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Assessment of Adolescent Attachment Patterns of College Students

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Abstract

Attachment patterns are the emotional bond formed with the people around us. This study determined the different adolescent attachment patterns (parent, peer, and romantic) and compared them to demographic variables including age, sex, and marital status. Online survey served as the primary means of data collection. A total of 60 students taking BS Human Ecology major in Family Development at the University of the Philippines Los Baños in Laguna, Philippines were the respondents of the study. Results revealed higher peer trust and communication than with their parents. Alienation is a little more experienced with peers than with their parents. More so, trust dimension was found to have statistically significant different means. In terms of romantic patterns, secure and fearful attachments best describe the students. However, fearful attachment was also reported as the least likely to describe them, followed by dismissing attachment.

Keywords: Adolescence; Parent attachment pattern; Peer attachment pattern; Romantic attachment pattern.

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1. Introduction

Attachment is “a deep and enduring emotional bond that connects one person to another across time and space” [1,2]. This attachment pattern is present to every person and is seen by different theorists as pre-determined in every individual wherein humans are born with the innate need of attachment to a primary caregiver. The attachment theory states that these attachments help children survive in the world [3].

Accordingly, children who did not received constant care and attention of a guardian may suffer not only from temporary deprivation but also from other long term effects which perseveres. There should be careful and focused attention given to attachment patterns we develop depending on the care given to us by our primary caregiver and the possible long term effects if we are deprived of our need for care and attention [4].

Further, attachment bond provides the need for security in humans especially in serving as protection from predation [5]. Infants form attachment to their primary attachment figures who give them support, protection, and care. This role is usually played by mothers who are usually the immediate caregivers of infants. Attachment behaviors were developed such as crying, clinging and searching as an adaptation to separation from the primary attachment figures [6]. The first two years of an infant is also considered by Bowlby as the critical period for receiving care from the primary caregivers wherein if not met, it might lead to delinquency, reduced intelligence, increased aggression, depression and affectionless psychopathy [7].

Studies would suggest that the observed attachment styles of adolescents can help give us the most appropriate methods of helping an individual that’s why the study of the attachment styles were found to be useful for psychologists. In a study [8], the findings showed that attachment relationships between an adolescent and his/her mentor can predict the changes in the social relations of adolescents. This means that the quality of the social interactions of adolescents is affected by the attachment patterns they form. Since adolescence is the stage where humans start to rely more on their peers, the quality of their relationships could be affected by the attachment patterns they have.

Previous researches show that attachment patterns would affect an individual’s behavior, self-esteem and well-being. Since these attachment patterns are developed starting from infancy, greater understanding about this topic must be given to the primary caregivers, especially the parents. As stated in Bowlby’s theory, if the attachment needs of an individual were not given in the first two years of life, it might lead to delinquency, reduced intelligence, increased aggression, depression and affectionless psychopathy [7].

Parent, peer and romantic attachments are important in an adolescents’ development of self-concept, identity, and values [9]. It was reported that experiences which occurred in infancy and childhood would affect the quality of adult relationships that humans form [10]. Our attachment experiences could also affect our engagement to risky behaviors as well as adolescent sexual behaviors.

Thus, this research sought to determine the overall attachment patterns of BS Human Ecology students majoring in Family Development and compare their attachment patterns by some demographic characteristics such as age, sex, and parents’ marital status. Results of the study can help in providing new knowledge not only to

psychologists but also to families. The recognition of the attachment patterns can help families better understand each other. This can also bring opportunities of intervention to prevent unwanted behaviors. The attachment people form has shown great influence to almost every aspect of early childhood development [11].

2. Materials and Methods

The study employed quantitative approach. Quantitative research allows testing of objective theories through gathering and analysis of a set of measurable parameters and indicators. In making sense of the data gathered, variables under this research type were subjected to statistical procedures and later used to come up with generalize conclusions. Particularly, survey research was conducted to give a numeric detail on the trends, attitudes, ad opinions of a population through a sample [12].

