

## The Relationship between Marital Satisfaction and Children's Attachment Style

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**Abstract:** It is important for family therapists to understand and respond to the relation between parents' marital quality and the psychological well-being of their children. There are few subjects in modern psychological theory that provoke as immediate a response as the struggle to understand child-parent relationships. The current research attempts to investigate the relationship between children's attachment style and parent's marital satisfaction. Method: This correlation study enrolled 260 girl students between 9-11years and their mothers (between 20-40 years old) who were studying in Shiraz primary schools during a cluster sampling. To collect the data vulnerable Attachment Styles Questionnaire (VASQ) and Enrich Couple Scales were employed. Results indicated that there is a positive correlation between mother marital satisfaction and children's secure attachment style.

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### 1. Introduction

Attachment theory is the joint work of John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth (Bretherton, 1992). Bowlby began his studies of attachment when he researched the earliest developmental origins of childhood and psychopathology at London's Tavistock Clinic (Berman & Sperling, 1994,p.3). Bowlby noticed that when the separation between the caregiver and the child occurred, a predictable sequence of actions took place. First, the child protested and actively sought out the caregiver. With prolonged separation, the child experienced a state of despair or sadness, followed by detachment and a disregard of the caregiver if he/she returned (Hazan & Shaver, 1994). As a result of his observations, Bowlby developed a theory of infant-caregiver attachment and its survival significance for the child in the face of separation.

A basic assumption of attachment theory suggests that infants cannot provide protection and care for themselves. As a result, infants have evolved behaviors that function to maintain proximity to a protector or caregiver. These behaviors, called an attachment system, are to promote the safety and survival of infants. These evolved behaviors, designed by natural selection, form a behavioral system that satisfies an infant's basic social and survival needs (Fraley, 2002; Kirkpatrick, 1998).

Bowlby believed that attachment behaviors are instinctive and will be activated by any conditions that seem to threaten the achievement of proximity, such as separation, insecurity and fear. Bowlby (1969, 1988) also postulated that the fear of strangers represents an important survival mechanism, built in by nature. Babies are born with the tendency to

display certain innate behaviors (called social releasers) which help ensure proximity and contact with the mother or mother figure (e.g. crying, smiling, crawling, etc.) – these are species-specific behaviors.

During the evolution of the human species, it would have been the babies who stayed close to their mothers who would have survived to have children of their own and Bowlby hypothesized that both infants and mothers have evolved a biological need to stay in contact with each other. These attachment behaviors initially function like fixed action patterns and all share the same function. The infant produces innate 'social releaser' behaviors such as crying and smiling that stimulate caregiving from adults. The determinant of attachment is not food but care and responsiveness.

Bowlby suggested that a child would initially form only one attachment and that the attachment figure acted as a secure base for exploring the world. The attachment relationship acts as a prototype for all future social relationships so disrupting it can have severe consequences. Bowlby (1951) claimed that mothering is almost useless if delayed until after two and a half to three years and, for most children, if delayed till after 12 months, i.e. there is a critical period.

If the attachment figure is broken or disrupted during the critical two year period the child will suffer irreversible long-term consequences of this maternal deprivation. This risk continues until the age of 5. Bowlby used the term maternal deprivation to refer to the separation or loss of the mother as well as failure to develop an attachment. The underlying assumption of *Bowlby's Maternal Deprivation Hypothesis* is that continual disruption of the attachment between infant and primary caregiver (i.e.

mother) could result in long term cognitive, social, and emotional difficulties for that infant. The implications of this are vast – if this is true, should the primary caregiver leave their child in day care, whilst they continue to work?

John Bowlby believed that the relationship between the infant and its mother during the first five years of life was most crucial to socialization. He believed that disruption of this primary relationship could lead to a higher incidence of juvenile delinquency, emotional difficulties and antisocial behavior. To support his hypothesis, he studied 44 adolescent juvenile delinquents in a child guidance clinic (McLeod, S. A. 2007).

