

Attachment Styles among African American College Students

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Abstract

This study explored adult attachment styles among African American college students. The participants consisted of 129 college students aged 18 to 26 years ($M = 20.1$; $SD = 1.9$). The participants completed three attachment instruments: (1) the Original Attachment Three-Category Measure (Hazan & Shaver, 1987); (2) the Relationship Questionnaire (RQ; Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991); (3) the Experiences in Close Relationships-Revised (ECR-R; Fraley et al., 2000); and a demographic information form. The results indicated that the avoidant and secure attachment styles were dominant among African American college students. Cultural considerations are examined.

Keywords: attachment, attachment styles, African American, college students

1. Introduction

1.1 Attachment Theory

Attachment theory focuses on psychological styles of interpersonal relatedness believed to be established during infant-parent relationships and enduring across the lifespan. John Bowlby, credited as the “founder of attachment theory,” attributed psychological and behavioral abnormalities to early childhood experiences. Bowlby (1969) defined attachment as the “lasting psychological connectedness between human beings.” His interest in human attachments derived from the study of etiological theories, specifically Lorenz’s (1935) study on imprinting. Lorenz’s experiment suggested that once the attachment is established, it is irreversible. He also implied that this innate attachment was synonymous with survival (Lorenz, 1935). Bowlby furthered Lorenz’s point and proposed that attachment was an evolutionary marker in humans. This suggests humankind evolved such that infants who remained close to their mothers survived longer. From other studies conducted in the late 1930s and early 1940s, Bowlby (1944) “concluded that maternal separation/deprivation in the child’s early life caused permanent emotional damage.”

Another notable psychologist, Mary Ainsworth, extended Bowlby’s theory of secure/insecure attachment by developing an assessment, the Strange Situation Classification. Through this classification tool, Ainsworth investigated how attachments vary among infants. Ainsworth and Bell (1970) categorized attachment into three different styles: secure, avoidant, and ambivalent. Securely attached infants are connected with sensitive and responsive primary care. Ambivalently attached infants are linked with inconsistency in primary care. Avoidant infants are associated with unresponsive and affectionless primary care. These assumptions were believed to trail the infants into the latter stages of development (Ainsworth & Bell, 1970).

While Bowlby’s and Ainsworth’s work centralized on infancy, Cindy Hazan and Phillip Shaver were focused on how childhood attachment correlates with romantic intimacy in adulthood. Hazan and Shaver (1987) created two questionnaires that explored this correlation while providing revised definitions of each style in relationships. This monumental shift laid the framework of what is now known as *adult attachment theory*.

1.2 Attachment Styles in Emerging Adults

Emerging adulthood is understood as the transitional phase of life between adolescence and adulthood (18–25 years old; Arnett, 2000). This critical stage in development is historically marked by individuals establishing a sense of independence separate from their caregivers' socialization and navigating their identity through relationships; yet this developmental period differs from adulthood because individuals have not yet assumed lasting responsibilities such as homeownership, marriage, and a solidified career path (Arnett, 2000; Díez et al., 2019). In the United States, emerging adults often find themselves at the juncture of two paths: vocational and academic education. Although contextual factors (e.g., financial funding, caregiving responsibilities, and social support) impact individuals' enrollment in institutions of higher education, over 90% of college students fit within the emerging adulthood range (Education Data, 2021). Within college-aged populations, individuals continue to display attachment styles in relationships that parallel parent-child attachments (i.e., secure, avoidant, anxious, and dismissive-avoidant; Doucet & Rovers, 2009; Leveridge et al., 2005; Obegi et al., 2004; Steele & Steele, 1994). These conscious and unconscious messages that parents share about a child's sense of security are internalized during childhood and persist into adulthood (Ainsworth, 1989; Bowlby, 1977). Individuals that perceive their parents' behavior as warm, comforting, nurturing, supportive and affectionate are less likely to endorse avoidant and anxious attachment styles (Díez et al., 2019). Along with interpersonal functioning in a familial context, individuals' attachment styles penetrate romantic relationships.

Of note, individuals may seek to satisfy their childhood needs for security through their romantic relationships as adults (Einav, 2014). Consider the example of an individual with disorganized attachment manifesting from experiences of childhood emotional abuse. Potential ramifications of childhood emotional abuse include a child not experiencing emotional security and support from their parent. This type of individual has a propensity to pursue relationships that lack emotional boundaries and partners who allow codependent behaviors such as not wanting to be alone, not establishing a sense of self outside of the relationship and internalizing a fear of abandonment.

