

Mainstream Attachment Theory as a Social Construct: A Sociological and Gender-Theoretical Critique

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ABSTRACT

Originating in mid-20th century Europe, attachment theory was shaped by patriarchal norms that positioned mothers as primary caregivers and reinforced nuclear family structures as the standard context for healthy child development. This paper critically examines mainstream attachment theory through the perspectives of sociological and gender theory, arguing that it reflects these historically embedded social assumptions rather than purely universal psychological principles.

Drawing on social constructionism, intersectionality, and cultural relativism, the study demonstrates how these social assumptions marginalize diverse family forms and gender identities while contributing to rigid caregiving expectations and social stigmatization. It challenges the deterministic link between early attachment and lifelong psychological outcomes, highlighting methodological limitations and the influence of broader social contexts such as war, culture and economic change.

Contemporary research is incorporated to show that caregiving capacities are not inherently gendered, but that attachment patterns vary across cultures and relational development remains flexible across a lifespan. The paper argues for a reconstruction of attachment theory that prioritizes inclusivity, cultural sensitivity, and diverse caregiving models, including alloparenting and non-traditional families.

Ultimately, this study positions attachment theory as an evolving framework that must adapt to changing social realities, offering a more equitable and context-aware understanding of human development.

INTRODUCTION

As a well-established branch of developmental psychology, attachment theory is increasingly applied to fields such as parenting, teaching and clinical psychology. While acknowledging its value, this paper will discuss assumptions embedded in the theory and the challenges that changing societies pose to its application and universality.

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Attachment theory, initially proposed by John Bowlby¹ as a framework for understanding patterns of psychological distress and child-caregiver relationships, emerged during and after World War II. It was further refined throughout the 1940s and became widely recognized within developmental psychology during the 1960s. Bowlby, a psychiatrist who served in the British Army during the war, worked extensively with families and children examining numerous infant-caretaker attachment patterns and identifying diversity in the behavior of children, some of whom displayed confidence and emotional security when faced with family separations, while others experienced anxiety or avoidance. Motivated by personal childhood memories of caretaker separation, Bowlby developed an interest in investigating the relationship between parental care and child attachment behavior. As his ideas gained recognition, psychologists such as Mary Ainsworth and Mary Main joined the investigation, and collectively they established the framework of attachment theory.

This framework rests on an understanding of evolution. Bowlby explains attachment behavior as an innate response that keeps an infant close to its primary caregiver, increasing the infant's chances of survival.² He posits that early attachment behavior can modify a person's Internal Working Model (IWM), an implicit framework developed from infancy that informs how an individual may perceive, interpret and respond to relationships throughout life.³ Mary Ainsworth and Mary Main contributed by categorizing common attachment behaviors into four types: Secure, Anxious-Ambivalent (Resistant), Anxious-Avoidant, and Disorganized.⁴ These attachment categories remain highly influential in developmental psychology, and are also widely used in popular discussions of relationships, parenting and self-understanding, despite ongoing debate over whether findings derived from controlled laboratory settings can be fully generalized to real-life social contexts.⁵

A core assumption of this theory is that stable, continuous care from a primary caregiver is essential for healthy emotional development, and that disruptions in early caregiver bonds can produce lasting consequences.⁶ However, as the scope and influence of the theory have grown, its limitations have also become apparent. This paper examines several assumptions implicit in the theory relating to caregiving, such as “maternal love is an animal instinct”⁷, and assumptions about gender roles and family structure

¹John Bowlby, “Forty-Four Juvenile Thieves: Their Characters and Home-Life,” *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* (London) 25 (1944): 19–53.

²John Bowlby, *Attachment and Loss: Vol. 1. Attachment* (Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1969).

³Matthew J. Dykas and Jude Cassidy, “Attachment and the Processing of Social Information Across the Life Span: Theory and Evidence,” *Psychological Bulletin* (Washington, DC) 137, no. 1 (2011): 19–46, <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0021367>.

⁴Mary D. Ainsworth and Silvia M. Bell, “Attachment, Exploration, and Separation: Illustrated by the Behavior of One-Year-Olds in a Strange Situation,” *Child Development* (United Kingdom) 41, no. 1 (1970): 49–67, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1127388>; Mary Main and Judith Solomon, “Procedures for Identifying Infants as Disorganized/Disoriented during the Ainsworth Strange Situation,” in *Attachment in the Preschool Years: Theory, Research, and Intervention*, The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Series on Mental Health and Development (The University of Chicago Press, 1990).

⁵Ainsworth and Bell, “Attachment, Exploration, and Separation.”

