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‘Haven of safety’ and ‘secure base’: a qualitative inquiry into factors affecting child attachment security in Nairobi, Kenya

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Abstract

Secure attachment in childhood and adolescence protects children from engagement in high risk behaviors and development of mental health problems over the life span. Poverty has been shown to create impoverishment in certain aspects of caregiving and correspondingly to compromise development of secure attachment in children. Nineteen children 8 to 14 years old from two schools in a middle income area and an urban informal settlement area of Nairobi were interviewed using an adapted Child Attachment Interview (CAI) protocol. CAI was developed to provide a glimpse into the ‘meta-theories’ children have about themselves, parents, parenting and their attachment ties with parents and extended family members. Narratives obtained with the CAI were analyzed using thematic analysis. Both Bowlby's idea of ‘secure base’ as well as Bronfenbrenner's ‘ecological niche’ are used as reference points to situate child attachment and parenting practices in the larger Kenyan context. We found that with slight linguistic alterations CAI can be used to assess attachment security of Kenyan children in this particular age range. We also found that the narration ability in both groups of children was generally good such that formal coding was possible, despite cultural differences. Our analysis suggested differences in narrative quality across the children from middle class and lower socio-economic class schools on specific themes such as: *sensitivity of parenting* (main aspects of sensitivity were associated with disciplinary methods and child's access to education), *birth order*, *parental emotional availability*, and severity of inter-parental conflicts and child's level of exposure. The paper puts in context a few cultural practices such as greater household responsibility accorded to the eldest child and stern to harsh disciplinary methods adopted by parents in the Kenyan setting.

Keywords

Attachment; parenting; discipline; poverty; Kenya; girl child

Children, Attachment, and Economic Insecurity: An Overview

The term attachment underwent significant transformations from the time it was first formulated to its modern conceptualization. The father of attachment theory first called it ‘the child’s tie to his mother’ (Bowlby, 1958). Apart from being a ‘secure base’ for exploration, a parent is thought to function as a ‘haven of safety’ during times of distress (Ainsworth, 1989; Bowlby, 1982). To fulfill these roles a parent is expected to be responsive, sensitive and available physically and emotionally. The nature and quality of sensitivity, responsiveness and accessibility in the care-giving context as provided by the primary caregiver over time forms a children’s attachment experience. Bowlby later expanded ideas about consolidation of that experience into the ‘internal working models’ which had a strong influence on attachment research and development of new measures (Bowlby, 1978, 1988; Bretherton, 1990, 2005; Bretherton & Munholland, 2008). The Adult Attachment Interview (AAI) (George, Kaplan, & Main, 1984, 1985) was the first of such measures intended to assess people’s internal working models using an interview format. New child narrative measures: the Attachment Story Completion Task (Bretherton, Ridgeway, & Cassidy, 1990), Separation Anxiety Test (Slough & Greenberg, 1990), Doll House Story Completion Task (Green, 2000), the Attachment Story Completion Task (Verschueren & Marcoen, 1994), Child Attachment Interview for 8 to 14 Year-Olds (Shmueli-Goetz, Target, Fonagy, & Datta, 2008) were also developed. There remains an open question about how these measures and attachment as a concept would evolve in non-Western and specifically in a low income country.

Poverty creates multiple stressors for families, including unemployment, substandard housing and schooling, exposure to violence, substance abuse, inadequate health care and parental absence (Staveteig & Wigton, 2005; Betancourt et al., 2013) leading to impoverishment in different aspects of child caregiving (De Wolff & van IJzendoorn, 1997; Walker et al., 2007). Attachment security in late childhood and adolescence is recognized as an important protective factor for different type of psychopathology later in life (Moretti & Peled, 2004). Parents can feel depressed or experience lack of support (Russell, Harris, & Gockel, 2008) and might not have enough stamina to attend to their children if they are struggling with basic survival issues like food or housing (Cyr, Euser, Bakermans-Kranenburg, & Van IJzendoorn, 2010). Subsequent harsher or insensitive parenting leads to insecure attachments (Conger, Conger, & Martin, 2010, Hao & Matsueda, 2006). For these reasons Belsky (1999) championed an integrated attachment and ecological systems approach that would allow deeper appreciation for the mechanisms underlying deprivation and how they affect parenting and attachment. In this model the formation of attachment security is affected by parental sensitivity, availability and responsiveness, and is a consequence of both personal qualities as well as the whole ecological system of the caregiver that includes formal and informal social support and financial and job security etc.

