

Re-examining attachment theory in Educational Psychology: A call for culturally responsive practice

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Attachment theory is embedded in Scottish educational policy and practice (Education Scotland, 2017) and is considered an optimal framework for understanding children and young people's social and emotional development (Furnivall et al., 2012). However, since its first conceptualisation (Bowlby, 1958), cross-cultural scholars have critiqued the theory's lack of cultural sensitivity. Evidence from cross-cultural research illustrates how attachment theory represents a Western, middle-class perspective, which does not consider the diversity of parenting practices and values across the world (Keller, 2018). This consideration is relevant for the Scottish context given the diversity of cultures present in the country today (Scottish Government, 2020). Subsequently, this article is the product of our learning and experiences as Trainee Educational Psychologists (TEPs). Using cross-cultural literature, as well as our own experiences on placement, we re-examine the underlying assumptions of attachment theory and consider its implications for educational psychology practice. We propose that a culturally responsive lens to attachment theory must be applied in order to ensure that we are meeting the needs of all children and young people.

Keywords: Attachment theory, Culturally responsive practice, Educational psychology.

Introduction

A RELEVANT critique of the field of attachment is that it is culturally insensitive and does not fully reflect the developmental context or capture the nuances of parent-child relationships' – Stern, Barbarin & Cassidy (2022, p.394).

As a group of four Trainee Educational Psychologists (TEPs), we seek to understand the impact of differences and diversity on life opportunities, as well as the implications for promoting equality and diversity within the field of educational psychology. Through reflective discussions about our experiences on placement (see our vignettes below), we have begun to think again about the principles and teachings of Bowlby's (1969) attachment theory in terms of its cultural responsiveness and its claim of universality.

In this article, we explore the potential implications of using a Westernised, middle-class, 'attachment-informed' lens to view and interpret the needs of children and young people from culturally diverse backgrounds. We hope this paper helps to stimulate conversations about attachment theory, where we believe this dialogue must occur in order to ensure the profession of educational psychology is more culturally responsive.

Background

Attachment theory was first formulated by John Bowlby in 1969, who incorporated ideas from evolutionary theory, ethology, primatology and systems theory into his conceptualisation of attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969). Years later, Mary Ainsworth collaborated with Bowlby to develop the attachment assessment tool, the Strange Situation (Ainsworth et al., 1978), which led to the generation of categories of attachment (e.g. secure, insecure avoidant and insecure ambivalent).

Within Bowlby and Ainsworth's framework of attachment, the definition of attachment and its central components are universal (Bowlby, 1969). This means that children are born pre-programmed to form attachments with their primary caregiver, and there is a critical period for developing this attachment bond. Within this viewpoint, disruption to the attachment process will result in long-term cognitive, social and emotional difficulties (Bowlby, 1951). Subsequently, Bowlby's theory of attachment implies that the features, and processes, of secure attachment is what produces the optimal conditions for healthy childhood development (Keller, 2018).

However, critics of attachment theory cite findings from cross-cultural research to demonstrate the lack of cultural sensitivity in the development of Bowlby's theory of attachment (e.g. in its teachings and in how it is

applied in practice). As early as the 1950s, Mead (1954) called for the need for additional field research to explore the diversity of child-rearing beliefs and practices across cultures before any assumptions could be drawn about a universal attachment experience. Kessen (1979), on the other hand, writes about how the Strange Situation procedure embeds Western ideas and cultural assumptions of child-rearing practices, which should not be used when studying children from non-Western cultures. An example of this is 'stranger anxiety'.

One of the key components of the Strange Situation is the introduction of a stranger to the child in the presence of their primary caregiver. The child's behaviour is then observed and interpreted; if the child is wary or anxious of the stranger, this is interpreted as an indicator of a healthy or 'secure' attachment relationship to the primary caregiver (Ainsworth et al., 1978). This behavioural interpretation is based on Western norms, which dictate that it is appropriate for a child to be wary of strangers (Bretherton & Ainsworth, 1974). However, in collectivist cultures (e.g. parts of Asia, Africa and Latin America), it is the norm for children to be exposed to a broader network of caregivers and people within the community from an early age (Keller & Otto, 2014). In this case, a lack of stranger anxiety would be the result of a different cultural approach to socialisation, rather than an indicator of a disrupted emotional bond between the infant and caregiver as the Strange Situation procedure would ascribe (Rothbaum et al, 2000).