⁶J. Bowlby, “Maternal Care and Mental Health,” *Bulletin of the World Health Organization* (Switzerland) 3, no. 3 (1951): 355–533; Bowlby, *Attachment and Loss, Volume 2: Separation, Anxiety and Anger*, no. 95.

⁷Erica Burman, *Deconstructing Developmental Psychology*, 2nd ed. (Routledge, 2007), July 2026

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rooted in patriarchal norms: the mother “as the naturally dominant care-taking force”, and “the universality of nuclear family structures”.⁸ At family level, these assumptions presuppose mothering and caregiving, and can reinforce a rigid division of labor associated with nuclear family structures; at societal level they can contribute to the stigmatization of communities, pathologization of normal behaviors, rigid gender norms, increased parental stress and inflexible parenting styles.

In this paper I argue that mainstream attachment theory, with its foundational assumptions regarding caregiving and gender roles, inadvertently reinforces traditional gender norms, potentially restricting the flexibility of gender characteristics and responsibilities. This paper’s findings may support advocates of gender equality and diversity seeking to challenge rigid gender expectations.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This research is grounded in certain sociological theories as outlined below. It is argued that attachment theory may well be more a product of social constructs than merely a psychological framework.⁹ Social constructionism emphasizes that social realities are not fixed but are constantly created and recreated through cultural changes and human interactions, and that social categories, such as gender, race and class, are symbolic characteristics reflecting dynamic cultural trends and norms.¹⁰ Inherent to attachment theory are clearly defined gendered divisions of caregiving responsibilities which undermine its explanatory power and reduce its effectiveness. In addition, the theory’s reliance on western-based research reflects historical methodological constraints, in particular limited ethnic and cultural diversity, which the research community is still working to address.

The intersectionality of identities theory,¹¹ helps us understand how unique experiences of oppression and privilege may arise from the intersection of personal characteristics and identities.¹² It explains how attachment theory may generate psychological stress for certain groups when its normative claims about “appropriate” caregiving and family roles are treated as standards in social and institutional settings. Individuals whose identities conflict with these standardized traits, or those who deviate from them, may suffer self-conflict, social stigmatization and discrimination. According to the theory of intersectionality, this may heighten the stress suffered by individuals such as LGBTQIA+ individuals who already bear marginalized identities.¹³ For example, a single transgender FTM (female-to-male) father performing parenting roles that, according to societal and cultural norms, are culturally coded as more feminine, may

<https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203946169>.

⁸Burman, *Deconstructing Developmental Psychology*.

⁹Vivien Burr, “What Is Social Constructionism?,” in *Social Constructionism*, 4th ed., vol. 1 (Routledge, 2025), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003335016-1>; Burman, *Deconstructing Developmental Psychology*.

¹⁰Burr, “What Is Social Constructionism?”

¹¹Kimberlé Crenshaw, “‘Difference’ through Intersectionality 1,” in *Dalit Feminist Theory*, 1st ed., with Sunaina Arya and Aakash Singh Rathore (Routledge, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429298110-15>.

¹²Kenneth Gergen, 61. *The Saturated Self: Dilemmas of Identity in Contemporary Life* (2016), 318–20, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400848393-062>.

¹³Crenshaw, “‘Difference’ through Intersectionality 1.”

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face discrimination because he holds multiple minority identities: single parent, transgender, divergent from traditional gender roles. Therefore, in reconstructing attachment theory, minority groups should be considered in order to strengthen inclusivity and reduce the risk of the marginalization or stigmatization of certain communities.

The generalizability and application of attachment theory is further limited when examined through the lens of cultural relativism which holds that theories and activities should be understood in terms of the culture they are rooted in, rather than being judged against the standards of another culture.¹⁴ Consequently, while this paper does not completely reject attachment theory, and acknowledges the pioneering contributions the theory has made to the construction of developmental psychology, it seeks to be a reminder of the complex sociological origins of the theory and the need to promote its flexible application, particularly by acknowledging cultural differences.