Our study reflects these theoretical perspectives while focusing on specific attachment and parenting experiences of children in Nairobi, Kenya.

Methods

Participants and Procedures

Twenty children between the ages of 8 and 14 years from two school settings were invited to participate. One school was located in a middle class, and the other in a low resource neighborhood. In both schools instruction was delivered in English.

School A in a low resource neighbourhood—School A was situated in an urban slum area; it had a front yard and a two-storied wooden building with walls made from iron-sheets. Annual tuition fees were less than 150 US dollars.

School B in a middleclass neighbourhood—School B had a big front yard with three 4-storied houses made from bricks, several playing-fields, and a parking lot. The school provided student transport with annual tuition fees of 1,500 US dollars.

To document children's caregiving experiences with both mother and father, we identified children who were living with both parents. The lead researcher contacted the students personally after obtaining necessary permissions from school authorities. The researcher met English-speaking pupils from class 2 (8-9 years old) to 8 (14-15 years old) to inform students about the objectives of the study, issues related to voluntary participation and confidentiality. Children who volunteered to participate were given sealed envelopes with informed consent forms to take to their parents and were requested to bring them back. Those who got forms back signed were invited to participate in a 'draw your family' exercise for which children were provided with paper, crayons and pencils. Every second and fourth child of ages eight, nine and ten years old; and every second child aged eleven, twelve, thirteen, and fourteen years old were then invited for a half an hour interview. The interviews ranged from 21 minutes to 62 minutes in length. with the average for the middle class school being 23 minutes, and 41 minutes for the low-income school. All interviews were conducted one-on-one, in English by the first author and were video-recorded. Participants were offered to take stationary with them as a token of gratitude for their time. Those who were not interviewed due to the randomization were thanked for their support and offered to take their drawing and stationary with them.

Study Measure

The interviewer administered the Child Attachment Interview (CAI) developed by Target, Fonagy, Datta and Shmueli-Goetz (2003) to assess attachment organization in middle childhood. It is a semi-structured consisting of 19 questions designed to bring out relevant attachment information, including concepts of self and relationships with significant caregivers; mother, father, grandparents, and siblings. The interview probes caregiving experiences; when parents are sad, angry or happy; and asks the child to elaborate on experiences with their caregivers in terms of when, how, and why. Questions also center on times when the child was unwell, hurt, separated or angry with caregivers to elucidate how

caregiving met the child's needs. The six subscales that the narrative gets coded into include: Emotional Openness, Disorganization, Balance of Positive and Negative References of Attachment Figures, Use of Examples, Resolution of Conflicts and Overall Coherence. Also coded are three clinical scales such as *Preoccupied Anger*, *Idealization and Dismissal* that elaborate on the type of attachment insecurities. All scales are scored from 1 to 9, with attachment to mother and father scored separately. Scoring is based primarily on a child's ability to give an integrated, believable account of his or her experiences which are supported by elaborated and relevant examples. Non-verbal and verbal aspects of the video recorded interview are carefully analyzed. Scale score patterns are used further to assign child to one of the four major attachment classification categories: Secure, Insecure-Preoccupied or Dismissing, or Disorganized for each caregiver. Since the CAI had not been used in the Sub-Saharan region, we pre-tested CAI administration and made minor adaptations to the interview without compromising the overall consistency of the tool.

The first author was trained by a reliable CAI coder with certification. Her skills were checked in two pre-test interviews, one of which was conducted under direct supervision of this expert who gave feedback on areas needing improvement. Interviews were conducted and coded by the first author (APW) as part of her Masters dissertation and the last author (MK). Thematic analysis focused on revealing culturally-specific themes relevant to attachment and assessment of cross-cultural sensitivity of the tool performed in accordance with guidelines offered by Braun and Clarke (2006) which were modified for CAI protocol needs. One interview with a 10 year- old girl in the middle class school was discarded due to technical issues with video-recording.

