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## **Attachment theory and culture: parenting in Latin America and rural Peru from an attachment theory perspective**

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# **Chapter 1**

## **General Introduction**



The current dissertation mainly focuses on maternal sensitive behavior towards infants in Peru, a concept that originated from attachment theory. In this Chapter, attachment theory and its central concepts will be discussed, with special attention to their applicability to Latin American countries, and controversies around the universality versus culture-specificity debates. In addition, this Chapter provides an overview of the most-used instruments to assess attachment behavior and caregiver sensitivity, some of which are used in the empirical studies of this dissertation.

## **Attachment theory**

The attachment relationship refers to the affectional bond that infants establish with a specific caregiver, commonly the mother (Bowlby, 1969/1982, 1979). This bond is characterized by being emotionally significant and persistent over time and involving specific people with whom infants desire to maintain proximity and whom infants perceive as stronger and wiser. This bond also causes infants to feel distressed at involuntary separation from the caregiver (Ainsworth, 1989).

Infants need extensive care for several years before they become self-reliant (Gurven & Walker, 2006). Therefore, attachment reflects a universal psycho-biological mechanism based on ethological and evolutionary considerations that contribute to infant survival (Bowlby, 1969/1982, 1979). This mechanism includes attachment behaviors such as crying, smiling, differential tracking, sucking, and grasping, which allow infants to promote their proximity with their caregiver(s) (Cassidy, 2016). Parallel to displaying attachment behaviors, infants develop a system of exploration behaviors that distance them from their caregiver (Cassidy, 2016; Bowlby, 1969/1982). This exploration behavior system provides the scaffold for developing diverse skills through environment exploration (Magai et al., 2016).

The balance between the attachment and exploration behavioral systems constitutes secure base behavior (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Bowlby, 1969/1982). Children move away from their caregivers to explore the environment and eventually return to them to seek security, especially in the face of threatening situations (Ainsworth, 1967). The caregiver-infant interaction's behavioral characteristics evolve into attachment behavior patterns categorized as either secure or insecure (Ainsworth, 1967). Secure attachment refers to a balance between attachment behaviors that reflect seeking proximity and comfort in distressing situations, and exploratory behaviors that involve engagement with the environment when it is safe. In contrast, insecure attachment refers to an unbalance between the attachment and exploratory behaviors, either by minimizing or maximizing the necessity of contact and comfort from the attachment figure (Ainsworth, 1989; Bowlby, 1969/1982). Insecure attachment can be classified as either avoidant and ambivalent/resistant. Avoidant insecure attachment refers to a pattern in which

attachment signals are minimized and the infant avoids showing distress to the caregiver. In contrast, the ambivalent/resistant insecure attachment refers to a pattern of maximizing attachment signals in which the infant shows distress even before separation from the caregiver, as well as upon reunion (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Solomon & George, 2016). Finally, a disorganized attachment pattern has also been identified, in which the infant shows fear of the caregiver or displays contradictory or disoriented behaviors and apparent dissociation (Main & Solomon, 1986, 1990).

**Universal core hypotheses.** A central element of attachment theory resides in its universal assumptions, which can be captured into four core hypotheses. First, the universality hypothesis assumes that given the opportunity, all infants will become attached to one or more specific caregivers in the absence of neurodevelopmental problems. Second, the normativity hypothesis states that in a non-life-threatening context, most infants will display a secure attachment. Third, the sensitivity hypothesis claims that infants will develop secure attachment based on caregiving characteristics, in which the caregiver's sensitivity is essential. Fourth, the competence hypothesis assumes that attachment security is linked to socio-cognitive competence and other positive child development outcomes (van IJzendoorn, 1990).