PREDOMINANT ASSUMPTIONS AND IDEOLOGIES

From a sociological perspective, attachment theory is not purely a psychological product, constructed by integrating observations, facts and science, but a social product carrying era-specific traditions, ideologies, human assumptions and bias. In 20th century Europe when the theory was proposed, societies commonly had, and imposed, strict gender boundaries stemming from a patriarchal social structure.¹⁵ Gender-linked expectations were imposed by society on families and individuals: men were assumed to be aggressive and women overly emotional; traditionally men worked and women raised children; religion emphasized men's bravery and women's kindness.¹⁶ Reinforced by nationalism, religion and patriotism, these ideas were taken for granted and set as moral boundaries to standardize behaviors. Bowlby's studies on attachment were equally influenced by these social norms. Scholars like Bowlby were raised in traditional families with women in the caretaker role and men the financial provider, which led to a focus on maternal rather than paternal care. The world wars intersecting Bowlby's studies made this situation more pronounced: with most men on the battlefield, the available data on paternal caregiving diminished, making it reasonable to focus on maternal care. In many of Bowlby's publications, he used "mothers or foster-mothers" to describe the role of caretakers,¹⁷ though he acknowledged the possibility of men also performing caregiving roles. Nevertheless, his wording suggests that he still believed that effective caretakers should possess, for nurturing and comforting children, stereotypically feminine or maternal characteristics: emotional sensitivity, gentleness, and constant availability.

Mary Ainsworth's Strange Situation experiment involving 26 mother-infant pairs, was similarly focused on maternal care. This experiment aimed to identify trends in infants' attachment behaviors, especially

¹⁴Melville J. Herskovits, *Cultural Relativism: Perspectives in Cultural Pluralism*, ed. Frances Herskovits (New York, 1972).

¹⁵Chris Beckett and Hilary A. Taylor, *Human Growth and Development* (SAGE, 2016); Lynda R. Ross, *Interrogating Motherhood*, 1st ed., vol. 5, OPEL (Open Paths to Enriched Learning) (Athabasca University Press, 2016), <https://doi.org/10.15215/aupress/9781771991438.01>.

¹⁶Burman, *Deconstructing Developmental Psychology*; Ross, *Interrogating Motherhood*, vol. 5.

¹⁷Katherine Simon, review of *Review of Maternal Care and Mental Health*, by John Bowlby, *The Milbank Memorial Fund Quarterly* 29, no. 4 (1951): 496–99, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3348276>.

patterns of distress, proximity-seeking, avoidance and ease of soothing during separation and reunion episodes, and establish the primary attachment styles.¹⁸ Due to practical constraints, she could not conduct a comparative investigation with male caretakers. However, interestingly, recent studies have identified certain sex-based responses relevant to care-taking behaviors, with males demonstrating greater skin conductance and higher heart rate than females when exposed to a crying infant. Emma Roellke et al. further examined physiological/endocrine responses in men specifically, rather than in comparison to those of women.¹⁹ These findings indicate that men may experience different sensitivity levels and responses toward infant distress, challenging the assumption that mothering and fathering can be discussed interchangeably. Time-period constraints are inevitable during any sociological study, but focusing as a matter of course on maternal care rather than caregiving behaviors performed by both genders limits attachment theory's current relevance.

Another assumption in the theory which reinforced the limited maternal focus was that women are the predominant caretaker. Though it was accurate that women were the dominant caretaking forces in 20th century Europe, such era-specific social trends should not be amplified as a universal or natural fact. Justifications for these gender role prescriptions have typically relied on biological differences which suggest that women are more emotionally sensitive, patient and nurturing, with a “maternal instinct” to care for and feed infants, since by their biological functions associated with childbirth and lactation women are more suited to childcare.²⁰

Bowlby also relied on evolutionary theory and human animalistic behaviors. He observed that in many animal populations males have flexible relationships with females, as they often accompany a female until pregnancy and then depart to find another female to continue breeding. Consequently, in these animal populations, the responsibility for childcare falls upon the female. He drew parallels between primates and humans to suggest how maternal care is universal among these closely related species, and that attachment behaviors evolved because they improved human infants' chances of survival.²¹ These theories fail to consider the conscious and will-directed human behaviors not controlled purely by evolution and genetics, for example, a non-gestational caregiver who may deliberately take parental leave and establish consistent bedtime routines to build trust and emotional security. They also fail to explain attachment behaviors arising from love and connection. Recent studies on caregiving for infants and toddlers demonstrate that both genders exhibit similar capacities for caregiving behaviors.²² Furthermore, a narrative overview suggests that existing neuroimaging evidence has not demonstrated consistent gender

¹⁸Ainsworth and Bell, “Attachment, Exploration, and Separation.”

¹⁹Albert L. Brewster et al., “Gender Differences in Physiological Reactivity to Infant Cries and Smiles in Military Families,” *Child Abuse & Neglect* 22, no. 8 (1998): 775–88, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0145-2134\(98\)00055-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0145-2134(98)00055-6); Emma Roellke et al., “Infant Crying Levels Elicit Divergent Testosterone Response in Men,” *Parenting, Science and Practice* (Mahwah) 19, nos. 1–2 (2019): 39–55, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15295192.2019.1555425>.

