

Point of view

The impact of changing socioeconomic situations on children and parents: An attachment perspective

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Sri Lanka Journal of Child Health, 2023; 52(1): 93-96

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4038/sljch.v52i1.10480>

(Key words: Attachment theory, Child-parent interactions, Socio-economic, Adolescents, Developing countries)

Sri Lankan society has seen rapid socio-economic changes in the last few decades¹. Both economic and social factors have put traditional family systems, and the associated patterns of attachment interactions that have been passed down through the generations, under pressure. In addition, a violent 30-year war has, both directly and indirectly, affected the relational aspects of Sri Lankan society². Extended family support in child rearing has also progressively diminished, compounding the difficulties faced by families³. Currently, the Covid-19 pandemic and its socio-economic implications too have contributed to these difficulties faced by families. This paper explores the cyclical and trans-generational effects these changes can have on the relational experiences of children and the utility of using attachment theory in understanding and mitigating these effects.

Attachment theory was first described by Bowlby in the 1950s and describes a relational framework for understanding human behaviour⁴. Attachment theory describes two primary relationship functions; the safe haven function describes the need for support and comfort under conditions of psychological or physical stress and the secure base function describes the need for support for a person's autonomy and exploration of his or her environment^{4,5}.

This theory has been fine-tuned, incorporating new ideas, as evidence has been gathered by many researchers since⁶. However, the main idea that a secure early attachment experience leads to better outcomes and an insecure attachment to poorer

outcomes remain the foundation and main practical applicability of this theory. This has gained empirical evidence with longitudinal studies suggesting that early attachments set the stage for future social relationships and how we interact as adults⁷. This happens as the mental representations of early attachments will act as a guide about the availability and responsiveness of potential friends and partners⁷. It has been found that securely attached children are more likely to develop positive expectations for close relationships than their insecurely attached counterparts⁷.

Studies have related the attachment theory to areas as diverse as child psychopathology, neurobiology, health, immune function, empathy, compassion, altruism, school readiness and culture^{8,9}. Research on adult attachment has identified that the primary relationship functions are also seen in organizational relationships⁵. Further research has shown that good attachment experiences at work are associated with outcomes such as creative problem solving, ethical decision making and better negotiating skills⁶. Non-fulfilment of attachment needs at work has been shown to lead to more stress and burnout⁶. Thus, applying the concepts presented in the attachment theory across disciplines can lead to greater understanding of the sometimes chaotic relational environment of the 21st century.

Attachment theory can also provide a link to understanding the relational conditions that contribute to socio-economic difficulties. It has been found that when families grow up in poverty, they were more likely to be faced with multiple stressors that will promote insecure attachments in parent-child relationships and tougher parenting conditions¹⁰. Conversely, when parents cannot form trusting, secure relationships, this can have a systemic effect that prevents families from gaining the social and emotional support they need to break the multigenerational cycle of poverty¹¹.

Current attachment research suggests that intra-group differences, such as socio-economic status (SES), may be more significant than inter-cultural differences in development of attachment styles¹². Studies have shown that mothers from low SES

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The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest

Personal funding was used for the project.

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families display more insecure attachment styles and unresolved losses and trauma¹³. The chronic stress associated with unstable employment or persistent economic hardship can lead to diminished self-esteem, a diminished sense of control over one's life, anger and depression, which in turn may impact a caregiver's availability and sensitivity¹⁴. Therefore, this may be a contributor to the vicious cycle that breeds not only poor attachment experiences for the child but also social and economic problems.

Attachment theory has been used in systemic practice, especially in the context of working with families¹⁵. Family systems theory, research and practices have broadened our recognition of the potential resources within family systems that can contribute to the individual resilience of children in the face of adversity¹⁶. The network of relationships, from parents, sibling and extended family members act as a pool of resources that can act as a buffer against adversity¹⁶. When families develop healthy parent/child attachments and also incorporate necessary social support from the extended family, they are better able to develop resilience. This is made easier when parents themselves have had secure attachment experiences and have supportive systems around them that help in dealing with socio-economic stressors. There is growing evidence that secure attachment provides a base for dealing with the difficulties of modern-day parenting like the need to multi-task work-life balance, managing information and coping with stress⁸.

In Sri Lanka, facing the brunt of socio-economic changes in the past few decades, the change from families that had one parent working to both parents working, the rise in the number of single parent families and the increasing number of families with one parent working abroad for extended periods of time, have completely changed the family dynamics from a few decades ago¹⁷. These difficulties are likely to be exacerbated by the difficulties brought on by the Covid-19 pandemic and its socio-economic effects. While these factors have already led to a reduction in the time that parents can physically spend with their children, they have also led to a lack in the quality of interactions between parents and their children. This can increase the likelihood of what are known as Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). ACEs, which include various forms of abuse, neglect and household dysfunction, have been found to have a strong relationship to poor mental as well as physical health outcomes for children later on in life¹⁸. As attachment systems are activated when an individual is stressed, it is not surprising that there is also a demonstrable link between a high ACE score and attachment insecurity in adults¹⁹. Conversely, better parental care has been found to mitigate against the effects of trauma such as those related to war²⁰.

Recent research indicates that the adolescent period is one where secure attachment experiences are crucial²¹. While this is in a different developmental context to early childhood, where the emphasis is more on exploration, a secure base to explore the world is still important. Simple things such as being delighted by parents can still be of great importance in this critical period of neurobiological and social vulnerability. In developing countries such as Sri Lanka, the expenses of education at these times usually mean that both parents need to keep working, and often, with an invariable lack of quality time spent with the adolescent that is seen. Parents having to help their adolescents in a virtual environment they themselves are unfamiliar with, is another issue. In fact, studies have shown that insecure attachment has been associated with more dysfunctional internet and social media use²².

A broader view of how living in a rapidly changing socio-economic environment affects attachment experiences indicates that the uncertainties and ambiguities inherent in such situations have an effect on these experiences²³. The bio-ecological model of human development shows how the wider ecology that a child lives in affects their development²⁴. These effects can also be modulated through other members of the family and thus the relational environment of the family. Having systems that are unpredictable around families can leave families feeling insecure in an ambiguous situation²⁵. These can be more general systems such as traffic regulations and its implementation, or more specific systems such as protection services. The attachment behavioural system is activated when a person is exposed to physical or psychological threat and deactivation occurs upon receipt of social support. However, when support is absent or inconsistent, the attachment behavioural system can become hyper-activated or suppressed²⁶. If activated regularly, these insecure attachment responses can become a persistent way of responding to situations for parents²⁷, in turn leading to poor attachment experiences for children at home. It has been established that parents who exhibit better psychological health and well-being are much more likely to provide their children with increased quality care²⁸ that promotes secure attachment patterns.

In children, repeatedly priming insecure attachment responses can lead to more long-term effects. In fact, it is now well established that attachment styles in childhood get translated into similar attachment responses in adulthood²⁷. Although the names of these attachment styles are different, and the pathways leading to the establishment of these styles can be complicated, adult attachment styles affect relationships with other adults and their own children. This can also become a vicious cycle with

these experiences and ways of responding to situations then being passed down trans-generationally through parent-child interactions.

As such, it is important to consider the implications that socio-economic changes have on the wider relational milieu of Sri Lankan society, using the concepts of the attachment theory. Although some policy decisions have been made that promote better attachment experiences, these have been for specific populations, in specific situations, as in the case of maternity leave for mothers²⁹. However, knowledge of the attachment theory has implications for many other socio-economic programmes and policies that involve children and their parents.

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