In recent decades, scholars have debated the universality versus culture-specificity of attachment theory's main tenets, questioning the effect of culture on the applicability of the above hypotheses (Quinn & Mageo, 2013). Within the framework of attachment theory, culture can be broadly defined as patterns of behavior, knowledge, and beliefs attained through socialization that differentiate groups from each other (Boyd & Richerson, 2005). It has been argued that there is a distinction between so-called individualistic and collectivist cultures (Triandis, 1989). Individualistic cultures are generally found in urban areas in the Global North (Hofstede 1991, 2001) and tend to prioritize the individual's independence over the group (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Thus, caregiving is geared towards fostering psychological independence and individual achievement and is characterized by a distal parenting style in which the caregiver induces higher levels of positive arousal in the child by face-to-face interactions (Kärtner et al., 2010; Keller et al., 2004). On the other hand, collectivist cultures are generally found in rural areas in the Global South (Hofstede 1991, 2001) and tend to value the group more than the individual, encouraging social relationships, interdependence, and compliance to group norms (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). In collectivist settings, caregiving is characterized by a proximal parenting style, in which the caregiver places the child in close physical proximity and maintains continuous contact but focuses less on active vocal and social activation (Keller et al., 2009). Additionally, the inter-dependent cultural model tends to include strategies from both previously defined models (Keller et al., 2006).

Scholars from a culture-specific position have argued that definitions of core attachment-related constructs and hypotheses are biased towards individualistic cultural contexts with distal parenting patterns due to their focus on meeting the individual needs of the infant and fostering psychological autonomy (Keller, 2013; Rothbaum et al., 2000). Concerning the universality and normativity hypotheses, some authors have argued that cultural differences impact the predominance of exploration or proximity-seeking behaviors related to attachment (Rothbaum et al., 2000). It has also been argued that the definition of attachment in line with the conception of psychological autonomy is consistent with Global North values but can deviate from cultural values of Global South and rural populations (Keller, 2013), and therefore indicators of attachment are related not to universal but culturally organized patterns of behaviors (Gaskins, 2013). Regarding the sensitivity hypothesis, it has been claimed that cultural variables cause modifications in how sensitivity is expressed (Rothbaum et al., 2000), and assumptions of monotropy in attachment theory have been criticized (Keller, 2013). As for the competence hypothesis, it has been claimed that attachment studies define concepts like social competence as a reflection of Global North values instead of considering their possible cultural variations (Rothbaum et al., 2000).

Despite the debate about the role of culture in infant caregiving and attachment patterns, some recent evidence supports the universality of attachment theory's core hypotheses. The universality hypothesis has been verified in systematic reviews of cross-cultural studies with African samples, including findings from eight remote societies and urban populations across different countries (Mesman, van IJzendoorn, Sagi-Schwartz, 2016; Voges et al., 2020). Similarly, evidence for the universality hypotheses has been found in Asian samples, including more than eighteen studies from six different countries (Mesman, van IJzendoorn, Sagi-Schwartz, 2016); and in Latin America, with consistent findings from countries such as Chile, Colombia, Peru, and Mexico (Lecannelier et al. 2019; Posada et al., 2016; Salinas-Quiroz 2015). Furthermore, maternal definitions of an optimally attached infant have been proven to be highly similar across Latin American, Asian, North American, and European cultures since secure base behavior appear to be a widespread phenomenon (Posada et al., 2013). As for the normativity hypothesis, there is evidence that most children show a secure attachment pattern, regardless of their culture of belonging (Mesman, van IJzendoorn, Sagi-Schwartz, 2016; Voges et al., 2019).

The sensitivity hypothesis has been tested less frequently than the other hypotheses (Mesman, van IJzendoorn, Sagi-Schwartz, 2016), but has been confirmed by studies conducted in the Dogon ethnic group of Mali from West Africa (True et al., 2001), Mexico (Gojman et al., 2012), Peru (Nóblega, Bárrig et al., 2019), Colombia (Posada et al., 2002; Posada et al., 2013), South Korea (Jin et al., 2012), Japan (Vereijken et al., 1997), and South Africa (Tomlinson et

al., 2005). These findings are consistent with a vast body of research that provides confirmatory evidence through extensive metaanalysis with caregiver-infant dyads from mainly Global North societies (De Wolff & van IJzendoorn, 1997; Bakermans-Kranenburg et al., 2003; Lucassen et al., 2011).

Finally, the competence hypothesis has been tested only sporadically by research conducted in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Therefore, cross-cultural evidence to support it is still insufficient (Mesman, van IJzendoorn & Sagi-Schwartz, 2016). For example, in Africa, among the Gusii of Kenya, the association between secure attachment with cognitive development and nutritional status indices has been proven (Kermorian & Leiderman, 1986); while in Latin America, secure attachment has been associated with nutritional indicators in Chile (Valenzuela, 1990) and social competence in Peru (Nóblega, Bárrig-Jo et al., 2019).