²⁰Ross, *Interrogating Motherhood*, vol. 5.

²¹D Maestripieri and J Roney, “Evolutionary developmental psychology: Contributions from comparative research with nonhuman primates,” *Developmental Review* 26, no. 2 (2006): 120–37, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dr.2006.02.006>.

²²Sheri Madigan et al., “The First 20,000 Strange Situation Procedures: A Meta-Analytic Review,” *Psychological Bulletin* (Washington) 149, nos. 1–2 (2023): 99–132, <https://doi.org/10.1037/bul0000388>.

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differences in neural activation during caregiving tasks.²³ Hence, behavioral differences between men and women in care-giving are more likely acquired through experience rather than genetics.

Coupled with rigid gender roles, this assumption that women are the primary caregivers was reinforced by cultural values and social ideologies over time. Attachment theory gained recognition immediately after the end of World War II, coinciding with the European social movement to re-establish traditional gender roles. The theory was considered “scientific” evidence that justified keeping women at home to focus on domestic tasks and childcare.²⁴ Although women demonstrated the ability to work as effectively as men during wartime, they were still encouraged to believe it was their natural mission and responsibility to rear children. Some social groups and governments continue to promote values that reflect this assumption. While it is difficult to determine the extent to which attachment theory directly shapes these expectations, the theory’s post-war influence demonstrates how its social and cultural limitations may reinforce unequal gender norms. Such expectations can concentrate unpaid domestic and childcare labor on women, reducing their autonomy and bargaining power in negotiating responsibilities with male counterparts.

Another assumption that puts pressure on many caretakers is that there is a strong link between the quality of caregiving and child attachment behaviors, with potential lifelong consequences. In his studies, Bowlby emphasized the Internal Working Model (IWM), a concept primarily drawn from Kenneth Craik’s ideas on mental models but conceptually parallel to Jean Piaget’s work on cognitive schemas and development.²⁵ Bowlby believed that early attachment interactions with caregivers could shape an individual’s expectations and behaviors in future relationships.²⁶ However, the evidence for this hypothesis was primarily based on observations, interviews and limited laboratory experiments (the Strange Situation experiment), which either introduced too many uncontrolled variables to establish a direct causal link or failed to simulate naturalistic conditions. Even if attachment styles have a direct link to the IWM, there is limited evidence that attachment is the predominant influence on later relational functioning. Recent neuroimaging studies have failed to identify any neural markers that can directly predict an attachment style, but distinct attachment styles do appear to correlate with differences in brain regions associated with social and emotional processing.²⁷ This suggests that attachment is not experienced in isolation from other psychological processes. Attachment may not function as an individual determinant of the IWM system, but as one contributing factor amongst many shaping an individual’s future. Therefore, the oversimplified relationship, and overstated link between attachment and IWM may cause caretakers to experience unnecessary stress and heightened anxiety regarding the long-term consequences of their caregiving practices.

²³Toni Schmader and Katharina Block, “Why Do Women Care More & Men Couldn’t Care Less?,” *Daedalus* (Cambridge, Mass.) (255 Main Street, 9th Floor, Cambridge, Massachusetts 02142, USA) 154, no. 1 (2025): 82–97, https://doi.org/10.1162/daed_a_02125.

²⁴Beckett and Taylor, *Human Growth and Development*.

²⁵Susanna Pallini and Barbara Barcaccia, “A Meeting of the Minds: John Bowlby Encounters Jean Piaget,” *Review of General Psychology* (US) 18, no. 4 (2014): 287–92, <https://doi.org/10.1037/gpr0000016>.

²⁶Dykas and Cassidy, “Attachment and the Processing of Social Information Across the Life Span.”

²⁷Cinzia Perlini et al., “Disentangle the Neural Correlates of Attachment Style in Healthy Individuals,” *Epidemiology and Psychiatric Sciences* (Cambridge, UK) 28, no. 4 (2019): 371–75, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S2045796019000271>.

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A further point is that the broader wartime context may well have shaped the mental states of Bowlby's subjects who were perhaps adversely affected by chronic stress, sociopolitical instability or trauma. Because such states of stress can resemble symptoms shared by the insecure/preoccupied attachment type, wartime stress may have been mistaken for, or contributed to, an apparent increase in this attachment classification, and these findings may well not have been replicated in peace-time. Additionally, preoccupied attachment may be the consequence of a survival skill: clinging to caretakers in order to achieve a better chance of survival in war. This attachment pattern may be attributed to children's social settings, rather than parental interactions, indicating how attachment behaviors can be intertwined with and affected by complex social emotions. Under such circumstances, simple attachment style categorizations may reflect the social context as a whole. With such assumptions unresolved, caretakers may be burdened by believing their actions alone have a decisive effect on their child's future.

