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**Examining Differences in Adult Attachment Across Varying Family Dynamics**

An honors thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Honors Studies in  
Social Work

By

Hannah Miller

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Social Work

J. William Fulbright College of Arts and Sciences

**The University of Arkansas**

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## **Chapter 1: Examining Differences in Adult Attachment Across Varying Family Dynamics**

Many researchers have examined the link between experiences in childhood and adult attachment. Attachment theory provides a developmental framework to understand cognitive mapping in childhood that affects how individuals perceive and experience relationships in adulthood. Those with secure attachment in adulthood report better relationship satisfaction, mental health outcomes, and overall life satisfaction (Diamond et al., 2017; Frias et al., 2016; Lin, 2019). Those who experience high levels of attachment avoidance and attachment anxiety in adulthood report difficulties in emotional and physiological regulation, poor mental health outcomes, and lower relationship and life satisfaction (Diamond et al., 2017; Ferraro & Taylor, 2021; Frias et al., 2016; Lin, 2019.)

Research examining the relationship between specific family dynamics and levels of attachment anxiety and avoidance is limited. The present study seeks to examine the relationship between specific family dynamics (e.g. the family members consistently present in the home during childhood, the relationship to family members in the home, the relationship of one's guardians during childhood) and attachment avoidance and attachment anxiety behaviors in adult relationships to provide a better understanding of which factors contribute to attachment patterns in adulthood. Chapter Two reviews attachment theory, adult attachment, and childhood experiences with family and how attachment in childhood and adult attachment are related. Chapter Three will discuss the study's research design, methods, and procedure. Lastly, Chapter Four will discuss the results, limitations, and implications.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

Researchers have proposed the examination of family dynamics and relationships as an avenue to study the formation of attachment styles and the continuation of attachment styles into adulthood (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Bowlby, 1988). However, many gaps remain in understanding which specific family experiences in childhood may be linked to avoidance, anxiety, and security in adulthood. Understanding variables that contribute to specific adult attachment experiences can provide social workers and mental health professionals insight into attachment patterns and how continuing these patterns affects perceptions and experiences in relationships and contribute to mental and physical health outcomes.

### **Attachment Theory**

Attachment theory was developed by psychologist Bowlby in 1969 while attempting to examine distress experienced by infants when separated from their parents (Bowlby, 2018). Bowlby proposed that these distress reactions (e.g., screaming, crying) are attachment behaviors in response to separation from an attachment figure, the primary caregiver to the infant (Bowlby, 2018). According to Bowlby, infants form attachment behaviors by “asking:” Is my attachment figure nearby, accessible, and responsive (Bowlby, 2018)? If yes, the infant feels safe, secure, and confident to explore their environment and socialize with others (Bowlby, 2018). If the infant feels the answer to this question is no, they display signs of anxiety (Bowlby, 2018). These behaviors persist until the child reunites with their attachment figure or until the child becomes exhausted from a prolonged period of separation from the attachment figure (Bowlby, 2018). Bowlby’s colleague, Mary Ainsworth, built upon attachment theory by conducting an experiment called “the strange situation” (Ainsworth & Bell, 1970). In this experiment, 12-month-old infants and their caregivers came to the laboratory and separated from and reunited

with each other. Ainsworth found that around 60% of children became upset when their caregiver left the room, but when the caregiver returned, they reconnected with them and were comforted by the caregiver (Ainsworth & Bell, 1970). Infants who exhibited these behaviors were labeled as having a secure attachment pattern. Around 20% of children become extremely distressed when their caregiver leaves and when united, displays indication they want to be comforted (Ainsworth & Bell, 1970). However, these children exhibit behaviors that they want to “punish” the caregiver for separating from them (Ainsworth et al., 1978). Ainsworth noted that these children had an anxious pattern of attachment. Another 20% of children did not appear distressed by separation from their caregiver, and when the caregiver returned, they often focused on toys in the laboratory instead of seeking to reconnect with their attachment figure (Ainsworth et al., 1978). This pattern was documented as “avoidant.”

Throughout the past few decades, researchers have found evidence that links caregiver sensitivity and responsiveness to a child’s attachment security. Further research conducted by Ainsworth showed that children who appeared secure in the experiment were more likely to have caregivers at home who responded to their needs and distress. Children who exhibited anxious or avoidant behaviors had caregivers who were inconsistent in responding to the child or would ignore the child at home.

Children who develop insecure attachment patterns are more likely to experience external and internal difficulties, and often take on family roles that are linked to negative affect. Insecurely attached children display externalizing problems (e.g. aggression, defiance, and lack self-regulation abilities) and internalizing problems (e.g. social problems, anxiety, and depression) (Fearon et al., 2010; Groh et al., 2012). Insecure attachments in childhood have also been linked to the development of ADHD (Storebø et al., 2013). Adolescents with insecure



attachment patterns have increased risks of developing serious mental health conditions, such as suicidality (Leben Novak et al., 2023). In the context of the family, children with insecure attachments often experience parentification, where the child acts as a caregiver to the parent or guardian (Byng-Hall, 2002). Children who experience parentification often suffer from negative mental health outcomes, low self-esteem, and feelings of shame, guilt, and worry (Byng-Hall, 2002).