**Applicability of the theory in Latin American countries.** One of the circumstances that prompted the cultural debate on attachment theory was that most studies were conducted in western, educated, industrialized, wealthy, and democratic (WEIRD; Henrich et al., 2010) societies (Mesman, van IJzendoorn, & Sagi-Schwartz, 2016). Attachment research has also focused more on studying urban populations than rural ones. Nevertheless, parenting is known to be influenced by urban versus rural residence (Keller et al., 2006). For example, rural mothers tend to understand their parental role and what they consider an ideal mother differently than urban ones (Mesman, van IJzendoorn, Behrens et al., 2016). Furthermore, rural caregivers have been generally found to foster more authoritarian parenting styles (Nacak et al., 2011; Pinderhughes et al., 2007), and be less informed about child development than urban mothers are (Miller & Votruba-Drzal, 2013). These factors might cause differences in the emphasis that urban and rural caregivers place on child-centered responsiveness. Therefore, although there is evidence that the core hypotheses of attachment theory are applicable outside the Global North world, the question may still arise as to whether the findings from Global North high-income countries are fully generalizable to the reality of caregivers and infants in low-and middle-income countries with large rural populations (Voges et al., 2019).

In Latin America, some of the first studies highlighted issues particular to the regional context, such as maltreatment, poverty, and its impact on attachment (i.e. Posada et al., 1995, 1999; Valenzuela 1990, 1997). However, in general, the publications were relatively scarce. The difficulty of carrying out larger research projects using standardized research methods due to lack of funding, limited the expansion of attachment research in this part of the world. Furthermore, a language barrier limited the researchers' ability to develop and participate in international partnerships, use scientific literature, pursue training in English-speaking



countries, and publish their work in international peer-reviewed English-based journals (Causadias & Posada, 2013). These conditions meant that Latin American research was still far from the international discourse of attachment theory. Faced with this situation, Latin American academics created the Ibero-American Attachment Network (Red Iberoamericana de Apego, RIA) as an organization that aims to increase the quality and quantity of attachment-based research projects and interventions in Latin American countries (Causadíás et al., 2011).

In the last decade, Latin American scholars have provided solid evidence on the applicability of attachment theory in the Latin American context with at-risk samples (Lecannelier et al., 2014; Lecannelier et al., 2019), indigenous and rural populations (Barone et al., 2020; Farkas et al., 2017; Cárcamo et al., 2016; Gojman et al., 2012), as well as populations severely affected by poverty and extreme poverty in the region (Olhaberry & Santelices, 2013). Moreover, studies have confirmed that the association between maternal sensitivity and attachment is applicable for this particular context, with confirmatory evidence in countries such as Colombia (Posada et al., 2016), Ecuador (Díaz et al., 2018), Mexico (Salinas-Quiroz et al., 2018), and Peru (Nóbrega, Barrig et al., 2019, Posada et al., 2016). Some research has studied the relationship between attachment and early childhood development outcomes. For instance, there is evidence of the association of attachment security with cognitive outcomes in Brazil (Villachan-Lyra et al., 2015) and with social competence in Peru and Mexico (Nóbrega, Bárrig-Jó et al., 2019). Lastly, Latin American research has also evaluated the impact of interventions on attachment outcomes. Thus, attachment-based programs have been tested in public institutions (Cárcamo et al., 2019), private organizations (Figuroa et al., 2012), and academic environments (Nóbrega et al., 2018; Barone et al., 2020).

## Caregiver sensitivity

Sensitivity is defined as the ability to perceive an infant's signals, interpret them correctly so that the selection of a response is more likely to fit the infant's needs, respond to the infant's needs promptly so the infant can perceive a temporal link between its behaviors and its caregiver's behavior, and respond to the infant's needs adequately (Ainsworth et al., 1974). The degree to which the response is adequate is assessed based on the infant's response. The goal of sensitive care is to provide optimal contact, comfort, and stimulation, ultimately demonstrated by a content and exploratory infant (Bretherton, 2013).