Results

Of the 19 children with valid interviews, 16 (84%) were securely attached to their mothers, and 17 (88%) were securely attached to their fathers. Akin to other attachment studies, we can say that we found high rates of secure attachment in Kenyan children both from middle and low resource schools. This finding is consistent with the idea that across cultures secure attachment is the rule, rather than exception. Despite this high proportion of children with secure attachments, in both schools there were quite a number of children with admixtures of dismissing and preoccupied tendencies.

Middle Class School

Nine valid interviews were conducted with students between ages 8 and 14 years (6 girls, 3 boys).

Low Resource School

Ten interviews were conducted with students ranging from 8 to 14 years (7 girls, 3 boys).

Discussion

The overall parent-child attachment security level in our study was found to be 86% – a figure that sits between two prior Kenyan studies. Bryant et al. (2012) reported 91% security in three urban slums outside of Nairobi—Mlolongo, Sophia, and Bondeni as measured

through the Circle of Security Test adapted for African context, and Van IJzendoorn & Sagi-Schwartz (2008) reported 57-69% security in Gusii villages outside of Nairobi using Ainsworth Strange Situation Test. Both studies focused on children under 5 years. We did not find any relevant attachment study focusing on middle childhood in Sub-Saharan Africa. Since attachment security is positively associated with higher self-esteem and confidence in middle childhood (Gomez & McLaren, 2007; Booth-Laforce et al., 2006), the estimate in the current study may have partially reflected an overrepresentation of securely attached families, i.e. parents and children, among volunteer participants from two-parent households.

Interviews with children brought to light a number of factors that were associated with level of attachment security, including:

- minimal use of harsh disciplinary measures
- consistent parental investment in child's education
- lower birth order, particularly in girls
- parental emotional availability
- minimal exposure to severe inter-parental conflicts.

The importance of parental control is accepted across cultures. However, the amount of control that is optimal differs according to family circumstances and cultural norms (Grusec & Goodnow, 1994). All children with parent attachment rated as secure were able to clearly explain their home-rules regarding the punishable behavior and the level of punishment for different misdeeds. This is how a secure 9 year-old boy from the middle class school explains instances when his mum gets angry at him:

“When I do something bad ... like I have not cleaned my clothes, I watch too much TV if ... I play too much and my things get lost”

A corresponding account of “crime and punishment” of a secure 12 year-old girl from the low resource school:

“I stole ... there was a time there was a cake on the tableI was interested in taking a piece... my mother refused...and I still look a piece...when my mother noticed that she took a slipper and hit me. I was not angry with her because I know ... I was supposed to go and apologize. I am the bad person here; she is not doing anything wrong. I was the one who had done something wrong.”

In Kenya corporal punishment is often regarded as a sign of parental concern and love rather than hostility to the child (Mudany, 1998; Mweru, 2010). Eight out of nine participants from middle class sample and eight out of ten participants from low resource urban neighborhood reported use of physical punishment by at least one parent. Five out of nine from the middle class sample and five out of ten in low resource sample reported being hit by both parents. We found that, as in prior studies (Conger, Conger, & Martin, 2010; Hao & Matsueda, 2006), among our participants, the greater the socioeconomic hardships, the harsher the disciplinary methods for milder offenses. In Kenya children occupy a subservient rank in the societal hierarchy compared to the adults; therefore there is an expectation to conform

(Oburu & Palmerus, 2003; Mweru, 2010). This might explain why most children who reported harsh corporal punishment justified their parental actions by showing extreme deference to parents. Some vignettes from our interviews highlight this dynamic.

“And why do you think he spansks you? Because he loves us and he wants to teach us that we should not do what we did.” – 9 year-old girl, middle class school about her dad.

“As you know, “spare the rod, spoil the child.” You must discipline your child even if you love her....hard discipline must be there as part of taking care of that child.” – 12 year-old girl, low resource school about her mum.

