



The Influence of Adult Attachment on Relationship Quality among Multi-Ethnic Group of Parents with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder Children

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to explore the influence of adult attachment on relationship quality among parents having children with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). A correlational research design was used to achieve the research objectives. Sixty eight parents of children with ADHD participated in this study. Two measures were used in this study: the Experience in Close Relationship (ECR) and the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS). The findings indicated that when the anxiety attachment level of the participants was high, the marital satisfaction was low. The findings of this study can make a contribution to those focusing on conflict resolution and marital quality with a deeper understanding on the interpersonal problems in the relationship from attachment theory perspectives. It is suggested that a longitudinal research be conducted in the future with both groups of clinical and community in order to explore how attachment variables can predict relationship adjustment and child adjustment overtime.

Keywords: adult attachment; marital quality; attention deficit hyperactivity disorder

INTRODUCTION

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) is one of the most commonly diagnosed childhood psychiatric disorders (Rowland, Lesesne, & Abramowitz, 2002). It was identified almost 100 years ago (Green & Chee, 1997). Several studies support the view that parents of children with ADHD experienced disturbance of the parental relationship (Cantwell, 1972; Befera & Barkley, 1985; Gillberg, Carlstrom, Rasmussen, & Waldenstron, 1983), demonstrated highly elevated levels of conflict with their children due to the ADHD symptoms, than parents of children without ADHD (Johnston & Mash, 2001; Pfiffner, Mc Burnett, Rathouz, & Judice, 2005).

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Hence, one of the best relevant theoretical approaches in explaining parental relationship and difficulties is by adopting attachment theory. The attachment framework by Bartholomew and Horowitz's (1991) is potentially useful and may give better insights to gain an understanding of the parental couple's relationship. A strong parental relationship may be used as a mechanism for the child with ADHD to receive a proper support from their parents emotionally and physically.

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Studies in Malaysia on attachment theory are very limited, particularly on how the adult couple's attachment styles influence relationship quality in parents of children with ADHD. The previous research has only shown the effect of children with ADHD on parental relationships (Cantwell, 1972; Befera & Barkley, 1985; Gillberg, Carlstrom, Rasmussen, & Waldenstrom, 1983; Johnston & Mash, 2001; & Piffner et al., 2005). Yahya (2012) conducted a research on adult attachment and relationship quality in parents of children with ADHD in the United Kingdom. The findings showed that behavioral problems in children with ADHD correlated negatively with interpersonal relationship in the parental couple (Yahya, 2012). Thus, further steps are needed, not only to acquire a better understanding of the previous findings, but to create a stable family structure with a healthy relationship between both parents, especially in the Malaysian context. Attachment was described as a 'lasting psychological connectedness between human beings' John Bowlby (1969, p. 194). An attachment relationship refers to a tie of affection that bonds someone with an attachment figure, principally the primary caregiver (Bowlby, 1969). John Bowlby (1969) developed the theory based on his observation on children and their caregivers at times when the child exhibits 'distressful behaviour' particularly when the

children are separated from their caregiver.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

The attachment system is activated particularly in response to stress, such as, while the child is frightened or in pain. Bowlby (1969) held that the early bonds that children form with their caregivers and the activation of the attachment system continue to have a great impact that continues through life. As early experiences differ from individual to individual, so do different individuals from different working models. Attachment styles and the quality of future relationships are determined partly as the result of mental images of both the self and others. Individuals who sensed that they were being rejected as children may go on to develop insecure attachment relationships with significant people in their later life. In contrast, individuals who had positive experiences of relationships may develop a sense of security that allows them to seek such relationships in the future (Hazan & Shaver, 1994). However, previous relationships do not always have a defining impact, since the type of interactions one has with others later in life may bring about change (Bowlby, 1969). Therefore, Attachment Theory may help to clarify sources of social support; provide a background for understanding interpersonal relationship problems; and identify coping mechanisms.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The main aim of the study was to explore the relationship between adult attachment styles and relationship quality among parents of children with ADHD.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a correlational research design in order to answer the research objective, which is to find out the relationship between adult attachment; attachment

Table 1: Demographic variables of the participants

Age	Minimum	Maximum	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Participants Age	23	62	38.97	7.3
Children Age	3	12	9.13	1.9

avoidance and attachment anxiety and relationship quality; dyadic satisfaction, dyadic cohesion, dyadic consensus, and dyadic affectional expression among parents of children with ADHD.