The notion of caregiver sensitivity originated primarily from the work of Mary Ainsworth and her colleagues' observational work in rural Uganda (Ainsworth, 1967). This seminal work was the starting point from which future research around caregiver sensitivity emerged (Bretherton, 2013). Based on her subsequent studies, sensitivity was highlighted as a significant

prerequisite for developing a secure attachment relationship (Ainsworth & Marvin, 1995). Caregiver sensitivity is now one of the most widely studied aspects of caregiver-infant interactions in the early childhood development literature (Mesman & Emmen, 2013). Many studies have now shown that caregiver sensitivity is related to positive infant development (Feeney & Woodhouse, 2016). In addition, it is considered as an essential precursor of more general positive adjustment in later childhood (Thompson, 2016) in different domains such as more positive cognitive (Landry et al., 2000; Sroufe et al., 2009), emotional, (Eisenberg et al., 2001; Kochanska, 2002; Kemppinen et al., 2006), and language (Tamis-LeMonda et al., 2004) developmental outcomes. Moreover, it has been found that maternal sensitivity is relevant for positive child development in ethnic minority families in the United States and the Netherlands (Mesman et al., 2012), as well as in Latin American rural low-SES dyads (Barone et al., 2020; Cárcamo et al., 2016; Gojman et al., 2012).

**Universality versus culture-specificity debate.** As with research on the core attachment theory hypotheses, most of the research on caregiver sensitivity has been conducted in Global North countries and urban areas. Studies in Global South, particularly in rural regions where extensive-shared caregiving is the norm are rare. Considering this tendency, the cultural debate has raised criticism and questioned the universality of the sensitivity construct (Keller, 2013; Lancy, 2015; LeVine, 2004; Weisner, 2015). Scholars from the culture-specific perspective have pointed out that there are communities in which caregiver sensitivity cannot be observed in mother-child interactions. For instance, in some Global South cultures, it appears to be common for mothers not to hold infants, speak very little to them, do not hug or kiss them, do not engage in face-to-face interactions, and do not smile at them (Lancy, 2015). Moreover, the monotropic relationship between caregiver and child postulated by attachment theory has also been questioned (Keller, 2013), noting that the phenomenon of alloparenting occurs in various cultures (Lewis, 2005). This phenomenon reflects a context in which a cooperative caregiving system prevails. Members of the social group help raise the infant, even if they are not biological relatives, instead of infants having to rely only on one primary caregiver who is constantly available to the infant (Keller, 2013).

Moreover, it has also been argued that attachment theory, and particularly the concept of caregiver sensitivity, does not consider cultural-specific parenting beliefs, social goals, parenting strategies, caregiving behaviors, and emotional expression in the sensitive caregiving conceptualization (Dawson, 2018, Kärtner et al., 2010). Furthermore, critics have argued that the insufficient consideration of cultural and contextual differences has resulted in an increasingly homogenous image of how caregiving is or should be. This phenomenon has been described as the rise of the "global mother" and has been noted for its consequent negative

implications for diversity and the potential for the pathologizing of parenting customs in Global South contexts (Dawson, 2018).

Researches from the universal perspective have argued that the original definition of the sensitivity construct does not mention positive affect, verbal response, or face-to-face interactions (Dawson, 2018; Mesman et al., 2018), which have been reported as absent in the caregiver-child interactions of some cultures (Lancy, 2015). Therefore, considering the original definition of sensitivity into account and combining it with ethnographic literature on caregivers and infants from different off-the-beaten-track communities, researchers have stated that sensitive caregiving can be observed in Global South contexts, although it might be expressed differently. According to these authors, sensitivity manifestations in Global South contexts include physical facilitation, focus following and tempo adjustment not only from mothers but from many other caregivers (Dawson et al., 2021), fitting with proximal caregiving, and alloparenting that is characteristic of many Global South communities (Hrdy, 2009; Jung & Fouts, 2011). Based on this, the idea of universality without uniformity has been proposed, suggesting that even though sensitive behaviors can be observed across cultures, the complexity and nuances of its manifestation can be culture-specific (Mesman et al., 2018).

