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

Fourment Sifuentes, K.G.

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Chapter 7

General discussion

This dissertation aimed to shed light on the study of attachment theory in areas other than western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic (WEIRD; Henrich et al., 2010) societies that dominate the literature. We aimed to describe the extent to which the attachment theory core hypotheses are supported by research in Latin America and specifically in a rural Peruvian Andean area. The findings of the articles presented in this dissertation are elaborated below. Theoretical and methodological implications; implications for policies, interventions, and future research; and challenges are discussed.

Theoretical implications

Attachment theory and its central concepts of child attachment security and caregiver's sensitive behaviors were the main focus of the studies in this dissertation. Attachment theory proposes the universality of its central assumptions (van IJzendoorn, 1990); however, there are continuing debates about the culture-specificity of relevant maternal and child interaction patterns (Keller, 2021; Quinn & Mageo, 2013; Weisner, 2015). Our results provided some support to the applicability of attachment theory's core hypotheses outside of the Global North. Nevertheless, they also underline the influence of the context. Cultural diversity and particularly high levels of poverty and harsh living circumstances need to be considered when interpreting findings from these studies. Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model emphasizes that child development occurs within a complex multilevel system of relationships, from the most intimate home system to the most comprehensive system, including culture and society (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). Then the impact of culture-specific aspects of samples included in this dissertation on attachment theory and its measures should not be surprising.

Attachment theory core hypothesis

The studies in this dissertation contribute to the expansion of the parenting literature to populations often not considered in this domain, and to the culture-specificity debate of attachment theory, particularly the four core hypotheses that it proposes (van IJzendoorn, 1990). 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). Chapter 3 provided an integrative discussion of the current body of empirical studies concerning attachment theory's core hypotheses in Latin American countries, while Chapter 6 tested three out of the four attachment theory's core hypotheses within a rural Andean sample. Thus, both chapters contain relevant information for attachment theory's hypotheses, and findings will be discussed below.

The universality hypothesis of attachment theory has generally been theoretically assumed, and it has only been empirically tested and confirmed a few times, such as in the study by Zeanah and colleagues (2005) that examined attachment in institutionalized children. Results from that study suggested that "the majority of institutionalized children were not able to form a selective attachment to their caregivers" (Zeanah et al., 2005; p. 1024). This result was based on a continuous rating of the Strange Situation Procedure (SSP; Ainsworth et al., 1978), and revealed that these children did not or insufficiently demonstrate a differentiation between familiar and unfamiliar adults, that their attention and activity (if any) was mainly directed toward objects and orchestrated by the caregiver, and that they "exhibited some caregiver-related distress (e.g., crying, rocking) during separation" (Zeanah et al., 2005; p. 1027). It is generally assumed that such patterns indicate a failure to form an attachment bond at all, and that this only occurs under extreme circumstances such as those in orphanages characterized by severely compromised caregiving. Thus, the universality hypothesis is generally not tested in samples from the general population, or even in 'regular' high-risk samples, as the non-attachment patterns are simply not expected to occur there. The most problematic pattern in those samples tends to be the disorganized attachment classification, which although worrisome, does not indicate a complete lack of attachment, or a full-blown attachment disorder.

It is then not surprising that none of the studies found in the literature review of Latin American research on attachments explicitly examined the universality hypothesis, and that it was also not the focus in the study conducted with the rural Andean sample. Nevertheless, especially in the rural sample with very low attachment scores, it might be interesting to actually test the assumption of an attachment bond in this population, for instance, by using the SSP jointly with the Attachment Formation Rating used by Zeanah and colleagues (2005). Unfortunately, this was not an option due to training and logistic restrictions.

But even the SSP does not represent a clear measure to establish the presence versus absence of an attachment relationship, as its presence is implicitly assumed in the coding process. Even in the study previously described (Zeanah et al., 2005), all children were classified into one of the ABCD categories, and only an additional scale revealed the patterns that suggested a lack

of attachment. Thus, the universality hypothesis is not easily tested with the available instruments. However, given that universality is theoretically only assumed under conditions of at least minimally adequate care, failure to develop an attachment relationship is unlikely in samples not experiencing extreme (social) deprivation.

