary according to region, age, gender, and socioeconomic differences?

METHODS

A systematic literature review was employed to answer the research questions. Figure 1 illustrates the use of the PRISMA model for the selection of studies. Scopus and Sodhganga databases were searched for relevant studies. Sodhganga is a database of Indian doctoral

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dissertations. The choice of the Sodhganga database was deliberate. It was done keeping in mind the suggestions of Grimm and Yarnold (1995) and Smith (1980) about the inclusion of unpublished studies in systematic literature review and meta-analysis. These authors have opined that many studies do not get published due to publication bias or other factors, but these studies have the potential to change our understanding of phenomena under study.

The search terms for both databases included *Attachment OR Attachment Style OR Attachment Pattern OR Attachment Theory*. In Scopus, the filter of country/territory was used to select studies from India. The records generated from the initial database search were assessed for relevance. This assessment resulted in identifying sixteen research articles and twelve unpublished theses, which were further assessed based on inclusion and exclusion criteria. Four research articles and seven unpublished theses qualified for further analysis. Content analysis of these records was carried out. One record had three separate studies that were separately analyzed; thus, altogether, thirteen studies were analyzed for qualitative synthesis.

A study was included for the content analysis if it had a sample from India, attachment style of the participants had been measured using the self-administered attachment measure, and adequate demographic details on age, gender, and socio-economic status were provided. Studies were excluded if they did not meet these criteria or if the sample came from the clinical population.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of the content analysis are summarized in Table 1 and Table 2.

Summary of design and sample characteristics:

The total sample size of the thirteen studies combined was 3,996. The summary of the research design and sample characteristics is presented in table 1. This table also contains the various self-report questionnaires that were used in the studies.

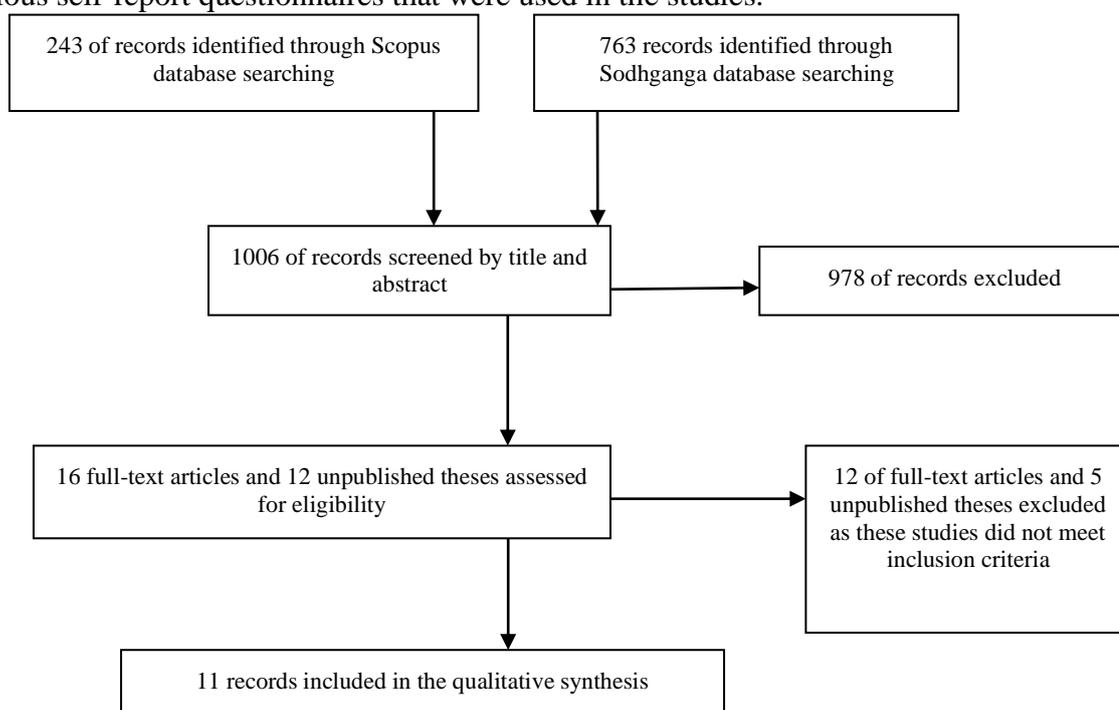


Figure 1. Flow diagram depicting the PRISMA model applied for the selection and inclusion of studies

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The general trend of attachment styles in Indian studies:

Ten out of thirteen studies reported secure attachment to be more prevalent than the insecure attachment. This finding is consistent with the normative hypothesis. Since most of the studies did not distinguish among the three insecure attachments, i.e., preoccupied, avoidant, and fearful styles, it could not be ascertained which of the three insecure styles had more prevalence.