Attachment theory has also been widely critiqued from a feminist perspective, as the framework typically positions the mother as the primary caregiver, leaving her predominately responsible for the emotional care of the child. This positioning reinforces gender stereotypes and places limiting assumptions on the choices available to both men and women when it comes to parenting (Morris, 2008). This conservative view of a mother's role in the family unit aligns with patriarchal discourse around mothering, and the idea that mothers should 'expend a tremendous amount of time, energy and money in raising their children' (Hays, 1996, preface). As Morris (2008) highlights, these expectations do not match up with the reality of mothers, who have their own needs and complex lives and circumstances. This view can also lead to 'mother-blaming', whereby the blame for any emotional difficulty experienced by the child falls disproportionately on the mother, and other contextual factors are often disregarded (Birns, 1999).

Despite these critiques, we believe that attachment theory continues to be applied in the field of educational psychology in ways which omit key social and cultural differences, whereby important contextual factors are often disregarded. We provide examples of this omission throughout our four vignettes, where we refer to our experiences as TEPs on placement.

Vignette A

Whilst on placement, I came across an observation tool/assessment framework which drew upon attachment theory (Golding et al., 2012). Within the assessment, the observer rates how the child 'behaves with familiar adults' (p. 54). On the left-hand side, the observer marks whether the child is almost always 'usually dependent'. On the right-hand side, the observer marks whether the child is almost always 'usually independent'. In the middle column, the observer rates whether the child behaves 'as [a] child of [the] same age or stage of development'.

When I first glanced at the assessment tool, I was concerned about the idea of comparing children's attachment-related behaviours. I began to consider whether the child would be compared against children of a similar cultural background, or whether the child would be compared against children from differing cultural backgrounds? Although the norm may be to promote an autonomous child in Western cultures, this may not permeate across all Western societies. Likewise, some non-Western cultures may not promote an autonomous child during early child development. Instead, value may be placed on caregivers/adults taking the lead and directing their child's activities. These diverse belief systems raised some important questions:

- When observing a child or young person, which groups provide the norms for psychological assessments?
- Should we even assess children in this way?
- When observing a child or young person, what actions/behaviours are considered to be independently or dependently appropriate?
- Who determines this appropriateness and how?
- What narrative would be told if the observer labelled a child or young person as 'usually dependent', without taking into account the child or young person's cultural background?
- How would this impact the child or young person's cultural identity?

Such questions are worth considering, and reflecting upon, when drawing upon attachment theory in professional practice.

Re-examining attachment theory

Van Ijzendoorn and Kroonenberg (1988) conducted a meta-analysis to examine the distributions of attachment patterns across eight countries (e.g. Federal Republic of Germany, Great Britain, Netherlands, Sweden, Israel, Japan, China and USA). Using the Strange Situation, the authors examined both cross-cultural variation (between countries) and inter-cultural variation (within the same country) in order to examine the universality of attachment theory.

When examining cross-cultural variation, secure attachment was the most common pattern of attachment. Whilst on the surface this may support the universality of attachment theory, the disproportionately high number of studies which were included from the USA may mean that the apparent consistency between cultures may not accurately reflect the variation of attachment patterns between cultures. Furthermore, Van Ijzendoorn and Kroonenberg (1988) found greater variations of insecure attachment patterns across cultures. For example, there were higher levels of anxious avoidant attachment patterns reported in individualistic cultures (e.g. Federal Republic of Germany) and there were higher levels of ambivalent resistant attachment styles reported in collectivist cultures (e.g. Japan). This cross-cultural variation helps to illustrate how different social and cultural contexts (e.g. individualistic or collectivist) can influence attachment styles.