Although it was not possible to empirically test the universality hypothesis in this study, the many hours of videotaped mother-child interactions analyzed by the two coders (KF and JM) do provide some insights, albeit informal and unstandardized. When looking back to reflect on the presence (or absence) of signs that the children were attached to their mothers, both coders agreed that none of the observed children in this sample seemed to display seriously disturbed attachment behaviors like those reported in the orphan study by Zeanah et al. Additionally, based on the extensive observations, coders would expect most children in the sample to display secure base behaviors, such as using their mother's facial expressions as an information source, in the face of distress. In fact, one of the coders had the opportunity to observe some similar situations during non-recorded interactions.

Regarding the normativity hypothesis, findings confirmed the predominance of secure attachment in Latin American samples, but mostly in the cases of non-risk samples consisting of typically developing children. This is particularly relevant as the normativity hypothesis can only be expected to be met among populations without conditions that entail risk for typical development. Moreover, the pattern found in the literature review when using the Attachment Q-set (AQS; Waters, 1995), i.e., lower mean security scores than the recent meta-analysis (Cadman et al., 2017) for high-risk samples, was also identified within the rural Andean Peruvian sample in this dissertation. Results showed that most children displayed low secure-base behaviors in interactions with their mothers, representing the lowest scores found within studies in Peru and other Latin American countries (e.g. Bortolini & Piccinini, 2018; Nóbrega et al., 2016; Posada et al., 2016). Possible explanations for the findings are related to the rural sample's harsh living circumstances and the suitability of the AQS for this sample. Considering that attachment theory posits that safe and healthy contexts are required to more easily fulfill the normativity hypothesis (van IJzendoorn, 1990), and the living circumstances in this economically deprived rural area in Peru, low levels of attachment security are not unexpected. These results are similar to those found in previous studies with similar samples in terms of risk (a rural poor Mexican sample, Gojman et al., 2012; and an undernourished Chilean sample, Valenzuela, 1997). However, it is unclear whether socioeconomic context can fully explain these extremely low security scores. Regarding the suitability of the AQS, its naturalistic nature and lack of an explicit stressor might influence the possibility of assessing some relevant secure-base behaviors. Additionally, some AQS items related to positive affect,



warmth, and physical contact between mother and child within the home do not seem to apply to describe attachment security within this rural Andean sample, in which some of these characteristics tend to be less prominent (Dawson, 2018; Mesman et al., 2018).

The sensitivity hypothesis was well-supported. The association between sensitivity and attachment security was observed in almost all samples in which it was tested within Latin American studies, including the Peruvian rural Andean sample. In the latter sample, findings showed that even under harsh circumstances, variations within maternal sensitivity levels are still meaningfully related to variations in child attachment security. Additionally, results supported the presence of sensitive behavior within the Latin American population and rural Andean and Amazonian samples, albeit not always according to Western norms. This is a particularly relevant finding that supports the assumption that sensitivity can be observed in different cultures, although sensitivity manifestations are culture-specific (Mesman et al., 2018); and the idea that how and in which situations sensitivity is observable appears to be context-specific (Bornstein et al., 2012; Kärtner et al., 2010).

Finally, results in this dissertation support the competence hypothesis, in a broader sense, by showing the relation of secure attachment with other positive child outcomes. It was also identified that although the claim that early child attachment security is vital for promoting positive development across the life span is central to attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969/1982), there is a striking scarcity of this type of studies in Latin America and other non-Western areas (Mesman, van IJzendoorn et al., 2016). This scarcity is striking considering the centrality of this hypothesis to attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969/1982). On the one hand, it signals urgency for further research to elucidate the association between caregiver-child attachment and caregiver sensitivity empirically. On the other hand, it raises questions about potential non-significant results in file drawers. Although some meta-analyses have shown significant associations between attachment and (later) competence within Global North samples (Fearon et al., 2010; Groh et al., 2012; 2014; Madigan et al., 2013), there is not enough evidence within Latin American samples to assume similar patterns in that context.