### **Adult Attachment**

In the 1980s, researchers began examining the links between childhood and adulthood attachment patterns. Researchers Hazan and Shaver examined similarities between the bond developed between infants and caregivers and the bond developed between adult romantic partners. Their research found that both feel secure when their caregiver or partner is responsive and insecure when separated, engage in intimate physical contact, and share other emotional and physiological responses (Hazan & Shaver, 2017). Hazan and Shaver postulated that adult romantic attachments are formed by the same system as infant and caregiver attachments (Hazan & Shaver, 2017).

### **Implications: Adult Attachment Theory**

Adult attachment research findings have three significant implications. If romantic relationships in adulthood are attachment relationships, adults should display individual differences like infant-caregiver relationships exhibited in Ainsworth's "the strange situation." If this is true, adults likely exhibit security, anxiety, or avoidance patterns in relationships. Additionally, these individual differences in attachment patterns in adulthood should affect emotional, social, and personal functioning, similar to Ainsworth's childhood observations. Whether or not an individual displays security, anxiety, or avoidance in their adult relationships

could reflect their experiences in childhood with their attachment figures. Bowlby proposed that children formed “maps” or “working models” that shape their perceptions about relationships as a result of their experiences in childhood (Bowlby, 2018). Children with specific attachment patterns, for example, may believe that adults are generally trustworthy because of their experiences that led them to form this conclusion. Once children have developed these “maps,” they will search for experiences in relationships consistent with their working models (Bowlby, 2018). Bowlby believed this attachment process should remain consistent throughout an individual’s life (Bowlby, 2018). If researchers assume adult relationships are attachment relationships, there is a possibility that children displaying anxious behaviors will grow up to exhibit anxiety in their adult relationships (Fraley & Shaver, 2000).

### **Stability in Attachment Patterns Throughout the Lifespan**

Researchers have different opinions about the source and degree of relationship between attachment in childhood and attachment in adulthood. One of the most debated adult attachment implications is that an adult’s patterns of attachment as an adult are shaped by interactions with caregivers in childhood (Fraley & Shaver, 2000). Psychologist Chris Fraley conducted research with self-reported measures of an individual’s attachment style with a caregiver and a romantic partner and found a small to moderate relationship between the two (Dugan & Fraley, 2022). In another study, Fraley found that an individual’s attachment to their caregiver over time also has a small to moderate correlation (Fraley, 2002).

Researchers Hazan and Shaver found that adults exhibiting secure behaviors (e.g. high self-esteem, self-sufficiency, a comfortability with intimacy and boundary-setting) in their adult relationships were likelier to reflect on their childhood relationships with their primary caregivers as warm, loving, and accepting. (Feeney & Noller, 1990; Fraley & Waller, 1998).

Although relationships between the two attachment patterns are moderately related, researchers agree that the attachment system influences behaviors, thought patterns, and perceptions into adulthood (Fraley & Shaver, 2000). In terms of the stability of attachment patterns, research provides strong evidence that attachment security remains stable from infancy through adulthood (Waters et al., 2000). Additionally, changes in attachment security through one's lifespan is related to changes in one's family dynamics, such as the family environment (Waters et al., 2000).

### **Effects of Attachment**

Attachment patterns are associated with personality traits that can impact thought patterns, emotion regulation, relationship seeking, and other behaviors throughout the individual's life (Collins et al., 2004; Mikulincer et al., 2003). Those with a secure attachment pattern, are more likely to hold more favorable views of themselves and view others as more reliable (Goodall, 2015). Securely attached individuals often possess greater perseverance and the ability to adapt to and manage challenges by channeling internal coping skills and external support (Mikulincer & Florian, 1998; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2005).

Recent research suggests that individuals with higher levels of attachment avoidance and attachment anxiety experience more difficulty in relationships, maintaining mental health, and emotional regulation (MacDonald & Park, 2021). Individuals with an anxious attachment pattern typically hold negative opinions of themselves, which can lead to codependency or over-dependence on others (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2005). Anxiously attached individuals also typically have an acute awareness of social and emotional cues from others (Fraley et al., 2006). Avoidantly attached individuals are more likely to perceive others as uninterested, unresponsive, or punishing (Bowlby, 1973; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2005). These perceptions often result in

failing to recognize the importance of relationships with others and avoiding emotional vulnerability and intimacy in adult romantic relationships (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2005).

### **Measures of Adult Attachment**

Studies surrounding attachment often utilize self-reporting measures based on a typological or dimensional attachment framework. For years, typological measures of adult attachment classified individuals as one of three or four dominant attachment patterns, often using one measure (e.g., Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994). However, research conducted by Fraley and Waller (1998) demonstrated that adult attachment is more accurately measured using a dimensional scale rather than a typological scale because assigning individuals to more rigid categories does not accurately represent the broad experiences and behaviors present in an individual. This study conducted analyses using dimensions rather than categories to prevent assigning rigid labels to participants.

### **Gaps in Research**

Researchers do not have a thorough conceptualization of the specific factors that affect or create change in an individual's attachment pattern. Social workers who work with clients that struggle with emotional regulation, relationship functioning, and mental health needs partly due to an avoidant or anxious pattern of attachment could benefit from further research about factors that contribute to attachment security and relationship functioning, as well as factors that negatively contribute to increased anxiety or avoidance in adulthood. Additionally, research is necessary for long-term resiliency.