Bronfenbrenner suggests we evaluate child development within the context of the child, her environment, both immediate and more remote, and the continuous interaction of the two; imagining the child's experience “as a set of nested structures, each inside the next, like a set of Russian dolls” (1979, p. 22). Conventionally, researchers have focused on either the micro level (individual behavior) or macro level (cultural influences) (Belsky, 1999). Simultaneous consideration of attachment and ecological models could enrich psycho-cultural understanding of childhood and parenting experiences. More recently global initiatives and development agendas have focused their attention on raising aspirations and changing attitudes to schooling amongst poorer children (Gorard, See, & Davies, 2012; Vision 2030; UN CRC, 1990; UN MDG, 2013). Our participants placed great importance on knowledge acquisition and evaluated parental sensitivity and responsiveness by way of their parents' ability to provide for the school fees and supplies and support educational trips. The following vignette attests to this outlook.

“I am so happy with my father, as he pays school fees for the whole year unlike others who are sent back home for erring in payment of school fees.” – 11 year-old boy, low resource school.

There was a strong conviction about the importance of education to ensure future success amongst participants from both samples. However, the theme of education was more predominate in low resource school children, where self-appreciation, parental love and success were all contingent on progressing in school and excelling in studies.

“I am clever because last month on January ... I was back to number eleven; now I had 372 marks, and I have got 60 in mathematics. This time on February I have got 390, and I was number 2 and got 72 in mathematics” – 8 year-old girl, low resource school.

We noticed an enormous burden of responsibilities associated with being the first born girl in the family and found it negatively affected development of secure attachment in our young girl participants. Even if overall assigned classification for the first born girl was secure, preoccupied anger was noted. This phenomenon was especially evident in participants from poor backgrounds, as these girls doubled up their student roles, with full time homemaking, as well.

“They had told me to wash utensils once I return back from school, and after that I had to fetch water, then....go for the charcoal ... whereas my brother goes to school,

comes back and would only need to do his homework.”- 10 year-old girl, low resource school.

Our participants expected emotional availability mainly from their mothers; an expectation that may be commensurate with gender role-expectations. In Kenya the broad outlook is that fathers are economic providers, and mothers are child-care providers on a daily basis, even if they are wage earners. In an 11 year-old girl's vignette, the conventional roles are affirmed.

“I feel I have a close relationship with my mother– ‘When we talk about ourselves, when we get to know each other ... When I feel depressed or sad I just tell her what has happened.”

“I feel my dad is generous– “when he pays for my school fees ... like for some of my friends the father does not pay theirs.”

Poverty is one of the critical factors that create severe strains on spousal relationships, increasing family dysfunction (Conger, Rueter, & Conger, 2000). Nearly seven children from low resource school shared that their parents fought bitterly and had strained relationships. Developmental research finds a strong link between parental conflicts and severe distress in children (Cummings & Davies, 2010; Jouriles, Farris, & McDonald, 1991). Three out of nine children from the middle class sample reported that their parents occasionally argued. Two of these participants said that their parents do not know how children felt when they argued; one participant shared that her mum knew her feelings about parental arguing, but her dad did not.

“I feel like crying. I feel like telling them ‘Stop arguing’ just the way they tell us to stop arguing because I do not want my parents to arguethough it is not very often” - 9 year-old girl, middle class school.

Our findings demonstrate that the children experience ambivalent emotions of loyalty conflict (Lee, 2001).

“If they quarrel like this I know one of them would leave... either my mother will go on her path or my father. So I will be left in a dilemma to choose.... who will I go with? And I love both of them so that is what makes me most worried. ” 14 year-old girl, low resource school.

The interviews also confirmed how parental conflicts could negatively impact participants' academic performance (Unger, McLeod, Brown, & Tressell, 2000; Clare-Stewart, Vandell, McCartney, Owen, & Booth, 2000). Vignettes from interviews explain this negative push in the following way:

“Like when I am in class ... and the teacher is teaching....suddenly I will just remember what happened at home ... instead of listening to the teacher.” - 10 year-old girl, low resource school.

“...once they quarreled before my eyes. I could not even concentrate in class, when exam came ... I really failed badly.” - 14 year-old girl, low resource school.

Even though the proportion of securely attached children in both samples was high, a number of participants from both middle and low resource schools demonstrated additional

tendencies towards insecurity such as high idealization, preoccupied anger and dismissal of their feelings which are outside the scope of this paper.