Despite verbal exchange and warmth are no part of the original sensitivity definition, they have been commonly added in more contemporary definitions of sensitivity (Mesman & Emmen, 2013). According to researchers from the universal perspective, this situation, in combination with a lack of research for sensitive caregiving manifestations in Global South contexts, has caused critics to consider the modern conceptualization of sensitivity as the only one to look for, ignoring the versatility of the original construct (Mesman, van IJzendoorn, & Sagi-Schwartz, 2016)

As a reply, authors from the culture-specificity perspective have sustained that caregiver sensitivity is rooted in a Global North form of caregiving (Keller et al., 2018) when other forms of caregiving in different cultures align with cultural-specific beliefs and socialization goals (Chaudhary, 2012). Furthermore, they have provided many examples of parental behaviors that could be seen as harsh or controlling but make sense from the perspective of each culture in which they occur, suggesting that the appropriate response to an infant's needs depends on the context. Thus, these authors have postulated that sensitive caregiving refers to a culturally specific Global North ideal of parenting that is not universal (Keller et al., 2018).

More recently, authors supporting the universal perspective have claimed that there are more points in common than differences between them and researchers from the culture-specificity standpoint. For instance, both groups acknowledge that ideals and beliefs about caregiving are

culture-specific and that different types of caregiving teach children a lot about themselves and others, especially when sensitive responsiveness comes from multiple caregivers (Mesman, Minter et al., 2016). Moreover, they have argued that the occurrence of controlling and harsh parental behaviors in some cultures does not exclude the possibility of observing sensitive care in those contexts (Mesman, 2018).

Although the cultural debate is still open, it is essential to address the compelling empirical evidence of the applicability of the caregiver sensitivity construct's in the Global South contexts. For instance, a study was conducted with twenty-six groups from fifteen countries representing Latin American, Asian, African, Middle Eastern, European, and North American samples to study maternal beliefs about the ideal mother. This study found a strong pattern of convergence between maternal descriptions of the ideal mother and the theoretical description of a highly sensitive mother across groups. However, some variations by cultural group membership were observed. For instance, mothers living in rural areas with a lower family income and more children were less likely to describe the ideal mother as highly sensitive (Mesman, van IJzendoorn, Behrens et al., 2016). Relatedly, it is important to emphasize that it has been argued that sensitivity does not necessarily develop uniformly in these different settings (Mesman et al., 2018). Thus, it has been stated that how and in which situations it is observable appears to be context-specific (Bornstein et al., 2012; Kärtner et al., 2010).

## **Video observational measures**

Observational measures of parent-infant interaction allow for an objective assessment of both dyadic partners (Lotzin et al., 2015). Therefore, they are considered gold standards in the general field of parenting assessment (Haws & Dadds, 2006). Through observations, researchers can uncover complex and unconscious behavioral patterns that cannot be measured through self-reports (Mesman, 2021). For instance, it should be noted that many aspects of responsive parental capacity do not refer to conscious decisions but to an automatic system of parental behaviors (Mesman, 2018). Likewise, using recorded video observations ensure the quality of their analysis. Thus, observational video measures allow establishing intercoder reliability, multiple examinations of relevant interactions, more in-depth analyzes of multiple behavioral modalities, and discussions between local experts and attachment researchers about the meaning of specific observations (Mesman, 2021).

Regarding attachment measurement, the Strange Situation Procedure (SPP) was the first method designed to evaluate and classify the infant's attachment security based on the recorded observation of secure base behavior (Ainsworth, 1967) and is considered a gold standard tool in that field (Cadman et al., 2018). SPP includes a standardized situation in a non-familiar environment that comprises periods of caregiver presence and absence and the intervention of