Table 1. Summary of Study and Sample Characteristics

Studies	Place	Measures	Sample	Age range (Mean)	Study design
Kayastha et al. (2010) – Study 1	Bangalore, Karnataka	Security Scale (Kerns, Tomich, Aspelmeier, & Contreras, 2000)	40 children	10 yrs – 12 yrs	
Kayastha et al. (2010) – Study 2	Bangalore, Karnataka	Security Scale (Kerns et al., 2000)	30 adolescents	13 yrs – 15 yrs	
Kayastha et al. (2010) – Study 3	Bangalore, Karnataka	Security Scale (Kerns et al., 2000)	30 (children w/o any clinical diagnosis)	6 yrs – 12 yrs	
Tikka, Ram, Dubey, and Tikka (2014)	Ranchi, Jharkhand	Relationship Scale Questionnaire (Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994)	40 (healthy participants)	(36.88 yrs)	Purposive sampling
Kapanee and Rao (2007)	Bangalore, Karnataka	Attachment Style Interview Schedule (Nautiyal, 2001 as cited in Kapanee and Rao, 2007)	327 college students (M – 124; F – 203)	18-21 yrs (19.74 yrs)	Cross-sectional
Maher, Sumathi, and Winston (2015)	Chennai, Tamil Nadu, Puducherry	Retrospective attachment questionnaire (Parkes, 2006)	221 young adults (M – 108; F – 113)	18 yrs – 30 yrs (20.53 yrs)	Purposive sampling; Ex-post facto
Gitanjali (unpublished thesis)	Ernakulam, Kerala	Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment (IPPA) (Armsden & Greenberg, 1987)	406 school children (M – 228; F – 178)	12 yrs – 14 yrs	
Roy (2010) (unpublished thesis)	Kolkata, West - Bengal	Relationship Scales Questionnaire (RSQ) (Griffin and Bartholomew, 1994);	600 students (M – 300; F – 300)	14 yrs – 19 yrs	Simple random and multistage sampling
Balaji (2017) (unpublished thesis)	Chennai, Tamil Nadu	Revised Adult Attachment Scale (RAAS) (Collins, 1996)	1050 IT employees (M – 546; F – 504)	548 were 20 yrs – 33 yrs; and 502 were above 33 yrs	Simple random sampling
Gupta (2012) (unpublished thesis)	Jalandhar and Amritsar, Punjab	Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment (IPPA) (Armsden and Greenberg, 1987);	600 adolescents (M – 300; F – 300)	14 yrs – 19 yrs; Boys 16.7 yrs; Girls 16.54 yrs;	Convenient sampling;
Vaishali (2009) (unpublished thesis)	Rohtak, Haryana	The experiences in a close relationship – revised (ECR-R) (Fraley, Waller, & Brennan, 2000)	200 married individuals (M – 100; F – 100)	30 yrs – 45 yrs	Convenient sampling;
Talebi (2005) (unpublished thesis)	Chandigarh and Panchkula, Haryana	Kerns attachment security scale (KSS) (Kerns, Klepac, & Cole, 1996)	300 children M – 150 F – 150	(5 th standard children) (10 yrs approx)*	Random sampling;
Mahla (2016) (unpublished thesis)	Rajasthan	Attachment style classification questionnaire for latency age children (Finzi-Dotson, 2012)	152 children w/o migraine diagnosis	8yrs – 13 yrs (76n); and 14 yrs – 18 yrs (76n)	Purposive sampling; Quasi-experimental, ex-post-facto study

Note. *Age was inferred based on sample characteristics

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The fact that secure attachment was more prevalent than the insecure attachment resembles the findings of Schmitt et al. (2004). Post-independence India's economic growth has been rapid. The advances made in agriculture (Dantwala, 1976; Parikh et al., 2018) and healthcare (Yip & Mahal, 2008) have ensured the availability of food and healthcare at a cheaper

rate. The moderate HDI index (UN, 2018), decreasing poverty and infant mortality (World Bank, 2019a; World Bank, 2019b) are other indicators of increment in resources and reduction in risks. The middle-income group, to which most of the samples belonged, has benefitted most by this development. This reduction in health-related risks, more availability of resources, and the relatively stable economy and polity are likely the factors responsible for the prevalence of secure attachment.