There are three patterns of attachment: Secure, Anxious Avoidant, and Anxious Ambivalent. Caregivers of securely attached infants are typically responsive and available to infants. In the caregiver's absence, secure infants become distressed but are comforted upon the return of the caregiver and able to explore the room in their presence (Hazan & Shaver, 1994). The anxious/ambivalent-attached caregiver is characterized as inconsistent or alternately intrusive and unresponsive to the infant's needs. Anxious/ambivalent infants appear angry, anxious, and too preoccupied to take part in exploring their new environment. Finally, the avoidantly attached caregiver is characterized as unresponsive and unavailable to the infant's needs. Avoidantly attached infants appear not to be distressed by separations from their caregivers, and avoid contact when their caregivers return (Hazan & Shaver, 1994). Infant/toddler attachment styles have corresponding later implications for securely and insecurely attached adults. Insecure or secure internal working models formed in infancy, are theorized to ultimately shape adults' expectations of romantic and marital relationships. Attachment theory has many proponents. Its simplicity makes it attractive to social, developmental, and clinical behaviorologists and psychologists.

Attachment theory offers a promising conceptual framework for understanding the psychological and contextual factors that contribute to marital. A consistent association has been found between child attachment dimensions and marital satisfaction of parents. Disruption of any of these functions leads to a predictable response from infants. However, as children mature the main functions of the attachment system become less dependent on physical proximity and more dependent on psychological proximity or "felt security" (Shaver & Hazan, 1988).

Presentation of marital conflict has been associated with a range of child emotional and behavioral problems, including internalizing and externalizing disorders, insecure attachment to

parents, and social difficulties (e.g., Howes & Markman, 1989; Katz & Gottman, 1993).

Marital satisfaction may have a direct relation with child outcomes. For instance, parents model the ways in which they manage interpersonal conflict, regulate emotions, and cope with stress when they disagree with each other (Fincham, Grych, & Osborne, 1994). Children may subsequently adopt such observed behaviors. Alternatively, marital quality may have an indirect or mediated relation with children's psychological adjustment. That is, intervening variables may in fact account for the association between these two constructs (Baron & Kenny, 1986).

In light of these adverse developmental consequences, there is a need to systematically study the relation between marital satisfaction and children's attachment pattern. Researcher attempts to investigate whether the mother marital satisfaction predicts their daughter's attachment style?

## 2. Material and Methods

The Population of interest in this correlational study was children studying in SHIRAZ primary schools and their mother. A total sample of 260 children (all girls, between 9 - 11 years old) and their mothers (20-40 years old) were asked to participate in a descriptive correlational design during a cluster sampling. To collect the data Vulnerable Attachment Styles Questionnaire (VASQ) and Enrich Couple Scales were employed.

We derived the following two indices using participants' responses to Likert scaled questions posed in self-administered questionnaires.

**Marital satisfaction Enrich Couple Scale:** Participants' level of marital satisfaction was calculated by adding scores from 35 relevant items. These items were answered on a 5-point scale ranging from very unhappy to very happy. Items assessed how happy respondents were with regard to aspects of their relationship such as the amount of time spent together, amount of understanding between partners, sexual relations, and division of household labor. This scale also included an assessment of the frequency of spousal disagreements across a range of topics such as money, in-laws, sex, or the children.

**Vulnerable Attachment Styles Questionnaire (VASQ)** From a pool of 31 questions concerning vulnerable attachment styles drawn directly from the ASI, eight items were found to be redundant in terms of extensive overlap leaving 23 items for the final VASQ questionnaire scoring. These were extensively respondent and expert-tested in an interactive interview context. Questionnaire items were written as self-statements with a five-point Likert response scale. Response options ranged from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree'. The center point was 'unsure'. In

order to minimize state effects, respondents were asked to complete items as they felt generally rather than currently. Instructions to the respondent were broad: 'Below are a number of statements concerning the way people feel about themselves in relation to others. Indicate whether you agree or disagree with the description as it applies to you by circling a number from 1 to 5. There are no "right" or "wrong" answers.