To that end, mixed findings suggest that while individuals with non-secure attachment styles are susceptible to experiencing convoluted romantic relationships and poor interpersonal functioning, individuals with dismissing-avoidant attachment styles had positive responses to being accepted by others (Simpson 1990; Carvallo & Gabriel, 2006). The literature documented that individuals who endorsed avoidant attachment are more likely to experience in their relationships more instances of negative emotions such as sadness, worry, disappointment, or loneliness. Although there is a wealth of research on attachment styles, the dearth of studies explicitly focusing on generational and racial differences in attachment styles warrants attention.

1.3 Generational Differences in Attachment Styles

Empirical research has investigated the generational patterns of attachment style within families of origin (Doucet & Rovers, 2009; Leveridge et al., 2005; Obegi et al., 2004; Steele & Steele, 1994). Limited research has begun to unearth nonfamilial generational differences grounded in attachment theory. Cohort differences exist between generations (Beaven, 2014). According to Mannheim's theory of generations, historical zeitgeists including shared experiences of social, economic, and political events give rise to the establishment of a new generational cohort. Scholars have examined generational differences in the workplace and discovered that communication styles varied between generations (Crampton & Hodge, 2006; Venter, 2017). Given that there is evidence of dissimilarities in communication styles (Crampton & Hodge, 2006; Venter, 2017), associations of patterns in communication and attachment styles, (Ebrahimi & Kimiaei, 2014; Jang et al., 2002;), it can be posited that generational differences exist.

1.4 African Americans and Attachment Styles

A growing body of literature suggests that attachment styles differ across ethnic-racial groups (Bakermans-Kranenburg et al., 2004; Barnett et al., 1998; Brown et al., 2008; Magai et al., 2001). Anecdotal accounts suggest that child-rearing practices in African American families are inconsistent with practices in White families and include stricter parenting and the use of corporal punishment for corrective disciplinary action. Parents undergo the process of developmentally socializing their child by expressing messages, intentionally and unintentionally, regarding how to interact with, behave with, and function with others. These messages assist children with creating schemas about how to regulate their emotions as well as how to empathize with others (Maccoby, 1984). Individuals endorsing secure attachment report that their parent(s) offered support and warmth during their childhood (Díez et al., 2019). When comparing African Americans' attachment styles to European Americans, African Americans scored higher on dismissing attachment and lower on attachment security (Magai et al., 2001). We postulate that several factors contribute to the inequivalence in attachment security and

attachment styles in African Americans. The long-standing history of generational and collective trauma within the African American community may continue to residually impact African Americans in the present. Further, systemic challenges such as classism and lower socioeconomic status were found to impact the parent-child relationships and, subsequently, attachment styles (Bakermans-Kranenburg et al., 2004).

The extant research has since filled gaps in the literature by introducing newly revised adult attachment scales and self-reported questionnaires that explore this concept further. The present study aims to explore adult attachment theory and its implications for culture, specifically African American culture. Accordingly, it was hypothesized that the secure attachment style will be more prevalent among African American college students.

2. Method

2.1 Participants

The participants ($N = 129$) were college students at a university in the southern region of the United States. All the students in the study self-identified as Black or African American. The average age of the participants was 20.11 years ($SD = 1.973$). Among the participants were 92 females (71.3%) and 37 males (28.7%). The participants were enrolled in courses within the departments of psychology and communications. The participants were academically classified as freshmen ($N = 50$; 38.8%), followed by seniors ($N = 38$; 29.5%), sophomores ($N = 24$; 18.6%), and juniors ($N = 16$; 12.4%). Participants enrolled in a psychology or communications course may have earned extra credit toward their grade for completing the questionnaires. Utilizing an a priori power analysis (G*Power; Faul et al, 2007), the minimum number of participants required for a moderate effect size of .3 and a power of 0.94 was 127.