Although researchers have proposed that family relationships may affect the maintenance of attachment styles (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Bowlby, 1988; Marvin & Stewart, 1990), researchers have a limited understanding of how family structures and relationships between

primary caregivers may shape an adult's attachment pattern. Because of this lack of data, research seeking to understand the relationships between attachment style and family dynamics remain limited. For example, do individuals who grow up in a nuclear, two-parent family experience more secure attachment than individuals who grow up in blended or single-parent families? More specifically, are aspects of the family system, such as which relatives live in the household, marital status of the caregivers, and permanence of family members throughout a child's life related to particular dimensions of anxiety and avoidance in terms of attachment? This quantitative study aimed to investigate these questions by examining the relationships among family structures—the type of family, which family members are consistently present in the home, marital status of caregivers—and the dimensions of anxiety and avoidance among attachment styles of adults. For this study, the type of family includes single-parent family, divorced parent family, separated parent family, nuclear family, extended family, foster family, and adoptive family, with many of these family types overlapping.

### **The Current Study**

The current study seeks to examine two research questions, the first being is there a relationship between family type and anxiety and avoidance in adulthood? The researcher hypothesis is that participants who grew up in a family where both biological parents were present will demonstrate lower anxiety and avoidance than participants who grew up in another family type, such as a single-parent family, blended family, or a family who participated in foster care or the adoption process. Research that compares two-parent family types found that children living with married biological parents displayed greater cognitive abilities and fewer behavior problems compared to children in other family types (Berger & McLanahan, 2015). Because

attachment has been related to development, including cognitive development and the presence of externalizing and internalizing behaviors, family types may influence attachment as well.

The second research question that emerged seeks to understand if there is a relationship between the marital or partnership status of guardians in childhood and anxiety and avoidance in adulthood? The hypothesis is that participants whose guardians remained married or in a committed partnership throughout childhood demonstrate lower anxiety and avoidance than those whose guardians live separately, due to divorce, separation, or other factors. Research demonstrates that children who grew up in homes with married caregivers experienced more positive outcomes in terms of behavior and development (Berger & McLanahan, 2015). This formulated the question to examine whether anxiety and avoidance are related to partnership or marriage status of guardians.

## Chapter 3: Methods

### Participants

#### *Sampling*

Convenience sampling was used to recruit participants for this study. Incentives were provided to encourage participation, including one \$50 Amazon gift card to be given to one randomly selected survey participant. The inclusion criteria for the study was to be age 18 and older. A recruitment email (see Appendix C) was sent out through several University of Arkansas student listservs and social media posts in select Facebook groups, GroupMe groups, and Instagram accounts. Participation was voluntary and informed consent (see Appendix B) was received prior to participation in the study.

#### *Demographics*

The sample was restricted to an age range of 18 years and older to prevent individuals currently experiencing childhood or adolescence from participating since the study focuses on attachment in adulthood. A sample of 185 participants was recruited for the study. However, one participant was excluded from the analysis because they answered less than 3% of the survey questions.

Approximately 92% of the participants (n=168) identified as female, 6.6% of participants (n=12) identified as male, and 1.1% of participants identified as nonbinary (n=2). One participant chose not to disclose their gender. Of the participants, 81.0% were white (n=149), 5.4% were two or more races (n=10), 4.9% were Hispanic or Latino (n=9), 4.3% were Black or African American (n=8), 2.2% did not disclose their race (n=4), 1.6% were Asian or Pacific Islander (n=3), 0.01% were Native American or Alaskan Native (n=1). Demographic information is included in Table 1 below.

For data collection, age was divided according to decades in the life span, consistent with common approaches in cross-sectional research (Terracciano et al., 2005). Participant age ranges were relatively equal, with 32.1% of participants between 18 and 29 years of age ( $n = 59$ ), 31.0% of participants were between 50 and 59 years of age ( $n=57$ ), and 29.3% of participants were between 40 and 49 years of age ( $n=54$ ). Participants aged between 30 and 39 years of age ( $n=8$ ) made up 4.3% of the sample, and 3.2% of participants were 60 years of age or older ( $n=6$ ). Age ranges were compiled into three categories based on the stage of life: young adulthood (18-29), middle adulthood (30-49), where most individuals have children at home, and older adulthood (50 and older), when people are likely to live independently or with their partner, free from young children. This regrouping allowed for more concise data analysis as a result of more evenly distributed group sizes.



**Table 1**  
*Demographic Characteristics of Study Sample*

Variable	N = 184	Percentage
Age		
18-29	59	32%
30-49	62	34%
50 and older	63	34%
Race/Ethnicity		
Asian/Pacific Islander	3	2%
Black/African American	8	4%
Hispanic/Latino	9	5%
Native American/Alaskan Native	1	<1%
White	149	81%
Two or More Races/Ethnicities	10	5%
Prefer Not To Say	4	2%
Gender		
Female	168	91%
Male	12	7%
Nonbinary	2	1%
Prefer Not to Say	2	1%

### Research Design

This study aimed to determine whether a relationship exists between family structure and adult attachment. Approval from the University of Arkansas' Institutional Review Board (IRB)

was received on November 17, 2022 (2209420427). IRB approval can be found in Appendix A. The original study design included a survey collecting demographic, family, and attachment information and an interview collecting family and attachment information. The investigator recruited six participants via social media to participate in an interview for the qualitative portion of the study that utilized the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI) guide. Unfortunately, these interviews could not be used in this analysis because the AAI protocol was not available for undergraduate research students to access to score and interpret the data accurately. Participants still received \$25 Amazon gift cards compensation for their participation, and interview recordings were stored securely for future research. Data analysis and study results consist of the quantitative measures utilized.