To conclude, this dissertation adds to the attachment theory literature and, particularly, the knowledge regarding the universal and culture-specific aspects of the theory and its measures—both within Latin American countries and in rural Andean settings in the Global South. A challenge for future studies will be unraveling the influence of socioeconomic and cultural factors to understand findings regarding attachment theory's main concepts. Finally, the parenting literature would benefit from combining insights from etic and emic approaches (Corona & Maldonado, 2018; Helfrich, 1999). This combination might foster a culturally

inclusive approach to attachment theory and practice, which might contribute to the implementation of appropriate government policies to the local situation.

Methodological implications

This dissertation successfully captured variations in maternal sensitivity and child attachment security with Western-based standardized instruments. Chapter 4 presented the first study in Peru using the Ainsworth sensitivity scale (Ainsworth et al., 1974). Then, Chapter 5 incorporated different naturalistic episodes (free interaction, bathing, and feeding) and measures used for the first time in a study with a rural Andean sample. The quality of child attachment was assessed with the Attachment Q-set (AQS; Waters, 1995), but only during a free interaction situation. Results showed that instruments considering pre-specified behaviors could have advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand, they are very informative as they allow us to better understand specific pre-defined behaviors that these mothers and children do and do not display, which may be relevant for interventional purposes. However, on the other hand, it could also be a downside because some particular behaviors are not equally relevant or applicable in the rural Peruvian context.

Regarding the type of observations, conducting lengthy naturalistic observations is advantageous as it gives a more precise representation of the variety of maternal behaviors across different situations and conditions (Joosen et al., 2012) and allows participants time to get used to being observed and diminish the effects of the observer and camera on the dyad's behaviors (Chapter 4). However, some other naturalistic yet standardized situations were also identified as convenient for comparison purposes. For instance, including observations such as bathing and feeding situations, as in Chapter 5, is considered appropriate because those activities are common to all families, and mothers will necessarily be present and interact with their children somehow. In the main study reported in this dissertation, each of these naturalistic situations was used to measure maternal sensitivity. Results suggested that the interplay between measures and situations should be considered when designing a study. Additionally, all situations and measures were assumed to be very informative, mainly when we are just getting to know and understand samples.

When reflecting on all the observations conducted, we identified some different patterns in the type of activities that mothers prioritized during the one-hour free interaction that may have influenced maternal sensitivity and quality of child attachment ratings. For example, some mothers spent almost all the observation time interacting with their children and following



them around. The expected patterns of Western dyads characterized these interactions, with more direct attention, positive affect, play, and warmth; characteristics that are usually less prominent in rural non-Western contexts (Dawson, 2018; Mesman et al., 2018), and therefore were described with high scores for maternal sensitivity and child attachment security. Another group of mothers was mainly busy doing chores. In some of these cases, mothers were busy but still able to respond to their children when in need, while in other instances, mothers barely seemed to interact with their children. These latter observations were assigned low scores for maternal sensitivity and child attachment security. It appears that the choice of activity (chores) might be closely related to the levels of sensitivity, suggesting either that mothers low on sensitivity are more likely to choose non-interactive activities for the observations, and/or that mothers needing to do chores have less opportunities to show sensitivity due to competing demands.

This situation suggests that conducting longer naturalistic observations, such as a full-day observation, would have allowed us to capture all mothers in competing-demands conditions. Of course, mothers were free to decide whether they wanted to pay attention to their children or conduct other activities; however, the specific moment (day of the week and time of the day) may have randomly led to more dyadic interaction in certain observations while mothers were doing their chores in other observations. This also reinforces the suggestion about the necessity of observing a broader range of situations that includes separations and child distress.

Conclusions from Chapters 5 and 6 suggest that only using standardized measures to assess maternal sensitivity and quality of child attachment, with this rural Andean sample we are just getting to know and understand, only scratches the surface of the relevant interaction patterns. To have context-situated information about the daily manifestations of parenting and child (in)secure attachment behaviors, scholars need to include a more holistic qualitative (or mixed) approach that might help us to better describe and understand the observed interactions and behaviors. Additionally, the same videos can be analyzed qualitatively. We will then be able to more comprehensively identify the specific manifestations and patterns of these dyadic interactions. Finally, for future studies, video observations may be accompanied by other ethnographic data collection techniques. These would provide broader information to understand the possible mechanisms behind specific behavioral patterns.