Finally, an underlying assumption of attachment theory, built on the social foundations of 20th century Europe, is that nuclear families are globally natural and common. The framework of attachment theory was constructed around the concept of "the nuclear family", defined as "a family unit consisting of a man and a woman and their dependent children".²⁸ "Nuclear families" first emerged as a sociological concept in the 1950s and they were regarded as the basic and historical unit of social organization. It was a social observation that evolved into a commonly accepted fact. Consistent with attachment theory, the idea of the "nuclear family" also emphasized traditional gender roles and household divisions of labor, and this provided attachment theory with the sociological evidence to confirm its credibility. Key experiments to test attachment theory were also conducted based on this assumption: the Strange Situation experiment studied mother-infant relationships in nuclear family structures, reinforcing the notion of the nuclear family's importance for healthy attachment behavior.²⁹ The Adult Attachment Interview (AAI) was similarly designed, asking its subjects to reflect on childhood interactions with their parents, especially their relationships with their mother and father.³⁰ Although belief in the universality of nuclear families, fundamental to attachment theory, may have seemed reasonable at that time, subsequent social and historical changes have led us to question this belief.

In the context of gender, the idea of the nuclear family contributes to reinforcing rigid gender roles: the father as the primary breadwinner and mother as the primary caregiver. In family life this limits personal choice, and at a societal level, it perpetuates inequality between genders. More specifically, man as the breadwinner is seen as the main pillar of the family, with higher social status and control. These rigid gender roles obscure the individual characteristics of people, with some women judged "not good

²⁸George Peter Murdock, *Social Structure*, with University of California Libraries (New York : Macmillan Co., 1949), <http://archive.org/details/socialstructure00murd>.

²⁹Xin Peng, "The Impact of Family of Origin on Attachment Relationships and Emotional Regulation Ability," *Communications in Humanities Research* 51, no. 1 (2024): 135–40, <https://doi.org/10.54254/2753-7064/51/20242515>.

³⁰Carol George et al., "The Adult Attachment Interview," University of California at Berkeley, 1985.

enough” because of their gender rather than ability,³¹ and men who are caretakers labeled as “worthless or lazy”.³² Expectations and judgments targeting gender rather than individuals are harmful, as are expectations around the composition of the nuclear family. Demonstrating changes in family structure and gender roles in society, data from Britain show that by the 1990s, more than one in three children were born to single mothers, that the divorce rate had surpassed 30%, and that 70% of women were actively contributing to the growing economy³³. In Africa, Aka forager communities employ alloparenting strategies, with grandmothers, fathers, siblings and others participating in care-taking to help mothers balance demands on their productivity. These scenarios illustrate how parental behaviors can be remarkably flexible and that there are many pathways to successful parenting.³⁴ They also demonstrate that caregiving practices are historically and culturally flexible rather than universally fixed within the nuclear family structure. Consequently, attachment theory should be interpreted with greater sensitivity when examining diverse caregiving arrangements, and traditional gender roles or nuclear family models should not be treated as universally normative conditions for healthy attachment development.

CHANGES AND DIVERSITY IN THE MODERN WORLD

General Sociological Trends and Predictions Regarding Gender Participation in the Workforce

Significant societal changes occurred between the 1950s and 2020s. Gender roles became more flexible due to the movement for women's rights and more opportunities for education. Data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics show that in 1950, labor force participation rates were 33.9% for women and 86.4% for men.³⁵ However, this gap gradually narrowed throughout the second half of the twentieth century as social attitudes toward women's employment evolved. In the 1970s and 1980s, women's labor participation increased to 45% while men's labor remained stable; regionally, in some developed economies, women's labor reached 50%-60%, representing a significant shift in traditional gender divisions of labor.³⁶ Subsequently, in the 21st century, as economic developments progressed and social attitudes toward working women changed, labor rates have achieved a better balance. More specifically,

³¹Merryn McKinnon and Christine O'Connell, "Perceptions of Stereotypes Applied to Women Who Publicly Communicate Their STEM Work," *Humanities & Social Sciences Communications* (London) 7, no. 1 (2020): 1–8, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-020-00654-0>.

³²Aaron B. Rochlen et al., "Stay-at-Home Fathers' Reasons for Entering the Role and Stigma Experiences: A Preliminary Report," *Psychology of Men & Masculinity* 11, no. 4 (2010): 279–85, <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0017774>.