### **Materials and Procedures**

This study utilized an adapted version of the Relationship Style Questionnaire (RSQ). Researchers have concluded that using the RSQ as a 30-item dimensional measure of adult attachment provides the most accurate picture of attachment security, anxiety, and avoidance in adulthood compared to categorical scoring methods (Zortea et al., 2019). For this study, one item was omitted due to an error in creating the survey instrument. Seventeen items were omitted from scoring to remain consistent with the best evidence-based method for dimensional scoring and interpretation (Kurdek, 2002). Kurdek (2002) applied Simpson et al.'s (1992) theories about avoidance and anxiety to the RSQ. Per Kurdek's (2002) goodness-of-fit values, we removed 17 questions: 1-9, 14, 16-17, 19, 22, 26-28 (see Table 4, Model 3A). Seven items were combined to measure attachment avoidance (e.g., "I find it difficult to trust others completely," "I am somewhat uncomfortable being close to others," "Romantic partners often want me to be closer than I feel comfortable being") and five items were combined to measure attachment anxiety

(e.g., “I find that others are reluctant to get as close as I would like,” “My desire to merge completely sometimes scares people away”, “I often worry that romantic partners do not really love me”). Lower scores indicate more secure attachment, while higher scores are indicative of higher levels of attachment avoidance and anxiety, respectively (Baptist et al., 2012).

Data were collected through the distribution of an anonymous online survey examining the participants’ demographics, family type, composition, guardian marital status, and measurement of attachment. A copy of the survey can be found in Appendix D. The survey used a combination of pre-existing measurement tools and researcher-developed questions. The Relationship Scales Questionnaire (RSQ) provided a dimensional measure of adult attachment. Participants assessed their level of avoidance and anxiety in their close interpersonal relationships on a five-point Likert scale (1 = not at all like me, 2 = a bit like me, 3 = somewhat like me, 4 = quite like me, 5 = very much like me).

Participants filled out the survey through an encrypted online form. Upon completion of the survey, participants were redirected to an additional form, separate from their survey data, to enter their contact information to enter a \$50 Amazon gift card giveaway.

## Chapter 4: Results

Two standard multivariate analyses (MANOVA) were conducted. The first MANOVA examined the effects of family type on attachment avoidance and anxiety, while the second examined the effects of caregiver marital status on attachment avoidance and anxiety. In this model, both predictor variables will be examined separately and combined.

### Creation of Variables

Several factors within a single variable were combined to create more even group sizes for analysis. For example, for the variable “Guardian Marital Status,” “Divorced” and “Separated” responses were combined into “Separated/Divorced,” and “Never Married” and “One or more parent is deceased” were combined to create the “Other” category. Additionally, the “Family Type” category combined responses as well. “Two\_Orig” refers to families with two married caregivers consistently present in the home until the participant’s eighteenth birthday. “Two\_Orig” could mean two married biological parents, two married adoptive parents, or two married grandparents. “Two\_Diff” refers to families where both caregivers were in the participant’s life but in separate or blended homes. “Two\_Diff” could refer to two divorced biological parents who share custody, one biological parent and one step-parent, or two divorced biological parents who have remarried, for example. “Single” refers to participants raised in a single-parent family whose guardians did not remarry or get married during the participant’s childhood.

**Table 2**  
*Family Type Demographics*

Variable	N = 184	Percentage
Family Type		
Two_Orig	134	73%
Two_Diff	27	15%
Single	23	12%
Guardian Marital/Partnership Status		
Married/Partnered	142	77%
Divorced/Separated	42	23%

### **Descriptive Statistics**

When analyzing attachment anxiety and avoidance, a range of scores was calculated based on the participants' scaled responses to observe a mean score for each variable. The range for attachment avoidance was 7 to 35. Within this scale, the mean avoidance score was 18.06. The lowest score reported for avoidance was 7.00, and the highest score reported was 32.00. Attachment anxiety was scored on a 5 to 25 scale. The mean score for attachment anxiety was 9.78. The lowest score reported for anxiety was 5.00, and the highest score reported was 25.00.

Results indicated that attachment anxiety and avoidance were highest for adults 18-29. Attachment anxiety was higher for women and nonbinary people compared to men, and attachment avoidance was higher for nonbinary people compared to men and women. However, due to the unequal group sizes, this comparison is not an accurate representation of results across gender. Although due to the small sample size, these results are not statistically significant, these

findings are consistent with other research on differences among age, gender, and attachment (Chopik et al., 2013). A summary of these descriptive statistics can be found in Table 3.

**Table 3**  
*Means and Standard Deviations for Grouped Variable Responses*

Variable	Attachment Avoidance		Attachment Anxiety	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Age				
18-29	20.61	5.611	13.42	4.854
30-49	17.29	5.249	9.15	4.140
50 and older	16.70	4.665	9.30	4.047
Race				
Asian	23.67	5.508	12.67	6.658
Black	22.63	4.955	9.88	4.291
Hispanic/Latino	21.56	4.035	9.44	3.844
Native American/ Alaskan Native	21.00	0	10.00	<1%
White	17.44	5.233	10.42	4.663
Two or More Races	21.20	5.959	13.70	6.201
Prefer Not To Say	15.50	5.686	10.57	4.754
Gender				
Female	18.00	5.313	10.62	4.635
Male	18.33	6.787	8.67	3.576
Nonbinary	26.50	0.707	23.00	1.414
Prefer Not to Say	21.50	2.121	5.50	0.707

### Family Differences in Avoidance and Anxiety

Two multivariate analyses of variance were done. Both employed attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance as dependent variables. The first analysis included family structure as the independent variable, while the second included guardian marital status as the independent variable.