Limitations and implications for future research

Although the studies in this dissertation have some limitations and more research is still necessary, they contribute to the alarmingly small body of literature on observed parenting in Latin American, particularly in rural Andean families.

When designing the main study (Chapters 5 and 6), we wanted to conduct it within the surroundings of the initial pilot study reported in Chapter 4 to test the emerging hypotheses related to the high levels of maternal sensitivity observed in that region. However, this was not possible due to practical circumstances, such as lack of accessibility and absence of closeness of the leading researcher with a local partner institution in the area. But what seemed to be a limitation turned out to be the opportunity to study and show the relevance of living conditions. The observation of a different community in a different location showed that there are essential differences in context and socialization patterns even within the rural Andean region.

Even though rural Andean areas tend to be described as somehow similar, with vertical and inflexible relational family systems, in which children are expected to obey, and submission and passivity are valued (Gavilán et al., 2006; Panez et al., 2000), this dissertation shows that the wide variety of subcultures in rural Andean Peru also relate to a variety of parenting practices and behaviors. Compared to the small-scale pilot study (Chapter 4), many families from the main study (Chapters 5 and 6) lived in a more remote area with houses less close together, less contact between families, and therefore more isolation and possibly less sense of community. Differences between samples found in this dissertation highlight the importance of interpreting findings specific to those small regions where they have been collected, rather than assume patterns to be applicable to the entire “rural Andean area”.

Preferably, future studies should aim to include larger samples from different regions to more fully understand the role of particular cultural contexts and practices in parenting and child development. Even though the relevance of conducting studies with large samples is clear—they either amplify the variety of areas included and preclude limited statistical power to detect some significant relations or differences. However, including large samples is not an aim easy to achieve, even less in studies conducted in rural Andean areas.

Finally, it would have been worthwhile to study the presence and interactions of children with additional caregivers. However, the limits of the scope of the studies presented in this dissertation did not allow for such analyses. Previous studies have identified multiple-care



cultural context as a topic that still requires more attention from the attachment research community. Therefore, including an assessment of received sensitivity (Mesman, Minter et al., 2016) could be a relevant avenue for future studies in rural Andean areas.

Challenges

The studies in this dissertation, being the first of its kind in rural Peru, have contributed significantly to including generally not considered contexts in the attachment theory dominating literature. However, we also experienced some challenges that future researchers may consider when conducting studies in these areas. First, we will describe some methodological issues such as the recruitment process, the use of questionnaires, and the training processes for coding. Followed by some practical challenges related to canceled visits, extended living areas, communication, transportation, and weather difficulties. Finally, we will try to provide some alternatives and share some strategies to improve the data collection work.

The major challenge of this study was participants recruitment. Peru is an upper-middle-income country (The World Bank, 2021) facing many of the problems of low-income countries, where science and research have now begun to develop more fully, mainly in urban areas (Consejo Nacional de Ciencia, Tecnología e Innovación Tecnológica, 2017). Thus, the population of rural regions is not familiar with being part of research and all its implications, which makes them less aware of the relevance and contribution of their participation and more suspicious about the work we are explaining that we will do. Additionally, as there are potential power relationships between the participants and researchers from a prestigious university in the capital, the recruitment process must be conducted with great care. Researchers should avoid situations in which mothers do not feel comfortable declining the invitation by paying attention to non-verbal signals that reveal that situation. In addition, researchers should emphasize that refusing to be involved in the research will not represent any future trouble for the mother, child, or family.