### 3. Results

Adults respondents ranged in age from 20 to 40 years ( $M = 34.77$ ,  $SD = 6.22$ ) and in education from elementary school to doctoral/professional school. Only married adults (mothers) with a biologically related child were selected. The children of the respondents ranged in age from 9\_11 years ( $M = 7.69$ ,  $SD = 1.95$ ).

Table 1. Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations among Study Variables

Variable	Mothers Marital Satisfaction	MD	SD
Secure attachment style of children	-.39**	6.19	1.40
Avoidant attachment style of children	-.21**	4.29	.77
Ambivalent attachment style of children	-.17**	1.46	.22

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$

Correlational analyses were conducted to determine the direction and intensity of the relations among mothers' marital satisfaction and daughter's attachment style (see Table 1). Significant correlations were found among the variables. A significant positive correlation was found between mothers' marital satisfaction and daughters' secure style of attachment. Higher levels of maternal satisfaction were associated with increased levels of daughters' secure style of attachment.

Furthermore, a significant negative association was found between mothers' marital satisfaction and two variables; daughters' Avoidant style of attachment and Ambivalent style of attachment; higher levels of mothers' marital satisfaction were associated with lower levels of ambivalent and avoidant style of attachment of children.

Our first hypothesis predicted that mothers' marital satisfaction would have a significant direct association with secure attachment style of daughters. We found that mothers' marital satisfaction was significantly and uniquely associated with daughters' secure style of attachment; this finding supports Hypothesis 1.

Our second hypothesis predicted that mothers' marital satisfaction would have a negative relation with daughters' avoidant and ambivalent style attachment, which in turn would have a negative association with mothers' marital satisfaction.

### 4. Discussions

The present study showed how marital satisfaction relates to child attachment style. Findings were consistent with theory and research that have emphasized the importance of marital satisfaction in the prediction of child behavior problems. As we predicted, levels of mothers' marital satisfaction were directly associated with attachment style of children. Children (daughters) whose mothers were not satisfied with their marriages were more likely to be sad and

insecure, less sociable, and not as compliant compared to children whose mothers were satisfied with their marriages. Past research has shown that marital satisfaction is associated with parenting style, which in turn may affect children's psychological adjustment. In this study only mothers' marital satisfaction was measured. Mothers who endorsed low levels of marital satisfaction were less likely to spend time, praise, and show affection toward their children. Our findings are complemented by a research carried out by Goldberg & Easterbrooks, 1984, which predicts that mothers who contend with problematic marital relationships are not able to devote as much time to their children. These mothers may feel emotionally depleted because of marital distress and may experience compromised parenting.

However, we only did this research for mothers. In a research reported by Elizabeth A. Fishman Steven A. Meyers (2002) the quality of both mothers' and fathers' relationships with their children was inversely associated with children's level of psychological distress. Children whose parents reported relatively low levels of parent-child involvement were more likely to be sad and experience peer problems compared to children whose parents reported greater amounts of parent-child involvement. Moreover they found that marital satisfaction related to child psychological distress through the mediated pathways of both adult depression and parent-child involvement. They found that both mothers' and fathers' marital satisfaction were associated with their own levels of psychological distress. Mothers and fathers who reported low levels of marital satisfaction were more likely to endorse feeling depressed, sad, fearful, and lonely than those with high levels of marital satisfaction. However in their research, there was no significant relation between parents' depression and parent-child involvement.

Furthermore, child gender and child age did not moderate the relation between marital satisfaction and child distress or the association between marital satisfaction and parent-child involvement, as suggested by past research (Emery, 1982; Emery & O'Leary, 1982). In current study we considered only daughters.

In summary, our findings add to the growing evidence that marital satisfaction is directly and indirectly associated with children's attachment style.

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