The MANOVA using attachment measures as dependent variables and family structure as dependent variables found differences among family types, but did not produce statistically significant results ( $F[4, 360] = 1.79, p = 0.131$ ). This could be attributed to the combining of family types into three broader categories to complete analysis testing. Further research with a larger sample size with participants who experienced less common family dynamics (e.g. someone who lived with their biological parents and adopted siblings) could improve the quality of results.

The MANOVA using attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance as dependent variables produced significant multivariate effects across guardian marital status, specifically between the “Married” and “Divorced/Separated” groups ( $F[4, 360] = 4.24, p = 0.002$ ). Therefore, those who grew up with married caregivers scored significantly different than those whose caregivers were divorced or separated. These differences are illustrated in Table 3.

**Table 3**  
*Means and Standard Deviations for Guardian Marital Status Groups*

Variable	Attachment Avoidance	Attachment Anxiety
Guardian Marital Status	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)
Married (N=141)	17.54 (5.403)	10.23 (4.758)
Separated/Divorced (N=36)	19.89 (5.269)	12.31 (4.714)



For both attachment avoidance and attachment, all tested effects were significant ( $p \leq .05$ ). These results mean that those whose caregivers were married during childhood scored significantly lower in both attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance. These differences are illustrated in Table 4.

**Table 4**

*MANOVA (Guardian Marital Status as predictor) Between-Subjects Effects*

Model: MANOVA	df	F	<i>p</i>
Avoidance	2	4.279	0.015
Anxiety	2	3.559	0.030
Total	184	-	-

## Chapter 5: Discussion

The results of this study supported one of the two hypotheses addressed in the research questions. The hypothesis that those who grew up in a two-parent, nuclear family with biological family members would exhibit lower anxiety and avoidance than those who grew up in a single-parent family or other family type was not supported. There was a trend in the data toward this relationship. However, it was not significant due to a small sample size that lacked participation from individuals who grew up in less common family types. However, multivariate analyses supported the hypothesis that individuals who grew up in a family where both caregivers remained married or partnered reported lower levels of attachment avoidance and attachment anxiety than those who grew up with divorced or separated caregivers.

### Strengths

Although some research has been conducted on family experiences and attachment or divorce and attachment, most studies were limited by categorical measures of attachment, which are no longer the best evidence-based choice for measuring adult attachment patterns. The current study addresses these methodological shortcomings by scoring data dimensionally rather than categorically, eliminating the process of sorting individuals into more rigid labels of attachment styles and detailing differences among childhood experiences related to attachment avoidance and anxiety in adulthood.

Differences in attachment among those whose primary caregivers were married, divorced/separated, or never married/deceased that were observed are consistent with theories about parental divorce increasing the likelihood of experiencing insecure adult attachment (Smith-Etxeberria et al., 2022). This could be explained by modeling insecure attachment behaviors by parent figures, parental conflict, the divorce process itself, increased absence of a

parental figure, or individual differences. However, not all married or partnered parental figures model secure attachment patterns in adult relationships. Further research is needed to better understand the relationship between family experiences and attachment.

### **Limitations**

Using researcher-created questions to examine family structure and dynamics was a limitation in this study due to a lack of reliability or previous testing. Additionally, family dynamics are complex and many experiences, such as the introduction or subtraction of a permanent family member during a child's developing years, are difficult to measure and examine. For example, a participant who had been in a nuclear, biological family for 13 years before their parents divorced, a participant whose parents divorced when they were five years old and both parents remarried and formed two blended families, and a participant whose parents divorced before they were born all have very different experiences. However, our current conceptualization of differences in attachment across parental marriage status is not nuanced enough to make this distinction. Additional limitations of this study include a small sample size, with most participants identifying as female and White/Caucasian.

Due to time constraints, population-targeted recruitment was impossible, creating unequal group sizes and a lack of representation. The small representation of specific groups required the researcher to combine several family types into one broader category to conduct analyses. Those who identified themselves as belonging to two or more ethnicities/races reported the specific groups with which they identified. However, because of limited representation, they were grouped into one category of multiple ethnic/racial identities. Influences of culture and specific ethnic/racial experiences were not accounted for to the extent researchers intended, which limited the study's ability to examine differences along these experiences.

Another limitation is that the study focused on measuring general attachment anxiety and avoidance. Additionally, the research did not measure characteristics of the relationships between participants and both parental figures (e.g., support, unconditional love), which could have been important determinants of attachment avoidance and anxiety in adulthood. An improvement for future research would be to include questions in the survey that assess adult relationship history and experiences in adult romantic relationships so that these factors could be accounted for in the analysis.

Despite these limitations, the present study represents a step toward understanding attachment dynamics across family dynamics. Significant family-related differences in attachment avoidance and attachment anxiety were documented. These findings advance perspectives on attachment research and highlight the importance of the family unit on personality development.