3. Measures

3.1 Original Attachment Three-Category Measure

Based upon research conducted by Bowlby and Ainsworth (1982), Hazen and Shaver (1987) designed this 3-item measure to capture attachment styles according to avoidant, anxious/ambivalent, and secure typologies. Of the three items, participants selected the statement most consistent with their self-assessed style of attachment. The avoidant style corresponded to the item statement, “(A) I am somewhat uncomfortable being close to others; I find it difficult to trust them completely, and difficult to allow myself to depend on them. I am nervous when anyone gets too close, and often, others want me to be more intimate than I feel comfortable being.” The secure style corresponded to the statement, “(B) I find it relatively easy to get close to others and am comfortable depending on them and having them depend on me. I don’t worry about being abandoned or about someone getting too close to me.” The anxious/ambivalent was indicated by the item, “(C) I find that others are reluctant to get as close as I would like. I often worry that my partner doesn’t really love me or won’t want to stay with me. I want to get very close to my partner, and this sometimes scares people away.” Garbarino (1996) reports that “The frequencies of the three attachment styles in Hazan and Shaver’s (1987) study were 56% Secure, 25% Avoidant, and 19% Anxious/Ambivalent” (p. 5.)

3.2 The Relationship Questionnaire

According to the Fetzer Institute (n.d.), the Relationship Questionnaire is a “4-item questionnaire designed to measure adult attachment style. The RQ extends the original attachment Three-Category Measure (Hazan & Shaver, 1987) by rewording the description of each of the attachment styles, and by adding a fourth style—dismissing-avoidant.” The dismissing-avoidant category is indicated by the statement, “I am comfortable without close emotional relationships. It is very important to me to feel independent and self-sufficient, and I prefer not to depend on others or have others depend on me.” Although the measure asks for a preliminary categorical response, the subsequent questions seek to establish a dimensional framework for the attachment style rather than a strict categorical assignment. Reliability assessments have ranged from .37 to .65 for the instrument (Garbarino, 1996, p. 5).

3.3 The Experiences in Close Relationships-Revised

Created by Fraley et al. (2000), the Experiences in Close Relationships-Revised questionnaire “is a revised version of Brennan, Clark, and Shaver’s (1998) Experiences in Close Relationships (ECR) questionnaire (Fraley, 2012). The ECR-R is a 36-item measure of adult attachment styles consisting of two subscales: anxiety and avoidance. The ECR-R is “designed to assess individual differences with respect to attachment-related anxiety (i.e., the extent to which people are insecure vs. secure about the availability and responsiveness of romantic partners) and attachment-related avoidance (i.e., the extent to which people are uncomfortable being close to others vs. secure depending on others)” (Fraley, 2012). Subscale scores are averaged across a range of items with lower and higher

scores corresponding to lower and higher levels of the anxiety and avoidance. According to the scale administration instructions, some items must be reversed coded prior to score calculations.

3.4 Demographic Data Form

The demographic questionnaire contained five questions. Participants were asked their (1) age; (2) gender; (3) ethnicity; (4) cumulative GPA, excluding first semester freshmen; and (5) classification (freshman, sophomore, junior, senior).

4. Procedures

Prior to the start of data collection, approval from the Institutional Review Board was obtained. All participants were enrolled in undergraduate communications or psychology courses. After providing informed consent, each participant received a paper-and-pencil questionnaire with a counterbalanced combination of the two instruments along with the demographic questionnaire. It took approximately 10–15 minutes for each participant to complete the process.

5. Results

5.1 Statistical Analyses

The data were explored and analyzed utilizing IBM SPSS Version 27. The demographic characteristics of the participants are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Participants

	Sample	
	<i>n</i>	%
Gender		
Female	92	71.3
Male	37	28.7
Ethnicity		
Black/African American	129	100
Classification		
Freshman	50	38.8
Sophomore	24	18.6
Junior	16	12.4
Senior	38	29.5

Note. $N = 129$. Participants were on average 20.11 years old ($SD = 1.97$).