2.1. Sampling procedure

Adolescents were the subject of this research. A total of 60 students taking BS Human Ecology major in Family Development at the University of the Philippines Los Baños (UPLB) in Laguna, Philippines served as the respondents. Purposive sampling was used due to some constraints encountered during the conduct of the study. This serves as alimitation of the study. Hence, the interpretations drawn herein are conclusive only for the population sampled.

2.2. Data collection method and research instrument

The survey tool was created thru Google forms which facilitated a more convenient distribution of questionnaire to the respondents. Since the respondents belong to the young group who are mostly online, it was easier and faster to get responses and feedbacks. Google form links were then distributed to the respondents.

Questionnaire used was patterned from research titled “Attachment Styles of Female Parenting and Nonparenting Adolescents. [13]” Basically, it was subdivided in three parts such as 1) Demographic Characteristics, 2) Parent and Peer Attachment Patterns, and 3) Romantic Attachment Patterns. For demographic characteristics, information on age, sex, and marital status of the respondents’ parents were gathered.

Respondents were asked to rate a set of 12 statements to determine both parent and peer attachment patterns. Parent attachment was directed to the respondents’ attachment to their biological mothers. Rating was based from the five-point Likert-type scale (1= Almost always true; 2 = Often true; 3 = Sometimes true; 4 = Seldom true; 5 = Almost never true). As previously stated, these statements were adapted from[13] that used the Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment (IPPA).

Four of the 12 statements each refer to three dimensions such as trust, communication, and alienation. The following statements were used to gauge these three dimensions with regard to parent and peer attachment patterns:

Table 1: Statements for each dimensions of parent and peer attachment patterns

Dimensions	Parent Attachment	Peer Attachment
Trust	A. My mother respects my feelings	C. I wish I had different friends
	B. I wish I had a different mother	F. My friends listen to what I have to say
	C. My mother accepts me as I am	G. I feel my friends are good friends
Communication	K. When I am angry about something, my mother tries to be understanding.	H. When I am angry about something, my friends try to be understanding
	F. My mother has her own problems, so I don't bother her with mine	A. I like to get my friends' point of view on things I'm concerned about
	G. My mother helps me to understand myself better	D. My friends encourage me to talk about my difficulties
Alienation	H. I tell my mother about my problems and troubles	I. My friends are concerned about my well-being
	L. If my mother know something is bothering me, she asks me about it	L. I tell my friends about my problems and troubles
	D. Talking over my problems with my mother makes me feel ashamed/foolish	B. Talking over my problems with my friends makes me feel ashamed/foolish
	E. I get upset easily at home	E. I feel alone or apart when I am with my friends
	I. I feel angry with my mother	J. I get upset a lot more than my friends know about
J. I don't get much attention at home.	K. It seems as if my friends are irritated with me for no reason.	

Drawing from the questionnaire developed [13], romantic attachment pattern is composed of four categories such as secure, dismissing, preoccupied, and fearful. Specifically, secure attachment is described as maintaining close relationships without losing autonomy. Preoccupied attachment is characterized by an over involvement in close relationships. Meanwhile, dismissing attachment is defined as a downplaying of the importance of relationships and an emphasis on independence. Fearful attachment is an avoidance of close relationships because of fear of rejection. From these, the respondents were asked to rate the short paragraphs enumerated in

Table 2 to assess their romantic patterns. Likert' five-point scale was again applied wherein 1= not at all like me; 2= a little like me; 3= somewhat like me; 4= like me; and 5= very much like me.

Table 2: Descriptions for each romantic attachment patterns

Romantic Attachment Patterns	Description
Secure	It is relatively easy for me to become emotionally close to others. I am comfortable depending on others and having others depend on me. I don't worry about being alone or having others not accept me.
Dismissing	I am comfortable without close emotional relationships. It is very important to me to feel independent and self-sufficient and I prefer not to depend on others or have others depend on me.
Preoccupied	I want to be completely, emotionally intimate with others, but I often find that others are reluctant to get as close as I would like. I am uncomfortable being without close relationships, but I sometimes worry that others don't value me as much as I value them.
Fearful	I am somewhat uncomfortable getting close to others. I want emotionally close relationships, but I find it difficult to trust others completely, or to depend on them. I sometimes worry that I will be hurt if I allow myself to become too close to others.