### **Research Implications**

Although the hypothesis that there would be a difference between those who grew up in a two-parent family with biological siblings and family members only than those of other family types was not supported, future research could address this concept with a more extensive and more diverse sample to offer more insight. Additionally, had the sample consisted of more participants who grew up with foster or adoptive relatives in their homes, would there have been more participants who experienced adult attachment differently than most participants? The nature of the study, such that it was a self-reported survey, limited the ability to observe a direct relationship between variables. Accounting for other formative experiences in childhood, such as traumatic experiences or prolonged periods of separation from the caregiver, for example, were not examined in this study. It would be interesting to see if individuals, specifically diverse youth

and families, who encountered specific childhood events reported more attachment anxiety and avoidance in adulthood than other participants who did not have these experiences.

This communicates a need for more research into attachment to best support individuals with attachment-related needs encountered in adult relationships with others, themselves, and their environment. As individuals experience more attachment anxiety and avoidance, this may increase difficulties in emotional regulation, maintaining mental wellness, and impaired relationship functioning.

### **Practice Implications**

Although developed and utilized by psychology researchers and practitioners, attachment theory is appropriate for use in social work practice because of its alignment with the person-in-environment framework and its emphasis on developmental history in the emergence of psychosocial problems, as well as its acknowledgment of human behavior in the social environment (Blakely & Dziadosz, 2015). Social workers have the skills to develop social histories. They can use attachment theory to interpret the context of family history and experiences in adult relationships to inform intervention strategies to support clients in correcting impaired working models of self and others and increasing security. Attachment theory provides a strong developmental framework for social work practice by addressing the person-in-environment and guiding individuals in understanding their behaviors, specifically behavioral patterns and issues that affect one's ability to form and maintain relationships with others in adulthood (Blakely & Dziadosz, 2015). Social workers use attachment theory to guide individuals in understanding their behavior patterns and exploring past traumas, experiences, or thought patterns that developed in childhood, affecting relationships with the self and others. Understanding one's attachment and factors related to insecure attachment can inform holistic

social work practice that can empower individuals to increase attachment security to improve their ability to fully pursue and participate in adult relationships, including friendships, partnerships, and romantic relationships.

Relationships are a crucial component of well-being and an essential value in the social work code of ethics, and attachment patterns influence one's ability to engage in relationships. Insecure attachment has been linked to impaired abilities to form, maintain, and participate in healthy, intimate relationships in adulthood. Research shows that insecure patterns of attachment can be modified through psychotherapy. Emotionally-focused therapy, or EFT, which has proven to be an effective intervention for repairing adult attachment bonds, specifically in a couples therapy setting (Johnson et al., 2014). EFT alters "threat cues" that are present in a relationship with a romantic partner to improve connection and trust (Johnson et al., 2014). Another therapeutic strategy that may prove helpful in modifying insecure attachment patterns in EMDR, or attachment-focused EMDR (Wesselmann & Potter, 2009). Social workers can guide clients in understanding attachment experiences, identifying cognitive maps, and transforming working models from impaired and insecure to adequate and secure. Helping clients learn ways to engage in intimacy comfortably and enthusiastically by revising ineffective working models can improve their relationship and life satisfaction (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007).

## **Chapter 6: Conclusion**

This research study aimed to examine attachment avoidance and anxiety across family dynamics to determine whether a relationship exists between attachment and family time and attachment and parental/guardian marriage or partnership status in adulthood. Participants completed an online, anonymous survey where they answered questions about demographics and family dynamics and completed the Relationship Scales Questionnaire (RSQ), which provided a dimensional measure of attachment avoidance and anxiety. Based on multivariate analyses, the study found that no relationship exists between attachment avoidance and attachment anxiety and family type. When examining attachment anxiety and avoidance across partnership or marital status of parents or guardians and childhood, analyses revealed that these factors are linked. While lack of representation in the sample limits the generalizability of the results, this study provides new insight into the link between caregiver marital or partnership status and attachment anxiety and avoidance. To better understand the implications of the study's results, further studies could address the relationship between family dynamics and attachment, focusing on increasing the diversity of the sample and including questions that measure characteristics of one's relationships with their primary caregivers in childhood, either through an interview protocol or more detailed questionnaires. Although the study was limited, these findings contribute to the literature on attachment and emphasize the importance of human relationships on personality development, mental health, and other aspects.

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## Appendix A



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**To:** Hannah E Miller  
BELL 4188

**From:** Douglas J Adams, Chair  
IRB Expedited Review

**Date:** 11/17/2022

**Action:** **Expedited Approval**

**Action Date:** 11/17/2022

**Protocol #:** 2209420427

**Study Title:** Differences Among Attachment Styles Across Varying Family Dynamics

**Expiration Date:** 10/13/2023

**Last Approval Date:**

The above-referenced protocol has been approved following expedited review by the IRB Committee that oversees research with human subjects.

If the research involves collaboration with another institution then the research cannot commence until the Committee receives written notification of approval from the collaborating institution's IRB.

It is the Principal Investigator's responsibility to obtain review and continued approval before the expiration date.

Protocols are approved for a maximum period of one year. You may not continue any research activity beyond the expiration date without Committee approval. Please submit continuation requests early enough to allow sufficient time for review. Failure to receive approval for continuation before the expiration date will result in the automatic suspension of the approval of this protocol. Information collected following suspension is unapproved research and cannot be reported or published as research data. If you do not wish continued approval, please notify the Committee of the study closure.

