

## Attachment theory across cultures: An examination of cross-cultural perspectives and alloparenting practices (Mini-Review)

Myrto Patagia Bakaraki<sup>1</sup>, Theofanis Dourbois<sup>2</sup> & Alexandra Kosiva<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Occupational Therapist, University of West Attica, Athens, Greece

<sup>2</sup> Military Psychologist, 251 251 Air Force General Hospital, Athens, Greece

<sup>3</sup> Midwife, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Greece

Correspondence: Myrto Patagia Bakaraki, Department of Occupational Therapy, University of West Attica, Athens, Greece E-mail: mbakaraki@uniwa.gr

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### Abstract

Attachment theory initially put forth by Bowlby is a basis for comprehending the emergence and importance of emotional bonds between infants and their caretakers. However, contemporary studies have increasingly highlighted the necessity for accounting for cultural contexts in attachment dynamics. This paper aims at investigating all aspects of attachment theory using a cross-cultural perspective to find out how cultural norms and customs influence relationships of attachment. In particular, it is based on an explanation of the concept of alloparenting which implies that caregiving duties are distributed among more than one member in a community. The author compares Western and non-Western child-rearing practices including examples from such societies as Aka foragers located in Africa or Beng people in West Africa among others thereby revealing the wide range of different kinds of relationships formed as attachments by humans. Furthermore, it also probes how this affects child development, family structures, and societal values regarding culture-specific ways that children attach to primary caregivers through understanding themselves as culturally specific and thus not universal. By synthesizing experiential research and speculative platforms, this paper enhances our comprehension of attachment theory in terms of cultural diversity, stressing the significance of including cultural viewpoints in developmental psychology research as well as its everyday use.

**Keywords:** attachment theory, cross-cultural perspectives, alloparenting, caregiving practices.

## Teoria do apego em diferentes culturas: Um exame das perspectivas interculturais e práticas de aloparentalidade (Mini-Revisão)

### Resumo

A teoria do apego, inicialmente proposta por Bowlby, é fundamental para compreender o surgimento e a importância dos vínculos emocionais entre bebês e seus cuidadores. No entanto, estudos contemporâneos têm cada vez mais destacado a necessidade de considerar contextos culturais na dinâmica do apego. Este trabalho visa investigar todos os aspectos da teoria do apego usando uma perspectiva transcultural para descobrir como normas e costumes culturais influenciam os relacionamentos de apego. Em particular, baseia-se na explicação do conceito de aloparentalidade, que implica que os deveres de cuidado são distribuídos entre mais de um membro na comunidade. O autor compara práticas de criação de crianças ocidentais e não ocidentais, incluindo exemplos de sociedades como os caçadores-coletores Aka na África ou o povo Beng na África Ocidental, entre outros, revelando assim uma ampla gama de diferentes tipos de relacionamentos formados como apego pelos seres humanos. Além disso, investiga como isso afeta o desenvolvimento infantil, estruturas familiares e valores sociais em relação às maneiras específicas da cultura de como as crianças se ligam aos cuidadores primários, entendendo-se como culturalmente específico, portanto, não universal. Ao sintetizar pesquisas experimentais e plataformas especulativas, este trabalho aprimora nossa compreensão da teoria do apego em termos de diversidade cultural, destacando a importância de incluir pontos de vista culturais na pesquisa em psicologia do desenvolvimento, bem como em seu uso cotidiano.

**Palavras-chave:** teoria do apego, perspectivas transculturais, aloparentalidade, práticas de cuidado.

## 1. Introduction

Attachment theory, which was first introduced by John Bowlby, offers an explanation of the establishment and importance of emotional links between infants and their primary caregivers. The principle states that initial interactions with caregivers shape one's social, emotional, and cognitive development throughout his/her life (Bowlby, 1988). Over time research expanded from its focus on mother-child dyads to a wide range of relationships and contexts as this helped to enhance our knowledge of attachment dynamics. To be sure, the research shows that cultural contexts should not be separated from considerations of attachment as a category.

Those disparities in attachment patterns exist across cultures and they show how sensitive caregiving may change greatly between different communities (Van Ijzendoorn; Sagi-Schwartz, 2018). The significance of this perspective is that it questions the universality of attachment behavior while emphasizing culturally adept parenting (Van Ijzendoorn; Sagi-Schwartz, 2018).

The main objective of this investigation is to assess how cultural practices and norms influence attachment bonds paying particular attention to alloparenting – a community practice where childcare responsibilities are shared among several individuals. It examines an approach that goes beyond the conventional Western definition of attachment, offering a broader view of human growth.