When examining intercultural variation, the authors found that there was approximately 1.5 times greater intercultural variation than cross-cultural variation. This finding suggests that there is greater diversity in attachment patterns within the same country than across countries. Subsequently, this highlights how subcultures can (and do) exist within the same country. It is possible that these subcultures may have their own caregiving practices; thus, it would be inaccurate to think of one culture as being completely homogenous. To appreciate this diversity in both research and professional practice, several cross-cultural scholars argue that research into attachment theory needs to be more culture-conscious (Keller & Otto, 2014; Rothbaum et al., 2000).

The preceding paragraphs suggest how cultural differences may influence children's attachment styles. However, it is worth noting that this whole argument

continues to operate within the parameters of attachment theory. Instead of considering how cultural differences may influence attachment styles, perhaps educational psychologists should be contemplating how the styles themselves are cultural constructs. Furthermore, educational psychologists should consider what perspective of attachment theory is being conveyed in the research literature, and which populations are being represented.

At present, cross-cultural literature suggests that attachment theory seems to adopt a Western, middle-class perspective, which ignores the caregiving values and practices across non-Western cultures (Keller, 2016; Keller, 2018; Otto, 2008; Otto & Keller, 2014). Within the literature, there remains an 'overrepresentation of White, Western, educated, middle-class caregivers' and children (Stern et al., 2022, p.405). Although Ainsworth conducted her earlier research in Uganda with 26 families who lived in villages near Kampala (Bretherton, 2013), the body of literature related to attachment theory and ethnic minority caregivers and children is scarce (Malda & Mesman, 2017). Consequently, little is known whether outcomes of secure attachment (e.g. positive teacher-student relationships, higher academic attainment, etc.) are similar and/or different from those of White children (Stern et al., 2022).

Keller and Otto (2014) argue that 'psychological autonomy' is the prototype model in Western psychology, which focuses on individualism rather than collectivism. Within the principles of attachment theory, child-centred responsivity is seen as the best condition for children's healthy development and the precursor of securely attached relationships (Keller, 2018). This concept is based on the caregiver's ability to notice and respond to the infant's signals (Keller & Bard, 2017). This rests on the assumption of an autonomous child, who leads parent-infant interactions and whose worldview is the primary concern for the caregiver.

It is important to note, however, that this model is not a universal prototype across cultures and other prototypical models do exist across the world. For example, in some non-Western communities (such as West Cameroonian Nso) the prototype model is 'hierarchical relatedness' (Keller & Otto, 2014). Within this model, 'good' parent-infant care involves the parent taking the lead in directing their child's activities (Keller, 2016). The infant first learns the role of others and then learns their place in the social system. This is because realising one's role in the community honours the hier-

archical nature of the community relationship, as well as the interconnectedness of each member to one another (Keller, 2003).

A similar model appears to exist in Roma, Gypsy and Traveller communities, where it has been proposed that the communal lifestyle links the individual into a network of reciprocal security, helping to support identity formation (Liégois & Gheorghe, 1995). Furthermore, the extended family and the wider community often play a key role in rearing children in Gypsy and Traveller communities, through the provision of communal advice and assistance (Sweeney & Matthews, 2017). Thus, it is important to recognise that child-centred responsivity is not the most valued caregiving practice across the world.

Otto (2008) reports that West Cameroonian Nso communities value multiple caregivers rather than the dyadic mother-child relationship. The high workload of this subsistence-based agricultural community means that mothers promote the infant to develop 'special bonds' with multiple people (Otto, 2008). In doing so, West Cameroonian Nso mothers can fulfil their role in a community model where individuals are interconnected and interdependent. In this model, an infant is considered an apprentice to be stimulated, supervised and trained, with the aim of fulfilling their part in the community (Otto, 2008). This value-base is different to the dyadic model of attachment, which is typically seen in Western, middle-class cultures. Subsequently, Otto's (2008) research illustrates how caregiving practices seem to be highly adaptive to the specific ecological and social context of each community.