Participants

Sixty eight parents of children with ADHD participated in this study. All clinical participants of parents having a child with ADHD who participated in this study were recruited from all ten integrated primary schools in Kuching, Sarawak, Malaysia that placed students with disabilities including ADHD, and also one disable centre named *Persatuan Ibu Bapa Kanak-Kanak Cacat Sarawak, Malaysia (PiBAKAT)*. The disability class co-ordinator of every school was appointed as an enumerator to distribute and assist the parents answering the questionnaires. Table 1 presents descriptive statistics for the demographic variables of the participants.

Measures

There were two measures used in this study: the Experience in Close Relationship (ECR; Brennan & Shaver, 1998); and the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS; Spanier, 1976). ECR (Brennan & Shaver, 1998) is a frequently-used questionnaire that measures adult attachment dimensions (Yang, Wang, Li, & Teng, 2008). It has 36 items designed to measure attachment-related avoidance and anxiety. The Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS) was administered in the study to assess the degree of satisfaction, consensus, cohesion and affectional expression in the couple's

relationships. In this study, Cronbach's coefficient alpha for the 18-item scale of the ECR-Avoidance is 0.45, while for the 18-item scale of the ECR-Anxiety is 0.89. Besides, Cronbach's coefficient alpha for the DAS in total is 0.94.

Data Collection Procedures

At the beginning of the research, approval letter were obtained from the Malaysia Ministry of Education and Sarawak Education Department for data collection purposes. Researchers then identified the schools which placed children diagnosed with ADHD, from the Sarawak Education Department reports. After that, letters were sent to the school principals for approval, attached with the Informed Consent Sheet. Both single parents and couples with children with ADHD were invited to participate in the study.

The details of the study and also the confidentiality of the study were explained in the letter to ensure that the parents would be comfortable to participate in this study. It was also explained that all information provided would be treated in strict confidence by the researchers. The participants were also informed that the data would only be used for academic purposes. They would have the right to withdraw from the study at any point if they decided to do so. For both parents to take part, the completion of two consent forms, individually would be needed. Once the consent form was signed and obtained from the participants, the questionnaires set were sent out to the participants by hand through the enumerator. The completed questionnaires were collected by

Table 2: The descriptive statistic for all variables in the questionnaires

	N	M	SD
ECR-AVOIDANCE	53	63.11	9.50
ECR-ANXIETY	51	65.75	21.38
DAS-SATISFACTION	55	35.82	7.62
DAS-CONSENSUS	56	51.43	9.90
DAS-COHESION	56	16.00	5.60
DAS-AFFECTIONAL EXPRESSION	56	8.70	2.41

Table 3: Correlations among attachments style and dyadic adjustment scale

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6
ECR-AVOIDANCE	-	.19	-.17	.01	-.19	.03
ECR-ANXIETY		-	-.41**	-.39**	-.39**	-.39**
DAS-SATISFACTION			-	.62**	.69**	.58**
DAS-CONSENSUS				-	.62**	.72**
DAS-COHESION					-	.56**
DAS-AFFECTIONAL EXPRESSION						-

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). * . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

the enumerators.

Data analysis

Data was analyzed by using the Statistical Packages for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 17. Data checking and cleaning was performed prior to analysis. Exploratory data analysis (EDA) was performed first to determine if data are normally distributed. A descriptive analysis of frequency and means of socio-demographic characteristics and the overall scores were reported. Correlation was used to explore the relationships between the measures of the two questionnaires: Experience in Close Relationship (ECR) and Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS).

The result showed that ECR-

ANXIETY demonstrated negative correlation with all DAS variables; DAS-SATISFACTION ($r = -.41, p = .004$), DAS- CONSENSUS ($r = -.39, p = .005$), DAS-COHESION ($r = -.39, p = .005$) AND DAS-AFFECTIONAL EXPRESSION ($r = -.39, p = .005$).