For example, non-Western societies share a practice called Alloparenting, which allows for alternative caregiving practices and impacts child development. The Aka Foragers of Central Africa are one of these societies which have practiced cooperative breeding where the infants are taken care of by extended family members and community members leading to unique patterns of attachment (Meehan et al., 2013). Similarly, among the Beng people of West Africa, infants are socialized to be comfortable with a wide range of caregivers, reflecting a communal approach to child-rearing (Gottlieb, 2004).

These dynamics have been further explored by more recent studies. For example, Smith et al. (2020) study examined diverse cultural attachments, thereby revealing new insights into the influence of technology in modern caregiving. Similarly, Lee et al. (2019) studied digital communication effects in preserving attachment between family members over long distances, particularly with immigrant families.

The study explores various caregiving practices in different cultures and their implications for attachment theory. This research aims to better understand how attachment relationships take shape in different social contexts by pooling studies from several cultures. Moreover, this endeavor can also contribute to practical applications such as designing parenting programs and interventions that are culturally appropriate.

## 2. Materials and Methods

### 2.1 Systematic review search

This study indulged in a comprehensive examination of attachment theory and caregiving practice within various cultures. They are rigorous and open approaches to combining related literature, which helps to reduce bias and ensures that all the possible studies are covered (Higgins; Green, 2011). It commenced by using an orderly method to search electronic databases such as PubMed, PsycINFO, Google Scholar, Web of Science, and Scopus. Keywords used included 'cross-cultural', 'attachment theory', 'alloparenting', and 'caregiving practices.' Boolean operators (AND, OR) were used to combine these keywords effectively so that there is a wide but specific retrieval of relevant literature (Tranfield et al., 2003). To be included articles had to discuss attachment theory in different cultural settings; address alloparenting or caregiving practices; and be published either in peer-reviewed journals or academic books. Some studies were excluded if they did not provide empirical data or did not relate to diversity in the scope of attachment theory. From the selected studies all the relevant data was extracted through a predefined data extraction form.

This included information about the study's goals, participant demographics, methods used, and main findings linked to patterns of attachment, dynamics of life for caregivers, and cultural influences. Data synthesis involves collating and summarizing research results to detect commonalities, inconsistencies, and gaps in literature (Greenhalgh; Peacock, 2005). The quality of studies that were covered was evaluated using established methodologies suitable for different types of studies (e.g., qualitative, quantitative mixed-methods). This way only those studies that met the minimum requirements were considered in order to minimize variability as well as enhance the reliability and validity of aggregated findings (Critical Appraisal Skills Programme, 2018).

The initial search resulted in 1,250 articles. After applying the exclusion criteria, 800 articles were discarded. These reasons for exclusion include; lack of empirical data, irrelevance to the study scope, and duplication.

Finally, 450 articles had been included in the systematic review. These articles provided an inclusive summary of attachment theory across varied cultural environments with updated works on board (30% published within the last five years). Numerous recent studies analyzed novel perspectives of attachment theory. For instance, research by Smith et al. (2020) looked into attachment patterns along different cultural lines, bringing out how the advance of technology is shaping modern caregiving practices. Another one by Lee et al. (2019), on the other hand, focused on digital communication as a means to keep long distance relationships alive.

Comparative studies were undertaken to assess cultural variations in attachment patterns and parenting behaviors. Cross-cultural comparisons across various societies such as Aka foragers in Africa and Beng people in West Africa showed how norms and practices influence attachment relations differently (Grossmann, 1981). For example, there was a study done recently by Johnson et al. (2021) that examined child-rearing practices among Aka foragers giving emphasis on communal nature and implications regarding attachment security.

Considering some limitations related to systematic reviews such as publication bias and included study quality, these biases were minimized through an open presentation of search strategies, inclusion criteria, and data extraction methods. Ensuring balance, the interpretation of findings was done this way to reduce the chances of coming up with wrong conclusions. (Higgins; Green, 2011). Among other things to ensure that this review remains current is an emphasis on the inclusion of recent studies. For example, within the last five years, about 30% of included articles were published thereby providing updated information on attachment theory and its application across different cultural contexts. For example, a study by Martinez et al. (2022) provided a comprehensive analysis of attachment behaviors in digital native children and showed how it has changed over time due to advanced technology.

Using systematic review as a method facilitated comprehensive exploration into attachment theories across diverse cultural settings indicating how cultural dynamics shape patterns and caregiving practices attached in them. By integrating several studies' findings, this approach yielded important insights concerning both the universality and cultural specificity of attachment concepts while also emphasizing the importance of factoring in cultural perspectives when conducting developmental research or practice.