an unknown person to the caregiver-infant dyad. The categorization of infant's behavior in an attachment pattern is based mainly on its reaction during the separations and encounters and its relationship with the stranger and objects in the environment (Ainsworth et al., 1978). In the Latin American context, SPP has been used in countries such as Chile (Quezada & Santelices, 2010; Lecannelier et al., 2019), Colombia (Mesa et al., 2009), and Mexico (Gojman et al., 2012). However, due to the complexness of its training process and applicability, it has not been frequently used in the Latin American context. Conversely, the Attachment Q-Sort (AQS, Waters, 1995), also considered a gold standard tool, is a more widely used observational video measure in Latin America (Nóblega et al., 2016; Salinas-Quiróz, 2015; Salinas-Quiroz et al., 2018; Posada et al., 2013). The AQS allows assessing an infant's attachment secure base behavior based on the infant's interaction with his/her caregiver. The 90 behaviors (printed on cards) are ranked from 1 (less characteristic) to 9 (more characteristic). The distribution provided by the coder is correlated with a criterion sort representing the securely attached child, yielding scores ranging from -1 to +1 (Waters, 1995), with higher scores indicating a higher degree of child security.

Regarding the assessment of caregiver sensitivity, several observational instruments have been designed in the last decade. These instruments vary in their conceptualization of the sensitivity construct (Seifer et al., 1996). Some are very similar to the original construct presented by Ainsworth and her colleagues (Ainsworth et al., 1974), and others include new elements. For instance, some measures have added more specific behaviors and activities considered sensitive such as smiling, teaching, and talking (Mesman & Emmen, 2013).

The Ainsworth's Maternal Sensitivity versus Insensitivity to Infant Signals and Communications observational scale, is part of the Maternal Care scales (Ainsworth et al., 1974) and is currently used in empirical studies. This measure is beneficial for observing sensitivity across different cultural contexts as it does not assume specific behavioral sensitivity manifestations but instead leaves room for cultural-specific variations (Mesman et al., 2018). Therefore, the scale does not penalize caregivers for not showing common Global North expressions of sensitivity (Dawson et al., 2021), such as verbal responsiveness and face-to-face positive affect or warmth, which are not common in many Global South communities (Dawson, 2018). Furthermore, the Maternal Behavior Q- Sort (MBQS, Pederson et al., 1999) is a more widely used tool in Latin America (Bárrig-Jó et al., 2019; Nóblega, Bárrig et al., 2019). MBQS consists of items that describe ninety specific caregiver behaviors that follow the same procedure as the previously explained AQS (Pederson et al., 1999; Bailey et al., 2007). Evidence of the validity of the instrument has been found in Peru (Bárrig-Jó et al., 2019).

Considering the attachment theory perspective and the relevant debate on the applicability of attachment theory concepts and hypotheses in Global South countries and particularly in rural areas, the current dissertation will contribute to enhancing the number of attachment theory studies in such contexts, and particularly in rural Peru. The next chapter provides contextual information about the Latin American region and Peru as an introduction to the empirical chapters that follow.

## **Study objectives**

The current dissertation aims to shed light on the study of attachment theory in other areas than western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic (WEIRD; Henrich et al., 2010) societies that dominate the literature. Although attachment theory is supposed to be applicable outside of the Western world, and studies show that it seems to be relevant in other regions, little is known about the extent to which its key hypotheses are supported by research in Latin America, and even less in rural Andean areas. The current work aims to fill this gap. First, a literature review was conducted that included empirical studies concerning attachment theory that took place in Latin American countries. Afterward, a pilot study to explore one of the main concepts of attachment theory, sensitivity, was conducted, based on videos that the author of this thesis had previously collected with her research group in Peru. This pilot study provided the foundations to design the main empirical study reported in this thesis, which examines to what extent attachment theory is relevant in a rural Andean Peruvian area.

## **Outline of the dissertation**

After this a theoretical introduction on Attachment theory in Chapter 1, **Chapter 2** provides background information on the Peruvian context, particularly in the Andean rural areas where studies from this thesis took place. **Chapter 3** gives an integrative discussion of the current body of empirical studies concerning attachment theory conducted in Latin American countries. **Chapter 4** reports on quantitative ratings and qualitative descriptions of sensitive responsiveness and its manifestations in a group of rural Andean and Amazonian mothers and their infants. **Chapter 5** describes the level and nature of maternal sensitivity in an economically deprived rural area in Peru, examining differences between measures and situations. **Chapter 6** tests the three out of four attachment theory core hypotheses within a rural Andean sample. Finally, **Chapter 7** integrates the main findings of the dissertation, followed by a discussion. Limitations, suggestions for future research are discussed.

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