Variations due to region, age, gender, and socio-economic status:

Place of study. The total number of studies on attachment in the northern and southern Indian states was nearly the same. This distinction is important because the states in south India have been observed to perform better on human development and economic growth indices than the states of North India (Ghosh, 2006; Khera & Dreze, 2012). It indicates the north Indian states to have more cultural risks than south Indian states. All the studies from the south, except one, reported the prevalence of secure attachment. On the other hand, four of the six studies from the north reported the prevalence of secure attachment, and two studies reported the prevalence of insecure attachment in their samples. These findings on the attachment patterns are suggestive of the prevalence of secure attachment in south India and a mixed finding in north India. The findings support the claims of evolutionary theories.

Age: As table 2 indicates, most of the samples belonged to adolescence and the teenage group. Few studies had adult participants, and no study could be located in which the sample consisted of older adults. The studies on infants and young children were not present probably because measuring attachment among infants, and young children would require different techniques such as observational studies. This absence of studies on infants and children is not to claim that there are no studies of attachment on infants, either this review was not able to locate such studies or they were excluded because they could not meet the inclusion and exclusion criteria.

Among all the studies that had adolescents and teenage population all, except Roy (2010), reported secure attachment being more prevalent than the insecure attachment. Though not conclusive, this does point that among adolescents and teenagers, the secure attachment style is more prevalent. These findings were similar for young adults, as well. However, there was a mixed result among adult samples. While Tikka, Ram, Dubey, and Tikka (2014) reported the prevalence of insecure attachment, Gupta (2012), on the other hand, found secure attachment to be more prevalent. These findings are contrary and suggest further exploration of attachment patterns in the adult population.

Gender: All the studies had included both male and female participants; however, most of the studies did not provide adequate information regarding the variation of attachment style according to gender. The studies that reported this aspect had mixed findings. Roy (2010) did not find any significant gender difference in attachment patterns between boys and girls. In two studies, i.e., Gitanjali (2012) and Talebi (2005), girls scored higher than boys on attachment security. Furthermore, in one study, i.e., Balaji (2017), males scored higher on the avoidance scale. This finding is in tune with the Del Giudice (2011) meta-analysis that

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found males to score higher on the dismissing style and females higher on pre-occupied style.

In the two studies where girls scored higher on the secure attachment than boys, one was from Kerala (Gitanjali, 2012), while the other (Talebi, 2005) was from Haryana and surrounding areas. Both these states have shown relatively high human development and economic performances (Ghosh, 2006; Kumar & Rani, 2019). The higher attachment security in girls could be because of the overprotection that teenage girls go through in middle and high-income group families. In general, in Indian culture, there are heavy restrictions on the mobility of adolescent girls. Girls are considered as vulnerable and thus need to be protected. Boys, on the other hand, are often way freer, their mobility is not as restricted, and they begin to distance themselves from the family and find themselves in the closer company of their male friends (Basu, Zuo, Lou, Acharya, & Lundgren, 2017). These gender norms could be one of the reasons explaining the insecure attachment in male adolescents but higher secure attachment among adolescent girls.

Socioeconomic Status: The majority of participants in the studies belonged to the middle-income group. In some of the cases, this information was inferred based on the sample characteristics provided, for instance, adolescent students who came from private English medium schools, or adults who were employed as college professors or in the information technology (IT) companies. The lack of samples from lower socioeconomic strata leaves us with limited knowledge of how the trend would be among them.