2.3. Data analysis

Both descriptive and inferential statistics were used to analyze the data gathered. For the demographic characteristics, frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations were computed. To provide overall view of the attachment patterns, means and standard deviations were determined. It should be noted that ratings given to the items on trust and communication dimensions were reversed so that a higher score would reflect a positive parent and peer attachment. Ratings given to the dimension of alienation were also reversed to show that high scores would indicate high alienation or negative parent and peer attachment.

Further, Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was used to compare statistical means of the parent and peer attachment patterns in terms of the respondents' parent marital status. Romantic patterns were also tabulated and analyzed in terms of respondents' age and sex.

3. Results

3.1. Demographic Characteristics

All 60 respondents were taking BS Human Ecology major in Family Development Studies at UPLB. Respondents were of 18 to 24 years old with mean age of 19.82 or 20 years old at the time of study. Most of them (46.67%) were young adolescents belonging to 18 to 19 years old age range. Three-fourths (75%) are

females while 25% are males. Majority of their parents are married with 83.33% while a few 10% are separated and 6% are widows (Table 3).

Table 3: Profile of respondents

	Frequency (N=60)	Percentage (N=60)
<u>Age (Years): M (SD)</u>	19.82 (1.42)	
18-19	28	46.67%
20-21	26	43.33%
22-23	4	6.67%
24	2	3.33%
<u>Sex</u>		
Female	45	75%
Male	15	25%
<u>Parents' Marital Status</u>		
Married	50	83.33%
Separated	6	10%
Widow	4	6%

3.2. Adolescent attachment patterns

Each cluster of statements for the trust, communication, and alienation dimensions, means and standard deviations were computed. As shown in Table 4, respondents attributed slightly higher level of trust and communication with their peer than their parent (biological mother). Although both means fall in between sometimes true and often true, 0.33 and 0.59 difference were observed in favor of the peer attachment for the trust and communication dimensions, respectively. This is expected since communication gaps are usually created as conflicts arise between parents and their child during adolescence. As adolescents progress in their education, time spent with their parents tend to drop and now have more time with their peers [11]. With regard to alienation, a very minimal difference of 0.02 were computed in favor of their peers. There is a little more alienation experienced with peers than with parent. It is good to note that alienation is more leaning to the seldom true category.

Table 4: Means and standard deviations of the respondents' parent and peer attachment patterns

Dimensions	Parent attachment		Peer attachment	
	Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean	Standard Deviation
Trust	3.33	0.53	3.63	0.41
Communication	3.40	0.61	3.99	0.67
Alienation	2.36	0.80	2.38	0.66

For secure attachment, most of the respondents (38.33%) felt neutral about it. They are neither think of themselves as having high nor low secure attachment. With regard to dismissing and fearful attachments, most of the respondents “a little like me” with 35% and 28.33%, respectively. Preoccupied attachment has the most and equal percentage for “a little like me” and “somewhat like me” at 28.33%.

Table 5: Frequency of romantic attachment patterns of respondents

Rating	Secure		Dismissing		Preoccupied		Fearful	
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
1 Not at all like me	5	8.33	5	8.33	7	11.67	10	16.67
2 A little like me	11	18.33	21	35.00	17	28.33	17	28.33
3 Somewhat like me	23	38.33	15	25.00	17	28.33	12	20.00
4 Like me	14	23.33	13	21.67	14	23.33	13	21.67
5 Very much like me	7	11.67	6	10.00	5	8.33	8	13.33
Total	60	100	60	100	60	100	60	100

To give a more general perspective, responses for the “not at all like me” and “a little like me” can be combined and denote a negative attitude towards romantic attachment patterns. On the other hand, grouping responses for the “very much like me” and “like me” can give a positive attitude. The “somewhat like me” rating is described as neutral.