DISCUSSION

The results suggested that the parental relationship qualities correlated negatively with the severity of ADHD symptoms in the children. In other words, these findings indicated that when the anxiety attachment level of the participants was high, the marital satisfaction was low. On the other hand, when participants experienced low level of anxiety attachment, they would

experience highly level of their marital satisfaction. These findings are consistent with the previous research conducted by Yahya (2012), who reported that behavioral problems in children with ADHD correlated negatively with interpersonal relationship in the parental couple. Feeney, Noller and Callan (1994) also reported that attachment anxiety was significantly correlated but negatively with the marital satisfaction. Marital satisfaction requires open communication, self-disclosure, and sharing of thoughts, feelings, and emotions. Mikulincer and Horesh (1999) reported that anxious individuals' perception of others is coloured by the defensive projection of their own unwanted traits. This may have a negative effect on the marital relationship regarding all forms of dyadic adjustments: satisfaction, consensus, cohesion, and the expression of affection as this anxiety are strengthened when under stress.

Previous research suggests that an individual with an anxious attachment style is more likely to experience relational dissatisfaction than non-anxious people (Brennan & Shaver, 1995; Collins & Read, 1990; Steuber, 2005). DAS-SATISFACTION items deal with the degree of happiness and commitment in the relationship, such as, intention to divorce, leaving the house after a fight, regretting marrying and quarrelling. Clearly, these crucial issues cannot be discussed openly and constructively in the relationship if the anxious parents of children with ADHD are engaging in defensive behaviour and deactivation strategies. It is also understood that marital satisfaction requires the individual to feel comfortable with emotional closeness, and to communicate constructively (showing a higher level of interaction involving understanding of the other; positive self-disclosure; and a willingness to consider different opinions). As DAS-SATISFACTION items deal with crucial issues in the relationship, open discussion is vital. However, anxious parents of

children with ADHD characteristics were unlikely to engage in this positive atmosphere of interaction and discussion due to their defensive behaviour.

DAS-CONSENSUS items deal with the individual's perception of the couple's agreement on a variety of basic relationship issues such as: finances, recreation, religion, friends, conventionality, philosophy of life, dealing with parents and in-laws, aims and goals, time together, making major decisions, household tasks, leisure-time activities, and career decisions. In order to agree on these basic issues, couples need to be able to disclose to their spouses what they like and dislike. DAS-COHESION on the other hand examines the couple's sense of sharing positive emotional connections with each other, such as, engaging in outside interests together, having stimulating exchanges of ideas, laughing together, calmly discussing something, and working together on a project. These activities cannot be shared in the relationship if the anxious parent of children with ADHD is not able to disclose their thoughts, feelings, and emotions. Finally, DAS-AFFECTIONAL EXPRESSION represents an individual's perception of the couple's agreement on the demonstration of affection; sexual relations; not showing love; and being too tired for sex. In order to be positive on these matters, open discussion in the relationship is vital.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study can make a contribution towards relevant intervention programs to facilitate support for spouses with a child with ADHD in the relationship, particularly those focusing on conflict resolution and marital quality with a deeper understanding on the interpersonal problems in the relationship the attachment theory perspectives. It is important to find an appropriate way and a suitable person to support people with marital difficulties. The anxious individuals should be made

to feel that their partners care about them even when they have to spend too much time with the needy child. These anxious couples should be helped by making such arrangements so that they spend more time together as the insufficient intimate time may contribute to the difficulties in the relationship. This could be done by several ways, such as, taking time for child care in order to feel less guilty about it. Hiring specialized baby-sitter for an evening session also could be one of the alternatives, so that they have time together. These could be the alternatives to help the anxious individual not to feel neglected by their partners. In order to bring the research forward, it is suggested that future researcher conduct a longitudinal research to explore how attachment variables can predict relationship adjustment and child adjustment overtime, and also to involve both groups of clinical and community in the study.

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