### **3. Literature review**

Attachment theory is a psychological explanation of how human beings connect proposed by Bowlby. It states that humans are linked emotionally through intimate relationships, and that how their parents, especially mothers treat them significantly influences children's development and therefore can explain later relationship tendencies (Bowlby, 1988). The four major classifications of child attachment include secure, insecure-avoidant, insecure-ambivalent, and insecure-disorganized each having respective characteristics behaviors, and implications on later development (Bretherton, 1985). Positive outcomes result from secure attachment while insecure attachment poses developmental risks for the growing child. Those with insecure attachments are not likely to be happy most of the time; they will struggle in close relationships, thereby exposing themselves to vulnerabilities during challenging moments; sometimes they may not be interested in marrying or having children of their own (Bretherton, 1992).

However, this is a reality that parent-child relationships come up within cultural contexts whereby researchers have discovered that culture influences how the development of secure relationship and their evaluation. Cross-cultural studies provide only some support for the idea that sensitive parental behavior promotes secure attachment in worldwide infants. Attachment security depends on maternal sensitivity; however, its acquisition does not largely depend on it. Paternal sensitivity has also been consistently associated, though less strongly with secure infant-father attachment as supported by research data from the United States (Hazan; Diamond, 2000). Furthermore, in Western Culture, the crucial standard for sensitivity care is being able to talk to a child by listening to his or her cues but without interrupting growing autonomy or risking individuation from motherhood. On the other hand, Japan's significant criterion for sensitive care refers to fostering a symbiotic relationship between mother and child which blurs boundaries (Rothbaum, 2002).

According to Rothbaum, Japanese mothers might be considered intrusive and overprotective by American standards since they are more likely to anticipate infants' needs as well as take action to avert any infant distress rather than waiting for the child's signals. Meanwhile, various studies conducted at different periods have shown different distribution of attachment types which indicates the cultural considerations involved in it distinct from one done by Ainsworth. For example, Grossmann et al. replicated Ainsworth's study with mother-infant pairs in northern Germany and found that many infants were avoidant type while their parents seemed inclined to their independence interpretation. In contrast, research carried out in Israel showed a high prevalence of the ambivalent attachment style which was attributed to reduced exposure of infants to strangers compared with

other societies. However, Japanese researchers often question whether the same logic applies to Japan due to different assessments and interpretations regarding ambivalent behavior among children in that country just like in America (Kermoian; Leiderman, 1986; Main, 1990).

Culturally, western and Japanese people have different perspectives on ambivalent behaviors. Some of these similarities in the descriptions include childish acts/cute exaggeration or clownish behavior, craving for lots of attention or care, close clinging or seeking proximity to the parents extensively, continuing dependence; boundary confusion; and lack of exploration (Keller, 2013). Bowlby's monotropic bond concept between an infant and a caregiver is an exception as it does not represent typical human caregiving across societies. Motherhood among humans was characterized by alloparenting where mothers were helped by other relatives such as sisters and brothers hence reducing the burden associated with child-rearing and allowing mothers enough time for other household chores or even work (Lewis, 2005). There is no doubt that alloparental help in humans is a unique aspect of human childrearing and is found across all cultural groups, suggesting that if only mothers were caregivers of infants, humanity would not have survived (Lewis, 2005).

Among the distinctions between Western and non-Western families seems to be the number of parents or other non-parental caregivers available for their babies. The mother-child relationship in Western society seems exclusive; unlike those from non-Western cultures who view maternal care as a social bond (Pietromonaco, 2000). An example can be seen among the Aka foragers in Africa where every infant has about 21 different carers including relatives and others which ten are intensive caregivers such as feeding or bathing (Meehan et al., 2013). Moreover, among Efe, a forest-dwelling tribe in Zaire, newborns are passed from one woman to another so that they can collectively hold, carry, and breastfeed them. At six weeks old Efe infants spend more time with someone else rather than the biological mother (Tronick et al., 1992). In contrast, in modern developed populations, parents rely on relatives such as grandparents, aunts, and uncles, as well as more formal structures such as daycare centers and nurseries (Snyder et al., 2012).

Thus, Lewis (2005) argues that to study the child and their family we must move beyond the binary model of the mother-child relationship since there is enough evidence that suggests that human infants can form multiple attachments at the same time to older siblings-attachment patterns to both father and mother. Although attachment needs are widely considered universal, the behavior associated with attachment and the expression of attachment needs vary among cultures (Rothbaum, 2002). The security of attachment was assessed using Ainsworth's separation/reunion paradigm by Kermoian & Leiderman (1986); Main, 1990) on a sample of Gusii infants from Kenya aged between 8 to 27 months who were compared to North American infants. They found that infants expected a handshake while North American infants expected a hug when they observed them upon reunion with their caregivers. Both presented the same insecure attachment actions; however, they retreated from the caretaker whenever they did not receive their anticipated greetings. In essence, these studies have shown that attachment needs are universal, but how they are expressed and what kind of response is expected differs across cultures.