Table 1. The age, SES, attachment pattern and gender differences in the reviewed studies

Studies	Age Group	SES	Findings	Gender Differences
Kayastha et al. (2010) – Study 1	Adolescents and Teenagers	Middle Income	Secure attachment prevalent	
Kayastha et al. (2010) – Study 2	Adolescents and Teenagers	Middle Income	Secure attachment prevalent	
Kayastha et al. (2010) – Study 3	Middle –late childhood	Middle Income	Secure attachment prevalent (among healthy participants)	
Tikka et al. (2014) (Ranchi)	Adults		Insecure (dismissing attachment) more prevalent	
Kapanee and Rao (2007)	Young adults	Middle income*	Secure attachment prevalent	
Maher et al. (2015)	Young Adults	Middle income*	Secure attachment prevalent	
Gitanjali (2012)	Adolescents and Teenagers	Mixed	Secure attachment prevalent	Boys reported lower attachment security with mothers than girls but not with father
Roy (2010)	Adolescents and Teenagers	Middle and upper-middle	Insecure (dismissing attachment)	No significant gender difference found
Balaji (2017)	Adults	Middle income*	Inadequate Information	Males scored higher on the avoidance scale than females
Gupta (2012)	Adolescents and Teenagers		Secure attachment prevalent	
Gupta (2015)	Adults	Middle income*	Secure attachment prevalent	
Talebi (2005)	Adolescents and Teenagers	Middle income*	Secure attachment prevalent	Girls scored higher on attachment security with both mother and father than boys
Mahla (2018)	Adolescents and Teenagers and Early childhood		Secure attachment prevalent (among students without migraine diagnosis)	

Note. *Socioeconomic status was inferred based on sample characteristics

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The middle-income class of India is experiencing rapid changes due to globalisation and technological advancement (Fuller & Narasimhan, 2007; Lakha, 2005). The social developments such as the increasing per capita income, improved affordable healthcare, and reduced mortality are responsible for bringing changes in Indian society and culture; however, these resources are not similarly available for those below the poverty line. These individuals lacking in resources and dealing with heightened risks will likely have more prevalence of insecure attachment (particularly avoidant).

There were several limitations to the current study. To begin with, the studies that were included in the review used various attachment measures. Bartholomew and Shaver (1998) have argued that attachment measures lie on a continuum; thus, measures that are closer on the continuum will have comparable findings than measures that are further apart. Moreover, Belsky (1997) and Fraley and Roisman (2019) have suggested that the link between attachment processes of childhood with the attachment processes of adulthood has weak evidence. Besides, nearly half of the studies in the present review were unpublished doctoral dissertations. Although Grimm and Yarnold (1995) and Smith (1980) have suggested the inclusion of unpublished documents in systematic literature review and meta-analysis, a heavy reliance on them could mean compromising with quality.

Another limitation of the review was the absence of the distinction among the insecure attachment styles. To keep the analysis useful and straightforward one dimension and two category model was used, i.e., secure and insecure attachment style. The loss of further division of the insecure style into pre-occupied, fearful, and dismissing or avoidant led to the examination of only a few claims of evolutionary theories. Most of the studies included in this review did not explicitly distinguish among the insecure styles, and the different measures used by different studies made it difficult to have a consistency in terminology; thus, it was decided to group the insecure attachments. These limitations call for a cautious interpretation of the findings.

Despite these limitations, this review still attempts to bring several attachment studies from India in the same narrative whole, and thus it contributes to the ongoing debate and discussion on the evolutionary theorization of attachment patterns. It also reveals the need for more original studies on attachment styles on the older age individuals, those belonging to the lower economic group, and different geographical regions of India to make fair claims about the attachment pattern in this region.

CONCLUSION

This review explored the trend of attachment style, as reported in the attachment studies from India. This review found that secure attachment is more prevalent than the insecure attachment style in these studies. The samples in the studies belonged to the middle-income group to which affordable healthcare and other essential resources are readily available. Thus, this finding is consistent with the predictions of evolutionary theories claiming the prevalence of secure attachment in cultures characterized by low stress and more resources. Further, some studies reported the adolescent and teenage girls as being more securely attached than adolescent boys. One speculation is that this could be because of the gender norms by which these adolescents have to live.

The review found that most of the studies on attachment included adolescent and teenage samples, followed by adults and young adults belonging to middle socioeconomic strata.

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This review could not locate studies on older adults and infants. The reason in the case of infants/children could be that such studies were excluded from the current review because of different methods used for measuring attachment. The findings point that there is a lack of attachment studies on older adults and for those belonging to lower socioeconomic strata.

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Conflict of Interest

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