Regarding the use of questionnaires, based on the information collected in the pilot phase, conducted before the final data collection, we identified mothers' difficulties in understanding and responding to questionnaires that included abstract ideas, such as stress or child social competence development. Therefore, it was necessary to limit the questionnaires to those that collected more factual information and were more easily understood by mothers. In addition, we decided to gather the information of the questionnaire through conversations. Then research assistants read aloud items and helped mothers by showing them a picture with

possible options as a reference; once mothers identified the answer, research assistants would write down the selected option and continue with the next item. However, conducting focus groups with three or four mothers who knew each other, in which mothers share ideas and discuss, could have been an alternative to assess some particular topics, such as daily stressors or information related to child development. Additionally, an alternative to better describe child social competence could have been to conduct much more extensive observations, based on which the researchers could have described (through questionnaires) children's social competence characteristics.

As all of the previous attachment theory related studies in Peru had been conducted with urban samples, and all of the already trained coders were trained using those materials, it was necessary to conduct new training processes that included rural material. However, coding material from a rural area was challenging, even for those coders who had a lot of previous experience with the measures, due to different manifestations of maternal and child behaviors that have been discussed in the earlier chapters. For instance, most rural mothers tend to be more serious and speak to children with a more firm and loud tone of voice, which at the beginning of the training process tend to be mistaken for rudeness and lack of sensitivity. To tackle these issues, it was necessary to lengthen the training period by increasing the number of videos to practice and including extensive discussion sessions about the videos, which turned out to be very fruitful.

Regarding the practical challenges, collecting data with multiple home visits increased the possibility of canceled visits. Dyads participated in, on average, five visits, ranging from three to seven depending on the availability of the dyad. It was always difficult to schedule visits in the rural Andean area, with a non-clock-bound lifestyle. Although the mothers would agree to be visited on a particular day and time, they were not really conscious of the appointment they were settling on. In many cases, the mother would forget about the visit and suddenly decide to do something else or go somewhere else at the time of the visit. Therefore, to help mothers remember the time of their next visit, we would leave them a small note indicating that information. Additionally, if we had a visit near their houses, we would pass by to remind them that our next visit was forthcoming. Finally, in some more complicated cases, we would look for the mother at different times during the day, keeping in mind that she could ask us to do the visit at that moment as it was a good time for her.

In addition, due to the expansive areas in which Andean families live, it was not always easy to reach the houses we were looking for. Working with local research assistants makes search labor much easier; however, we need someone from the specific area to guide us in some other



cases. Unfortunately, we could not locate houses of dyads we had previously identified as residing in the surroundings in a couple of cases. Communicational problems were also an issue. Although almost all of the mothers had a cell phone of their own or one of a relative, in many cases, they were not aware of an incoming call, and in often there were problems with getting a phone signal at all in this area. This communicational difficulty complicates the initial contact and any possible future coordination whenever dyads were suddenly unavailable. In addition, weather conditions (raining and cold), lack of or limited public transportation that in some cases implied walking, carrying all the material were also some of the met challenges. To handle these conditions, we needed to be very flexible in rescheduling visits whenever we reached the mothers, and they were available. We also established fluid communication with different people giving transportations services, which helped improve the data collection process. However, due to the rainy season, we needed to suspend data collection for approximately three months. Therefore, we already knew how to deal with many of these conditions for the second data collection period.

Finally, the fact that the main study was conducted in a rural Andean area required the leading researcher and a research assistant to temporarily move to the community of study for approximately seven months in total. This condition significantly increased the budget of the study. This is a particularly relevant issue in a country where resources for academic research are limited (Consejo Nacional de Ciencia, Tecnología e Innovación Tecnológica, 2017), and opportunities for conducting such studies are rare. This struggle is shared with other Latin American scholars who also recognized the high costs of conducting attachment research, which in turn leads to the marginalization of non-Western research teams and samples (Causadias et al., 2021), and most particularly populations in rural areas.

Implications for policies and interventions

Over 3 million children between 0 and 5 years live in Peru (Instituto Nacional de Estadística e Informática, 2019), and approximately 31% of these children live in poverty conditions (Instituto Nacional de Estadística e Informática & Fondo de Población de las Naciones Unidad, 2019). Studies show that when a child located in the lowest quintile of the wealth index becomes five years old, its development is behind that of its peers in the highest wealth quintiles regarding cognitive, motor, and language, communication development (Verdisco et al., 2015). This situation may be similar for other child developmental areas, such as social and emotional competence.