**Adverse Events:** Any serious or unexpected adverse event must be reported to the IRB Committee within 48 hours. All other adverse events should be reported within 10 working days.

**Amendments:** If you wish to change any aspect of this study, such as the procedures, the consent forms, study personnel, or number of participants, please submit an amendment to the IRB. All changes must be approved by the IRB Committee before they can be initiated.

You must maintain a research file for at least 3 years after completion of the study. This file should include all correspondence with the IRB Committee, original signed consent forms, and study data.

cc: LaShawnda Fields, Investigator

## Appendix B

**INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT**

**Project Title:** *Examining Differences in Attachment Across Varying Family Dynamics*

**Principal Investigator:** Hannah Miller, Honors Social Work Student

**Research Mentor:** LaShawnda Fields, Ph.D., MSW

**Research Team Contact:** If you have questions about this research, you may contact:

- **Principal Investigator:** Hannah Miller, email: [hem008@uark.edu](mailto:hem008@uark.edu), (405)-479-8775
- **Research Mentor:** LaShawnda Fields, email: [lnfields@uark.edu](mailto:lnfields@uark.edu)
- If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant, please contact Ro Windwalker, the University's IRB Compliance Coordinator at 479-575-2208 or [irb@uark.edu](mailto:irb@uark.edu)

This consent form describes the research study and helps you decide if you want to participate. It provides important information about what you will be asked to do during the study, about the risks and benefits of the study, and about your rights and responsibilities as a research participant.

- You should read and understand the information in this document including the procedures, risks and potential benefits.
- If you have questions about anything in this form, you should ask the research team for more information before you agree to participate.
- Do not agree to participate in this study unless the research team has answered your questions and you decide that you want to be part of this study.

**WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY?**

This is a research study interested in understanding the lived experiences of individuals who experience relationships (friendships, partnerships, etc.) with respect to family experiences in childhood to better understand attachment. The long-term purpose of this study is to provide information to inform social work practice and therapeutic interventions that address attachment and relationship-related issues.

**WHAT WILL HAPPEN DURING THIS STUDY?**

- If you are at least 18 years of age, you are eligible to participate in the study.
- If you agree to be part of the research study, you will be asked a series of questions about your demographics, family, and experiences in relationships.
- The survey takes anywhere from 5-10 minutes to complete.

**WILL YOU SAVE MY RESEARCH INFORMATION?**

In order to ensure the collection of accurate research data, survey responses will be collected and stored in Google drive. No identifying information will be stored in connection with survey responses to protect confidentiality.

**HOW WILL THE DATA COLLECTED BE USED?**

As part of this study, we are obtaining data from you. We would like to use this data for both current studies as well as studies that may be conducted in the future. These studies may provide additional information that will be helpful in understanding attachment styles.

**WILL I PERSONALLY BENEFIT FROM THE STUDY?**

You will be entered in a raffle for a \$50 Amazon gift card. Additionally, you may find that completing the survey provides a therapeutic experience for you.

**I have read the consent form and have had the opportunity to ask questions about the study. I understand the purpose of the survey as well as the potential benefits and risks that are involved. I understand that participation is voluntary. I understand that I can print or download a copy of this consent for my records. By filling out the survey, I am giving my consent for my answers to be used in this research.**

*This form is available by request.*

## Appendix C

**Recruitment Email**

Dear [*insert name*],

My name is Hannah Miller and I am an honors BSW student at the University of Arkansas reaching out to invite you to participate in a research study about perceptions and experiences of relationships (friendships, partnerships, etc.).

If you decide to participate in this study, you will be interviewed by Hannah Miller at a day and time of your choosing via in-person, Zoom, or Microsoft Teams. We ask that you dedicate \_\_\_\_\_ for this conversation. As a show of appreciation for your time, we are providing a small token of thanks in the form of a \$25 electronic Amazon gift card. We would like both an audio and video recording of the interviews based on your comfort level and consent. The information obtained will be used for submission to scholarly publications as well as conference presentations. Pseudonyms will be used to protect the anonymity of participants as well as removal of additional identifying information.

Remember, this is completely voluntary. You can choose to be in the study or not. If you'd like to participate or have any questions about the study, please email or contact Hannah Miller at 870-315-0482 or hem008@uark.edu.

Thank you very much for your time.

Sincerely,

Hannah Miller  
Principal Investigator  
870-315-0482  
hem008@uark.edu



## Appendix D

### Differences in Attachment Across Family Dynamics

This is a research study interested in understanding the lived experiences of individuals who experience relationships (friendships, partnerships, etc.) with respect to family experiences in childhood to better understand attachment. Attachment is defined as a deep, enduring emotional bond between two people in which each seeks closeness and feels more secure when in the presence of the other (Bowlby, 1988). The long-term purpose of this study is to provide information to inform social work practice and therapeutic interventions that address attachment and relationship-related issues.

Attachment style questions are adapted from the Relationship Styles Questionnaire (Hazen and Shaver, 1987), (Collins and Read, 1990), (Bartholomew and Horowitz, 1991).

Click the link for access to the Informed Consent document: <https://bit.ly/3B8NmXI>

By continuing this survey, you are consenting to participate in my research study.