Using this, it can be observed that most respondents have neutral attitude with respect to secure attachment with 38.33% while having negative attitude to all other romantic attachment patterns wherein 43.33, 40%, and 45% don’t regard themselves to paragraphs on dismissing, preoccupied, and fearful attachments, respectively.

Table 6: Frequency of romantic attachment patterns of respondents

Rating	Secure	Dismissing	Preoccupied	Fearful
	% (n)	% (n)	% (n)	% (n)
Negative	26.67 (16)	43.33 (26)	40 (24)	45 (27)
Neutral	38.33 (23)	25 (15)	28.33 (17)	20 (12)
Positive	35.00(21)	31.67 (19)	31.67 (19)	35.00 (21)

3.3. Parent and peer attachment patterns by parents’ marital status

Another perspective to look at is the comparison of adolescents’ attachment patterns with varying parents’ marital status. Adolescents with widowed parents tend to extend more trust to both their parents and peers while

those with separated parents have the least.

Those with widowed parents communicate more with their parents while those with married parents converse more with their peers. This does not support the findings from previous study [13] wherein adolescents whose parents are married scored higher in the dimensions of trust and communication with their parents as compared to those adolescents whose parents were separated, divorced, or widowed. To both parents and peers, adolescents with separated parents communicate the least.

Lastly, adolescents with separated parents feel more alienated with both parents and peers. Those with widowed parents receives the least alienation from both parents and peers.

Table 7: Frequency of parent and peer attachment patterns of respondents by marital status

Attachment Pattern	Parent			Peer		
	M	S	W	M	S	W
Trust	3.32	3.21	3.63	3.68	3.13	3.75
Communication	3.42	3.17	3.5	4.06	3.5	3.94
Alienation	2.34	2.96	1.75	2.38	2.71	1.94

* M = Married (n=50); S = Separated (n=6); W = Widow (n=4)

In addition, ANOVA was done to test whether the differences between the means of parents' marital status in each dimension of parent and peer attachments are statistically significant. For all the dimensions in the parent attachment pattern, there is no significant difference in the means. This implies that there is no enough evidence to conclude that the means between parents' marital status in parents attachment patterns are the same.

Among the three dimensions of peer attachment pattern, only the trust dimension showed statistically significant difference among the means with a p-value of 0.0042.

Table 8: ANOVA results for parent and peer attachment patterns

Dimensions	P-value	
	Parent	Peer
Trust	0.4527	0.0042
Communication	0.6071	0.1620
Alienation	0.0534	0.1952

*Level of significance=0.05

3.4. Romantic attachment patterns by age

As reported in Table 9, both young and old adolescents had the highest percentage of response for the secure and dismissing attachments. However, it should be noted that rating for secure attachment fall under the neutral attitude or “somewhat like me” and under the “little like me” rating for the dismissing attachment.

For the preoccupied attachment, most of the young adolescents (32%) reported that they felt neutral about being preoccupied while most of the old adolescents (28%) associate themselves “a little like” the paragraph description on preoccupied attachment.

A more varied result is observed under the fearful attachment where most of the young adolescents (43%) said that they were “a little like” fearful while most old adolescents (28%) thought that they are “like” the description on fearful attachment. A 15% gap is also noticeable between their ratings.

Table 9: Percentage of romantic attachment patterns of respondents by age

Rating	Percentage (%)							
	Secure		Dismissing		Preoccupied		Fearful	
	YA	OA	YA	OA	YA	OA	YA	OA
Not at all like me	11	6	14	3	4	19	18	16
A little like me	14	22	32	38	29	28	43	16
Somewhat like me	39	38	29	22	32	25	14	25
Like me	21	25	21	22	21	25	14	28
Very much like me	14	9	4	16	14	3	11	16
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

*YA = Young adolescents (18-19 years old); OA = Old adolescents (20-24 years old)

Table 10: Combined percentage of romantic attachment patterns of respondents by age

Rating	Secure		Dismissing		Preoccupied		Fearful	
	YA	OA	YA	OA	YA	OA	YA	OA
Negative	25	28	46	41	32	47	61	31
Neutral	39	38	29	22	32	25	14	25
Positive	36	34	25	38	36	28	25	44
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

3.5. Romantic attachment patterns by sex

This section differentiates the romantic attachment patterns of male and female students. Table 11 shows the likelihood of the students for each romantic attachment pattern. Consistent with the previous observation, most male (47%) and female (36%) respondents felt neutral about having secure attachment.