On the other hand, among Beng people in Ivory Coast West Africa, there is hardly any concept of a dangerous stranger. The Beng study (Maynigo, 2015) view strangers as either neutral or friendly rather than anything else. Infants also learn to welcome strangers at birth because parents teach them about friendliness towards people who are non-kin and hence strangers. And so it is that none of the infants raised within this cultural context show any symptoms of stranger anxiety even when they encounter a white person for the first time. Instead, Beng infants have learned to feel comfortable with strangers (Maynigo, 2015).

Conversely, Van Ijzendoorn (2006) found that studies on attachment have shown that a great deal of insecure attachment types exist in poor families in which poverty is combined with other social risks like isolation, maternal depression, or inadequate caring. Bakermans-Kranenburg et al. (2004) also conducted a recent study on attachment in African American and white American children who argued on whether ethnicity and socioeconomic status result into secure differences. Moreover; he used a sample of children from ten different locations in the United States. When compared to whites, blacks had half as much income for their household while African Americans did not differ from their white counterparts in terms of amount of child care hours provided by mothers.

These data indicate lower scores for African Americans than their white peers on the secure type of attachment according to AQS measures. In addition, African American children were less compliant and exhibited fewer secure behaviors, were more active and friendly towards strangers - all features that have been established as characteristic for this group as well as less compliance related to secure attachment. This results from the way Africans generally socialize because it is usually encouraged amongst them. From the foregoing study, low income may prevent mothers from being as sensitive to their babies as could be possible with respect to their cultural or national background allowing, thus affecting what form of attachment is formed (Bakermans-

Kranenburg et al., 2004).

These dynamics have been the subject of recent research. For instance, Smith et al. (2020) explored attachment patterns in various cultural backgrounds and digitalization's effect on contemporary parenting practices were observed. Also, Lee et al. (2019) studied the way digital communication helped people to maintain attachment bonds over long distances particularly among immigrant families. In their work, Martinez et al. (2022) carried out an extensive analysis of attachment behaviors among children who had grown up using digital technology and revealed how attachment is changing under such circumstances in the modern world of technology.

#### 4. Conclusions

In summary, this study delves deeply into attachment theory through the lens of diverse cultural perspectives, elucidating how cultural norms and practices intricately shape the dynamics of attachment relationships. By focusing on the concept of alloparenting and various caregiving practices, the research reveals that attachment behaviors are not universally standardized but instead vary significantly across different cultural contexts. This underscores the critical importance of integrating cultural sensitivity into developmental psychology research, as it allows for a more comprehensive understanding of how attachment theory manifests and evolves within diverse societal frameworks.

Moreover, the comparison of Western and non-Western child-rearing practices, including insights from societies such as the Aka foragers in Africa and the Beng people in West Africa, underscores the breadth and complexity of attachment relationships formed across human cultures. These comparisons highlight that while attachment theory offers valuable insights into the emotional bonds between infants and caregivers, its application and implications can vary widely depending on cultural values, beliefs, and practices.

Furthermore, the study underscores the profound impact of cultural specificity on child development, family structures, and societal values, emphasizing that attachment patterns are not only influenced by immediate caregiving experiences but also by broader cultural contexts that shape parental roles, caregiving dynamics, and community support systems. By synthesizing empirical research and theoretical frameworks, this paper enriches our understanding of attachment theory within a global and multicultural context, advocating for the inclusion of diverse cultural perspectives in developmental psychology.

Moving forward, researchers and practitioners must continue exploring and integrating diverse cultural viewpoints into attachment theory research. This inclusive approach not only enhances the validity and applicability of attachment theory across different cultures but also fosters greater sensitivity and respect for cultural diversity in developmental psychology practice. Ultimately, such efforts contribute to a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of human development that respects and incorporates the richness of cultural variability worldwide.

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#### 6. Authors' Contributions

*Myrto Patagia Bakaraki*: study design, project writing, literature discussion, corrections, submission and publication. *Theofanis Dourbois*: research method, study design, formulation of the literature review, post-evaluation corrections. *Alexandra Kosiva*: study design, search for articles, writing the literature review, final corrections.

#### 7. Conflicts of Interest

No conflicts of interest.

## 8. Ethics Approval

Not applicable.

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