Within the Scottish context, parallels could be drawn between how some West Cameroonian Nso families operate within their communities and how some care experienced children and young people operate within theirs. For instance, care experienced young people, who live in a Children's House, are often exposed to a community model which values multiple caregivers (e.g. Children's House staff members). These situations can create tensions for both practitioners and care experienced young people when the underlying assumption of attachment operates within a system which promotes, and implements, policy and practice based around the nuclear family. Whilst children and young people who experience such a reality can and do thrive, educational psychologists should be more conscious of their assumptions when working with chil-

dren who have experienced an upbringing which is different to the nuclear family.

Keller (2018) argues that evaluating one system (e.g. Western system) with the standards of another (e.g. non-Western system) ignores the different realities and different value systems of many families and communities across the world. If attachment theory is applied in ways that promotes Western, middle-class parenting practices as the 'ideal' (e.g. child-centred responsivity), we argue that it not only devalues the diversity of parenting practices across the world (Keller, 2018; Stern et al., 2022), but it could also perpetuate negative attitudes of non-Western care. Keller (2018) argues that families who do not follow practices of child-centred responsivity may be viewed as 'intrusive', 'unresponsive', 'emotionally distant' and/or 'neglectful'. From a cross-cultural perspective, failure to acknowledge this cultural variability is not only unscientific, but it is also culturally insensitive and culturally unjust which does not align with the children's rights-based approach (UNICEF, 2023).

Vignette B

Whilst working with children who had recently migrated to the UK (e.g. from Afghanistan, Syria, Ukraine, etc.), I observed instances when practitioners attempted to use aspects of Bowlby's attachment theory to support children's needs. Specifically, I observed when practitioners have attempted to understand the child's profile and attachment style, which would subsequently help to inform the formulation and implementation of nurture-based support. Reference to the child's attachment style would later be used at future meetings to assess the child's progress and to recalibrate support.

Over time, I came to realise that the teams around these children did not fully take in to account the life experiences and upbringing that the children had experienced. Consideration was not given to how this compared (and conflicted) with the assumptions inherent within attachment theory, and how this was applied via the nurture-based approaches being used within the schools. For example, it was common for practitioners to promote the idea of a key adult rather than key adults, where the concept of 'multiple caregivers' may be more related to the child's life experience. At times, I noticed a sense of concern from practitioners, especially when the nominated key adult expressed that

they didn't have a strong connection with the child. Sometimes labels such as 'attachment difficulties' would be used to explain why interventions and strategies were not having the desired impact on the formation of child-adult relationships.

Despite having the best of intentions for these children, I now recognise that these points of tension could have been opportunities to explore the child's experience of attachment through what they have experienced in their life and upbringing. This led me to the conclusion that attachment is not a universal construct which is experienced the same way by all children, either across the world or across Scotland. These insights could have influenced how practitioners adapted, and implemented, a support such as nurture to meet the cultural experience of the child.

Vignette C

I attended a half-day training on attachment-informed practice for teaching staff. The training talked about the teachings of attachment theory as being applicable to human beings from the cradle to the grave, which suggested that the human experience of attachment is universal and not impacted by cultural differences or societal norms.

The training encouraged practitioners to understand children and families in the context of their relationships; however, it didn't specifically mention their cultural context or the potential cultural variations in parent-child care. Whilst a holistic, ecological approach to understanding children and their families was encouraged, I believe it would have been helpful to include specific content about how families from non-Western backgrounds may hold different values towards parent-child care.

Despite this critique, the training did refer to secondary attachment figures. For example, it highlighted that children who develop three or more secondary attachment bonds are usually more resilient, have higher self-esteem and have fewer mental-health problems (Bowlby, 2008). This could have been an opportunity to explore different child-rearing practices from cultures other than the 'nuclear', White, Western family set-up, where a child may have multiple caregivers and many secondary attachment bonds within their extended family/community.