The Peruvian government has made a lot of progress recognizing the importance of early child development in the past years. Since 2013, the Ministry of Development and Social Inclusion (MIDIS) has been promoting early child development as part of its Strategy “Include to grow.” In that framework, MIDIS has created and promoted the policy “Infancy first” that prioritizes seven results: 1) healthy birth, 2) secure attachment, 3) adequate nutritional status, 4) effective verbal communication, 5) stable and autonomous gait, 6) regulation of emotions and behaviors, and 7) symbolic function (Ministerio de Desarrollo e Inclusión Social, 2019).

The current state of the prioritized seven results is based on mothers’ reports only, so they must be interpreted carefully. This national survey states that only 41.1% of children between 9 and 12 months old have adequate interaction with their mothers as a precursor of secure attachment. Similarly, only 32.7% of children between 24 and 71 months have achieved a reasonable regulation of emotions and behaviors, and only 42.1 % of children between 24 and 36 months have developed the symbolic function (Instituto Nacional de Estadística e Informatica & Ministerio de Desarrollo e Inclusión Social, 2020). Despite these unpromising results, 90% of mothers from this national survey report responding immediately and appropriately to their child’s crying signals. Nevertheless, public policy and related interventions should be based on more rigorous and reliable types of data. Results in this dissertation confirm that it is possible to use standardized Western instruments in multiple caregiving situations to assess maternal and child behaviors, if they do not assume Western standards of the manifestations of caregiver sensitivity.

The situation of Peruvian children, especially children in the lowest wealth quintiles, requires the immediate attention of the government and civil society. Although a lot of progress has been made, we still need more work in terms of culturally appropriate ways of conducting interventions. Previous studies have shown that interventions programs can improve parenting in low-SES and minority samples (Barone et al., 2020; Negrão et al., 2014; Yagmur et al., 2014). Our results show that attachment theory’s core hypotheses apply to some extent in Latin American countries, particularly in rural Andean areas in Peru. However, they also highlight the relevance of specific contexts, specifically cultural aspects and living circumstances. For example, we have shown that even under harsh living circumstances (as the ones in our sample), variations within sensitive responsiveness levels are still meaningfully related to variations in child attachment security, and variations within the levels of risk are still meaningfully associated with variation in parenting quality.

Consequently, Peruvian government policies promoting culturally inclusive interventions aimed at fostering sensitive parenting strategies might effectively improve child development



in different domains. In addition, other interventions might address the reduction of the identified risk factors (low SES, low education, perceived worried, lack of social support, among others) to reduce maternal stress in an effort to increase their ability to interact with their children positively. Finally, these intervention programs should acknowledge the essential differences between urban and rural regions, as well as within rural Andean areas regarding context and socialization patterns.

Concluding remarks

To the best of our knowledge, this dissertation is the first attempt to review the extent to which theory's core hypotheses had been studied in Latin America and conduct observational studies on parenting in a rural Andean area in Peru. Our results provided some support for the applicability of attachment theory's core hypotheses outside of the Global North, and they also contribute to the visibility and recognition of the work of Latin American scholars in this field. In our study in the rural Andean area, core theoretical assumptions were to some extent supported; however, the influence of the context (cultural issues and harsh living circumstances) on parenting and child development was also emphasized. These results support both sides of the universality versus culture-specificity debates. Additionally, our findings provide insight into the challenges that the use of existing structured instruments bring when applied to the rural Peruvian context, but also show the potential that those instruments may have in better describing mothers and children behaviors in these families that we are just getting to know. Finally, we hope that this dissertation inspires other Latin American researchers to conduct more observational and naturalistic studies on parenting in contexts generally not included to contribute to parenting support in these areas. The inclusion of understudied populations in the realm of attachment theory can provide new insight into the dominant literature from the Global North. Additionally, as we better understand families in the Global South, we will be able to support them in ways that avoid imposing culturally hegemonic parenting practices, but that do justice to local cultural characteristics and strengths to foster safe and healthy child development.

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