³³"Women and Employment in Europe," *Equal Opportunities International* 10, no. 6 (1991): 18–25, <https://doi.org/10.1108/eb010561>.

³⁴Rebecca Sear, "Beyond the Nuclear Family: An Evolutionary Perspective on Parenting," *Current Opinion in Psychology* 7 (2016): 98–103, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2015.08.013>.

³⁵Howard N. Fullerton, "Labor Force Participation: 75 Years of Change, 1950-98 and 1998-2025," *Monthly Labor Review* (Washington) 122, no. 12 (1999): 3–12.

³⁶Sara Elder, *Women in Labour Markets: Measuring Progress and Identifying Challenges* (International Labour Office, 2010).

in the 2020s, global labor force participation was approximately 47% for women and 74% for men,³⁷ while in the United States, the rate for men had declined to around 69% and increased to approximately 57% for women.³⁸ Such statistics suggest that contemporary family structures increasingly rely on dual-earner households rather than a model in which women remain exclusively responsible for domestic labor and childcare. Although maternal employment does not necessarily prevent the formation of secure attachment relationships, these developments complicate attachment theory's historically gendered assumption that mothers should remain the predominant and constantly available caregivers. As women's roles and lives outside families diversify and expand, flexible parenting styles like alloparenting appear better aligned with contemporary time constraints, dual-earner households and childcare availability than the nuclear family model.

At regional levels, modern sociologists' "U-shaped hypothesis" illustrates women's labor participation in different societies. The hypothesis suggests that women's labor participation is highest in low-income countries due to survival needs, and reaches its lowest point in middle-income countries where the economy is supported by industrial production and manufacturing. As countries advance further into the tertiary sector of production and increasingly transition toward service-based economies, women's participation increases again.³⁹ Such evidence reveals that whereas the first peak in women's labor participation was prompted by poverty and responses to economic shocks, the second peak is predominantly associated with economic development, educational expansion and changing social attitudes toward women's employment. There is also evidence that increased access to education, a fundamental contributor to human and social development,⁴⁰ is an important factor in the rise of women's labor force participation since it provides women with the skills and qualifications necessary to enter the workforce. It follows that, according to the trajectory of the U-shaped hypothesis, achieving greater gender equality in the labor force may become increasingly possible over time, driven by educational advancement, economic transformation and government initiatives. Therefore, in the reconstruction of attachment theory, it is essential to consider the trend of women's increasing involvement in the workforce.

³⁷United Nations, *The World's Women 2020: Trends and Statistics* (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2020), <https://worlds-women-2020-data-undesa.hub.arcgis.com/>.

³⁸Laura Dawson Ullrich, "Male Labor Force Participation: Patterns and Trends," *Econ Focus* (Richmond) 26, no. 1 (2021): 26–30.

³⁹Sher Verick, "Female labor force participation and development," *IZA World of Labor*, ahead of print, 2018, <https://doi.org/10.15185/izawol.87.v2>; Claudia Goldin, "The U-Shaped Female Labor Force Function in Economic Development and Economic History," Working Paper no. 4707, Working Paper Series (National Bureau of Economic Research, April 1994), <https://doi.org/10.3386/w4707>.

⁴⁰Nega Mathewos, "The Impact of Women Education on Economic Development in Ethiopia," *Journal of Economics and Sustainable Development* 8, no. 7 (2017): 50.

These predictions regarding gender role development align with the dynamics of social values. According to Social Identity Theory and Norm psychology, individuals derive part of their self-concept and continuing positive social identity from their community membership.⁴¹ As women's labor participation increases, individuals begin to incorporate the everyday visibility of women working (e.g., dual-income families and working mothers) into a common conviction, a shared sense of recognition and belonging. This evolves into a symbol or shared “faith” which becomes embedded in the community's culture; through generations of reinforcement, this cultural belief will be “inherited” by the community's descendants in their early stages of development and interactions with society. Through sustained social reinforcement, the belief that “women should participate in the labor force” may gradually become normalized within society, reflecting broader transformations in gender roles. This process not only reveals the fluidity of social values but also underscores the need to reconstruct attachment theory so that it remains aligned with evolving social values.

Recent Findings on Attachment Theory in Culturally and Gender-Diverse Contexts

With the acceptance of attachment theory have come new insights and evidence contributing to the need for a more comprehensive assessment of the subject. In 2023, Madigan et al.⁴² conducted a meta-analytic review involving over 285 studies and 20,720 caretaker-infant pairs. The study concluded that secure attachment was most prevalent among all attachment styles globally, representing 51.6% of the population; avoidant attachment was 14.7%, resistant (“ambivalent” in the Strange Situation literature) attachment was 10.2% and disorganized attachment was 23.5%.⁴³ These statistics demonstrated that the general hypothesis of attachment theory, emphasizing secure attachment to be normative and most prevalent, may be valid. However, the study also identified regional variations in attachment style distribution, reinforcing the argument that attachment behaviors are shaped not only by individual psychological processes but also by the broader social and cultural context.