Conclusion

Our small study has demonstrated that the CAI can be administered to Kenyan children to elicit rich narratives about parent-child relationships. Our experience in Kenya suggests that making minor adaptations of interview questions and instructions to the local context yields narratives with great depth. Based on our experience, we believe the caregiving context with its unique cultural and normative issues should be evaluated by attachment researchers worldwide. In this regard, our child participants shared experiences that pave away to understand distinct socioeconomic and cultural landscapes that shape parenting practices and family circumstances and affect children's attachment security.

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Table 1

Changes to the CAI protocol to adapt for cultural differences

Original expression	Expression after modification
Q4/Q6 What happens when your Mum/Dad <u>gets cross</u> with you or <u>tells you off</u> ?	Q4/Q6 What happens when your Mum/ Dad <u>gets angry with</u> you?
Q9 What happens when you <u>are ill</u> ?	Q9 What happens when you <u>are ill or sick</u> ?
Q14 Has anyone important to you ever died? <u>Has a pet you cared about died</u> ?	Q14 Has anyone important to you ever died? (The question on pet was omitted due to cultural incomparability question about deceased relative and pet in one sentence.)
Q15 (prompt) Do you <u>keep in touch</u> ?	Q15 (prompt) Do you <u>communicate</u> ?

Table 2

Attachment Styles of School Children from Nairobi Middle Class Neighborhood

<i>Attachment Styles Child-Mother in Middle Class School</i>				
Children	Secure Attachment	Insecure Attachment		
		Dismissing	Preoccupied Anger	Disorganized
Boy (8 years)		Idealization Tendency		Disorganized
Boy (8 years)	Secure		Tendency	
Girl (9 years)	Secure			
Boy (9 years)	Borderline Secure		Tendency	
Girl (10 years)	Secure			
Girl (11 years)	Secure			
Girl (12 years)	Secure			
Girl (13 years)	Secure	Idealization Tendency		
Girl (14 years)		Borderline Dismissing		

<i>Attachment Styles Child-Father in Middle Class School</i>				
Children	Secure Attachment	Insecure Attachment		
		Dismissing	Preoccupied Anger	Disorganized
Boy (8 years)		Idealization Tendency		Disorganized
Boy (8 years)	Secure		Borderline Anger	
Girl (9 years)	Secure			
Boy (9 years)	Borderline Secure	Strong Idealization Tendency		
Girl (10 years)	Secure	Slight Idealization		
Girl (11 years)	Secure	Borderline Dismissing		
Girl (12 years)	Secure			
Girl (13 years)	Secure		Traces of Unresolved Anger	
Girl (14 years)		Dismissing		

Table 3

Attachment Styles of School Children from Nairobi Low-Resource Neighborhood

<i>Attachment Styles Child-Mother in Low Resource School</i>				
Children	Secure attachment	<i>Insecure Attachment</i>		
		<i>Dismissing</i>	<i>Preoccupied Anger</i>	<i>Disorganized</i>
Boy (8 years)	Secure			
Girl (8 years)	Secure	Tendency to dismiss		
Girl (9 years)	Secure			
Girl (9 years)	Secure			
Girl (10 years)	Secure		Traces of Anger	
Girl (10 years)			Preoccupied Anger	
Boy (11 years)	Secure	Borderline Dismissing		
Girl (12 years)	Secure			
Boy (13 years)	Secure			
Girl (14 years)	Secure			

<i>Attachment Styles Child-Father in Low Resource School</i>				
Children	Secure Attachment	<i>Insecure Attachment</i>		
		<i>Dismissing</i>	<i>Preoccupied Anger</i>	<i>Disorganized</i>
Boy (8 years)	Secure			
Girl (8 years)	Secure	Idealization Tendency		
Girl (9 years)	Secure			
Girl (9 years)	Secure			
Girl (10 years)	Secure			
Girl (10 years)	Secure			
Boy (11 years)	Secure	Borderline Dismissing		
Girl (12 years)	Secure		Borderline Anger	
Boy (13 years)	Secure			
Girl (14 years)	Secure		Tendency to Anger	