Implications for professional practice

Firstly, educational psychologists need to develop their understanding of attachment theory by re-examining its basic assumptions (Quinn & Mageo, 2013). We believe this will help to promote critical reflection on the relationship between the field of educational psychology and attachment theory. This is because the basic assumptions of attachment theory seem to perpetuate non-inclusive practices. Concepts such as distributed caregiving, allomothering, stranger anxiety, intimacy and agency should be central to this examination (Quinn & Mageo, 2013). This action aids cultural sensitivity, because it can help us to recognise our own biases regarding parent-child care (Quinn & Mageo, 2013). This in turn could help mitigate the risk of parental blame and/or parental misjudgements. This can be translated into practice (e.g. consultation and training), through avoiding attachment style classifications, challenging the use of unnuanced terms such as 'attachment difficulties' and including the acknowledgement and celebration of the key role multiple caregivers may have on children's lives. Policies such as *Realising the Ambition* (Education Scotland, 2020) may be helpful in guiding this non-classification type approach.

Secondly, educational psychologists should use the insights and knowledge gained from cross-cultural studies to adapt their practice. This is because the registration standards of proficiency for practitioner psychologists oblige us to practice in a non-discriminatory manner (Health & Care Professions Council, 2023). The standards, renewed in September 2023, have a stronger commitment to active implementation rather than a passive understanding of the standards (Health & Care Professions Council, 2023). Furthermore, there is a significantly expanded focus on equality, diversity and inclusion and a more robust emphasis on the importance of taking professional action to redress power imbalances. These professional actions will involve making changes to how we work at the individual, systems and strategic levels. Subsequently, we believe that changes in the implementation of attachment theory in educational psychology practice are necessary in order to promote a more inclusive practice.

Thirdly, educational psychologists should be emboldened to create a re-conceptualisation of attachment theory through research. This would add great value to the profession, because research is considered a core function of educational psychology practice (Gersch, 2004; Scottish Executive, 2002). Thus, the development

of attachment research may help to support the values of inclusion and social justice, which the profession rests upon. Quinn and Mageo (2013) argue that research into attachment theory should involve multiple and diverse cultures. Similarly, we believe that research involving ethnic minorities should be a research priority for educational psychologists, because a culturally sensitive model of attachment theory is essential when working with culturally diverse families.

As we embark on this re-conceptualisation of attachment theory, we might also wish to consider other more recent and nuanced approaches, such as a process approach to positive relationships, which promotes early child development as a dynamic concept (Meins, 2016). The approach proposes that this dynamism will inevitably include periods of change and instability, whereby parenting practices is only one part of the picture (Meins, 2016). By considering this approach, Meins (2016) suggests that we can promote a much more optimistic view of the child and/or young person, which can empower both children and their families.

Vignette D

I attended a Child's Plan meeting for a Traveller child. The child was cared for by his mother and his grandmother, with whom he shared a home. School staff felt that the child's dysregulation in school was because of 'attachment difficulties'. They based this understanding on the prominence of the caring role of the grandparent and their perception of the quality of care provided by his mother. The concern was further rationalised by the view that the mother did not seem to have the same level of concern as staff. They felt she had ignored advice from the school and had little engagement with outside agencies enlisted to help.

Using the term 'attachment difficulties' hindered critical reflection because it captured the behaviours as within the child. This diverted attention from consid-

ering the impact of the school environment, and ways to build the home-school relationship. It also sidelined the consideration of the role of other key adults, such as the grandparent, and how these could be valuable. In this example, the ease of acceptance of 'attachment difficulties' being the root cause of the dysregulation seemed to create a moral judgement in the guise of concern. It left little space for culturally diverse thinking about children's attachment, and I felt that a more culturally inclusive model of attachment could help me to support the school to be more inclusive of diverse family structures.

Conclusion

We propose that we must employ a culturally responsive lens to attachment theory to ensure that we are meeting the Health and Care Professions Council's (2023) standards of proficiency for practitioner psychologists. To do so, we must commit to a deep, personal reflection about how our current understanding of attachment theory is employed in educational psychology. Furthermore, we must embed any newfound knowledge of attachment theory into our professional practice to ensure our practice is responsive, inclusive and culturally sensitive. Finally, we must seek opportunities to create a contemporary, culturally sensitive model of attachment theory by prioritising research in this area.

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