Another study, focusing on 115 couples in the United States and 99 couples in China,⁴⁴ further examined the regional applicability of attachment theory concepts. The results indicated that avoidant attachment was associated with lower levels of negative affect in the American sample, consistent with attachment theory's prediction that individuals with avoidant attachment tend to employ emotional-disconnection strategies when experiencing distress; however, this pattern was not observed in the Chinese sample. The differing pattern in the Chinese sample may be partly explained by cultural differences.⁴⁵ Additionally, this study suggests a possibility that identical attachment styles in different cultural contexts may not

⁴¹Kati Kish Bar-On and Ehud Lamm, “The Interplay of Social Identity and Norm Psychology in the Evolution of Human Groups,” *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B* (England) 378, no. 1872 (2023): 20210412-, <https://doi.org/10.1098/rstb.2021.0412>.

⁴²Madigan et al., “The First 20,000 Strange Situation Procedures.”

⁴³Madigan et al., “The First 20,000 Strange Situation Procedures.”

⁴⁴Wenzhen Zhu et al., “Adult Attachment, Sacrifice, and Emotional Wellbeing of Couples: A Cross-Cultural Comparison between the U.S. and China,” *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* (London, England) 38, no. 2 (2021): 482–503, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0265407520963954>.

⁴⁵Zhu et al., “Adult Attachment, Sacrifice, and Emotional Wellbeing of Couples.”

consistently lead to similar psychological outcomes (as proposed in attachment theory). This emphasizes the importance of contextualizing situations before applying attachment theory or the Internal Working Model to predict an individual's future psychological development.

Studies have also extended investigations into interventions designed to promote secure attachment patterns. A 2024 narrative review of the “secure base” concept in attachment theory, which describes the caregiver’s role in providing the emotional security enabling children to explore their environment confidently, highlighted its importance for children's exploratory behavior and their emotional regulation.⁴⁶ It also noted that sensitive caregiving is a crucial factor in promoting mental health across different cultures. While this review supported the broad applicability of the secure base concept and encouraged its implementation, it also advanced the idea that “secure base” is not exclusive to parent-infant relationships; it can also be established through intimate group interactions such as teacher-student relationships⁴⁷, which activate individual secure attachment schemas. This finding suggests that attachment patterns may be more flexible than previously believed, and that that flexibility may continue in post-childhood stages and beyond traditional family settings. Similarly, modern criticism of attachment theory emphasizes how the rigid interpretation of attachment and its long-term impacts may reflect a deterministic view that undermines social influences and the plasticity of human development.⁴⁸ Consistent with Ye et al.’s⁴⁹ findings regarding secure bases, Mehdiabadi⁵⁰ also advocates for further research on the lifelong development of human attachment.

Recent gender studies have also provided new insights into attachment. A 2015 study on attachment and socio-demographic factors found that in its representative sample, age rather than gender, accounted for differences in attachment anxiety.⁵¹ In contrast, another article in 2022 reported significant gender differences in attachment, showing higher attachment anxiety in female students and higher attachment avoidance in male students.⁵² Taken together, these findings suggest that any gender differences in attachment are not universal or deterministic, and may vary according to context and measurement approach. However, a study examining the relationship between adult attachment styles and transgender identity found that transgender individuals with insecure attachment styles also reported higher levels of internalized transphobia and lower levels of positive transgender identity.⁵³ Such comparative studies

⁴⁶Zi-Ying Ye et al., “Secure Base and Mental Health in Children: A Narrative Review,” *Translational Pediatrics* (China) 13, no. 9 (2024): 1608–16, <https://doi.org/10.21037/tp-24-191>.

⁴⁷Ye et al., “Secure Base and Mental Health in Children.”

⁴⁸Parichehr Mehdiabadi, “Critique of Attachment Theory: A Positive Psychology Perspective,” *Journal of Personality and Psychosomatic Research* 1, no. 2 (2023): 1–8, <https://doi.org/10.61838/kman.jprr.1.2.1>.

⁴⁹Ye et al., “Secure Base and Mental Health in Children.”

⁵⁰Mehdiabadi, “Critique of Attachment Theory.”