Please answer the following question to continue the survey:

MATH CAPTCHA:  $2+2=$  \_\_\_\_\_

### Demographic Information

1. What is your age?
  - a. 18-29
  - b. 30-39
  - c. 40-49
  - d. 50-59
  - e. 60-69
  - f. 70 or older
2. Please select your ethnicity or race (Check all that apply).
  - a. Hispanic/Latino
  - b. Black/African American
  - c. White
  - d. Asian/Pacific Islander

- e. Native American/Alaskan Native
  - f. Prefer not to say
3. What is your gender?
- a. Male
  - b. Female
  - c. Transgender
  - d. Nonbinary
  - e. Prefer not to say

### Family Dynamics

1. Please select the individuals that were consistently present in your home before your 18th birthday.
- a. Biological Mom
  - b. Biological Dad
  - c. Step Mom
  - d. Step Dad
  - e. Adoptive Mom
  - f. Adoptive Dad
  - g. Grandparent(s)
  - h. Biological Sibling(s)
  - i. Step-sibling(s)
  - j. Adoptive sibling(s)
  - k. Foster Mom
  - l. Foster Dad
  - m. Foster sibling(s)
  - n. Biological Child
  - o. Unaccompanied Homeless Youth
  - p. Other children in foster care/group home
  - q. Other extended family members (aunt, cousin, etc.)

2. If you selected "Other children in foster care/group home" and/or "Other extended family members (aunt, cousin, etc.)", please briefly identify the family members that lived with you
3. Which best describes the relationship between your guardians growing up (biological, step, adoptive, or foster parents, grandparents, etc.).
  - a. Married/Partnered
  - b. Separated
  - c. Divorced
  - d. Never married
  - e. Unknown
  - f. One parent is deceased
  - g. Both parents are deceased
4. Which best describes the family dynamic you experienced up until your 18th birthday?  
(Check all that apply)
  - a. Two-parent family
  - b. Single-parent family
  - c. Step-family
  - d. Adoptive family
  - e. Foster family
  - f. Group home
  - g. Separated family (Parents divorced but share custody)
  - h. Extended family (One or more parents and one or more extended family members in the home)
  - i. Living independently with a partner and child
  - j. Living independently with a child
5. If none of the above family dynamics describes your situation, please use the space below to explain your family:

#### Relationship Styles Questionnaire

1. I find it difficult to depend on other people.
  - a. Not at all like me 1 2 3 4 5 Very much like me

2. It is very important to me to feel independent.
  - a. Not at all like me 1 2 3 4 5 Very much like me
3. I find it easy to get emotionally close to others.
  - a. Not at all like me 1 2 3 4 5 Very much like me
4. I want to merge completely with another person.
  - a. Not at all like me 1 2 3 4 5 Very much like me
5. I worry that I will be hurt if I allow myself to become too close to others.
  - a. Not at all like me 1 2 3 4 5 Very much like me
6. I am comfortable without close emotional relationships.
  - a. Not at all like me 1 2 3 4 5 Very much like me
7. I am not sure that I can always depend on others to be there when I need them.
  - a. Not at all like me 1 2 3 4 5 Very much like me
8. I want to be completely emotionally intimate with others.
  - a. Not at all like me 1 2 3 4 5 Very much like me
9. I worry about being alone.
  - a. Not at all like me 1 2 3 4 5 Very much like me
10. I am comfortable depending on other people.
  - a. Not at all like me 1 2 3 4 5 Very much like me
11. I often worry that romantic partners don't really love me.
  - a. Not at all like me 1 2 3 4 5 Very much like me
12. I find it difficult to trust others completely.
  - a. Not at all like me 1 2 3 4 5 Very much like me
13. I worry about others getting too close to me.
  - a. Not at all like me 1 2 3 4 5 Very much like me
14. I want emotionally close relationships.
  - a. Not at all like me 1 2 3 4 5 Very much like me
15. I am comfortable having other people depend on me.
  - a. Not at all like me 1 2 3 4 5 Very much like me
16. People are never there when you need them.
  - a. Not at all like me 1 2 3 4 5 Very much like me

17. My desire to merge completely sometimes scares people away.
- a. Not at all like me 1 2 3 4 5 Very much like me
18. It is very important to me to feel self-sufficient.
- a. Not at all like me 1 2 3 4 5 Very much like me
19. I am nervous when anyone gets too close to me.
- a. Not at all like me 1 2 3 4 5 Very much like me
20. I often worry that romantic partners won't want to stay with me.
- a. Not at all like me 1 2 3 4 5 Very much like me
21. I prefer not to have other people depend on me.
- a. Not at all like me 1 2 3 4 5 Very much like me
22. I worry about being abandoned.
- a. Not at all like me 1 2 3 4 5 Very much like me
23. I am somewhat uncomfortable being close to others.
- a. Not at all like me 1 2 3 4 5 Very much like me
24. I find that others are reluctant to get as close as I would like.
- a. Not at all like me 1 2 3 4 5 Very much like me
25. I prefer not to depend on others.
- a. Not at all like me 1 2 3 4 5 Very much like me
26. I know that others will be there when I need them.
- a. Not at all like me 1 2 3 4 5 Very much like me
27. I worry about having others not accept me.
- a. Not at all like me 1 2 3 4 5 Very much like me
28. Romantic partners often want me to be closer than I feel comfortable being.
- a. Not at all like me 1 2 3 4 5 Very much like me
29. I find it relatively easy to get close to others.
- a. Not at all like me 1 2 3 4 5 Very much like me