For the dismissing attachment, most amounted to 36% for both males and females under the “a little like me” category. Interestingly, an equal percentage of male respondents (36% each) felt “a little like” and “like” of the dismissing attachment.

Most male students (33%) felt neutral while most female students (33%) felt that they are “a little like” the description on preoccupied attachment.

Remarkably, there is an equal percentage for about having fearful attachment for the male respondents with 20% each. Meanwhile, most female respondents (31%) thought that they are “a little like” fearful.

Table 11: Percentage of romantic attachment patterns of respondents by sex

Rating	Percentage (%)							
	Secure		Dismissing		Preoccupied		Fearful	
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
Not at all like me	7	9	0	11	13	11	20	16
A little like me	13	20	36	36	13	33	20	31
Somewhat like me	47	36	21	27	33	27	20	20
Like me	27	22	36	20	27	22	20	22
Very much like me	7	13	7	7	13	7	20	11
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

*M = Male (n=15), F = Female (n=45)

Table 12: Combined percentage of romantic attachment patterns of respondents by sex

	Percentage (%)							
	Secure		Dismissing		Preoccupied		Fearful	
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
Negative	20	29	36	47	27	44	40	47
Neutral	47	36	21	27	33	27	20	20
Positive	33	36	43	27	40	29	40	33
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

4. Conclusion

4.1. Demographic characteristics

From a total of 60 respondent-students, 25% are males while 75% are females. Their mean age was 20 years old with 18 years old as the youngest and 24 years old as the oldest. About 83% of them have married parents while 10% are separated, and 6% are widowed.

4.2. Adolescent attachment patterns

When it comes to trust and communication, respondents have numerically higher mean score for their peers than for their parents. Higher alienation mean score is given to peers than to their parents. This may imply that at this stage, the respondents experience more reliance on their peers than in their parents. It may indicate stronger independence from the respondents' parents however it is important to take note that the mean scores calculated for all dimensions of the parent and peer attachment patterns were numerically near to each other. Parents remain as attachment figures even though adolescents seek independence from them.

Secure and fearful attachment patterns best describe the romantic attachment patterns of Family Development majors. However, the fearful attachment is also reported as not likely to best describe them, followed by the dismissing attachment. However, it should be noted that neutral responses were encountered which may have affected the results. This may imply that clear determination of the respondents' romantic attachment pattern was not achieved.

4.3. Parents' marital status and parent and parent attachment patterns

Among all dimensions, only the trust dimension under peer attachment showed statistically significant difference among the means. Hence, there is no adequate evidence to prove that there is statistical difference between means for the communication and alienation dimensions of peer attachment and all dimensions of parent attachment.

4.4. Age and romantic attachment patterns

In terms of age, secure and preoccupied attachment patterns best describe the young adolescents while fearful attachment for the old adolescents. For both, secure attachment is also the least to describe them.

4.5. Sex and romantic attachment patterns

It is interesting to note that most male students are likely to agree with paragraph on dismissing attachment and the least likely with fearful attachment. Meanwhile, female students are likely to describe themselves with secure attachment and least likely with dismissing and fearful attachment.

5. Recommendations

Since the study only delve with college students in a specific college major, future studies may include samples

from different levels of education (i.e. primary, secondary, and tertiary). This would give a broader view of student attachment patterns as well as each level's attachment patterns. Moreover, it can allow comparison for the three levels.

Additional parameters may also be of interest for other researches. They may get more information on the students' demographic characteristics, academic performance, views on education, personal goals and vision, among others [14, 15, 16]. Of course, depending on the focus of their research, they can find the relationships among variables and create models and frameworks on attachment styles.

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