⁵¹Katja Petrowski et al., “Is It Attachment Style or Socio-Demography: Singlehood in a Representative Sample,” *Frontiers in Psychology* (Switzerland) 6 (2015): 1738–, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2015.01738>.

⁵²Rainer Weber et al., “Gender Differences in Attachment Anxiety and Avoidance and Their Association with Psychotherapy Use—Examining Students from a German University,” *Behavioral Sciences* (Basel) 12, no. 7 (2022): 204–, <https://doi.org/10.3390/bs12070204>.

⁵³Anna Lisa Amodeo et al., “Adult Attachment and Transgender Identity in the Italian Context: Clinical Implications and Suggestions for Further Research,” *The International Journal of Transgenderism* 16, no. 1 (2015): 49–61, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15532739.2015.1022680>.

demonstrate that stigma-related pressures surrounding marginalized gender identities, rather than gender identity itself, may be linked to poorer psychological outcomes, reinforcing the argument that the intersectionality of identities, particularly marginalized identities, may increase vulnerability to stigmatization.

In conclusion, many of these modern findings acknowledge that while mainstream attachment theory provides a fundamental understanding of attachment, in order to predict an individual's psychological outcomes, the influence of stigmatization, together with cultural and gender identity differences should be considered when studying regional variations in attachment style distribution.

CONCLUSION

It is evident that attachment theory, while originally framed as a psychological construct, is deeply rooted in sociological assumption, and mere surface-level adjustments are insufficient. The essence of reform lies in cultivating flexibility and embracing diversity. Parenting strategies, for example, must be understood within cultural contexts. In many Western societies, values of independence and autonomy encourage children to take risks and make individual choices, whereas in many Asian contexts, collective harmony and empathy are emphasized. Since attachment theory was developed within Western traditions, it often positions Western caregiving as the normative path toward “secure attachment”, while misrepresenting or stigmatizing alternative approaches, such as Asian models of collectivist caregiving, as more likely to result in insecure attachment styles.⁵⁴ Such classifications risk pathologizing communities rather than acknowledging cultural strengths. Even the terminology of “secure” versus “insecure” creates a hierarchy that implicitly privileges one form of attachment and marginalizes others.

The same need for inclusivity applies to gender. While mid-20th century society predominantly saw gender as binary, and stigmatized non-binary or fluid identities,⁵⁵ modern cultures increasingly recognize gender as self-constructed and dynamic.⁵⁶ Census data in England and Wales, for instance, revealed that 0.5% of the population identifies with a gender different from their sex at birth,⁵⁷ reminding us that even small demographic percentages represent significant, vulnerable populations. Attachment theory must therefore expand to encompass gender-neutral caregiving roles, reformulating concepts in more inclusive terms. For example, instead of Bowlby’s emphasis on “the mother (or mother-substitute)” as the central attachment figure, “secure attachment develop[ed] through consistent and responsive care” avoids the gendered assumptions embedded in earlier formulations focused narrowly on mother-infant bonds.

⁵⁴Jessica Chang, “The Intersection of Collectivism, Individualism, and Attachment Styles,” Wove Therapy, March 10, 2025, <https://www.wovetherapy.com/blog/intersection-of-collectivism-individualism-and-attachment-styles>.

⁵⁵Patricio Simonetto, *A Body of One’s Own: A Trans History of Argentina*, 1st ed. (University of Texas Press, 2024), <https://doi.org/10.7560/328606>.

⁵⁶Phillip L. Hammack and Adriana M. Manago, “The Psychology of Sexual and Gender Diversity in the 21st Century: Social Technologies and Stories of Authenticity,” *The American Psychologist* (United States) 80, no. 3 (2025): 375–88, <https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0001366>.

⁵⁷Office for National Statistics, “First Census Estimates on Gender Identity and Sexual Orientation,” <https://www.ons.gov.uk/news/news/firstcensusestimateongenderidentityandsexualorientation>.

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By connecting attachment theory with gender studies, this paper illustrates the value of interdisciplinary research between psychology and sociology. While core concepts like the “secure base” and internal working models remain relevant, their application must be careful, culturally sensitive and inclusive. Because this paper draws on existing research rather than gathering new data of its own, the reconstructed framework it proposes should be seen as a starting point that future studies can test directly. Further research could examine how an attachment model reformulated for cultural and gender inclusivity holds up across different cultural and family settings, and whether these more inclusive concepts describe attachment as effectively as the original ones. If reinterpreted with flexibility and awareness, attachment theory can not only preserve its pioneering contributions to human development but also evolve into a framework that supports equity, reduces stigma and better reflects the diverse realities of contemporary societies.

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