5.2 Styles Measured by the Original Attachment Three-Category Measure and the Relationship Questionnaire

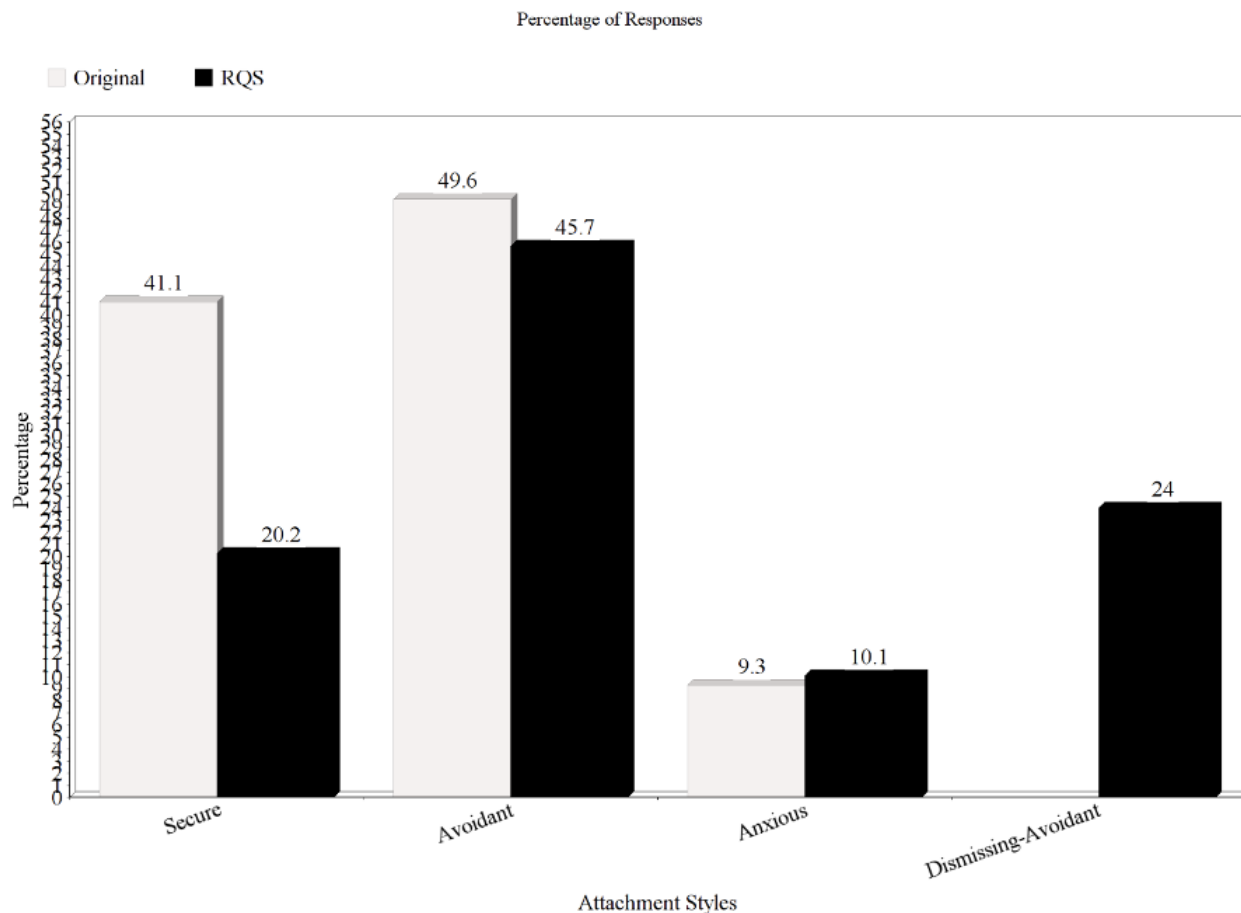


Figure 1. Percentage based upon frequency of responses to The Original Attachment Three-Category Measure and the RQ.

Nearly half of the participants who were administered the Original Attachment Three-Category Measure (Hazan & Shaver, 1987) self-reported an avoidant style of adult attachment ($N = 64$; 49.6%); followed by the secure attachment style ($N = 53$; 41.1%). The least reported attachment style of the Original Attachment Three-Category Measure was the anxious attachment style ($N = 12$; 9.3%). The same participants when responding to the RQ self-reported the avoidant style of adult attachment more than any other ($N = 59$; 45.7%) followed by the dismissing-avoidant style ($N = 31$; 24%). The secure attachment style differed by 20.9 percentage points (RQ, $N = 26$; 20.2%) between the two instruments. The least reported style measured by the RQ was the anxious attachment style ($N = 13$; 10.1%).

5.3 The Experiences in Close Relationships-Revised

The average scores for the anxious ($M = 3.06$; $SD = 1.23$) and avoidant ($M = 3.24$; $SD = 1.07$) subscales of the ECR-R were obtained. Raw scores ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). A paired samples t-test was conducted to determine differences between the two subscales. The results indicated no significant difference between the anxious and avoidant subscales [$t(125) = -1.461$, $p = .147$]. Figure 2 represents the location of average ECR-R scores within the secure domain.

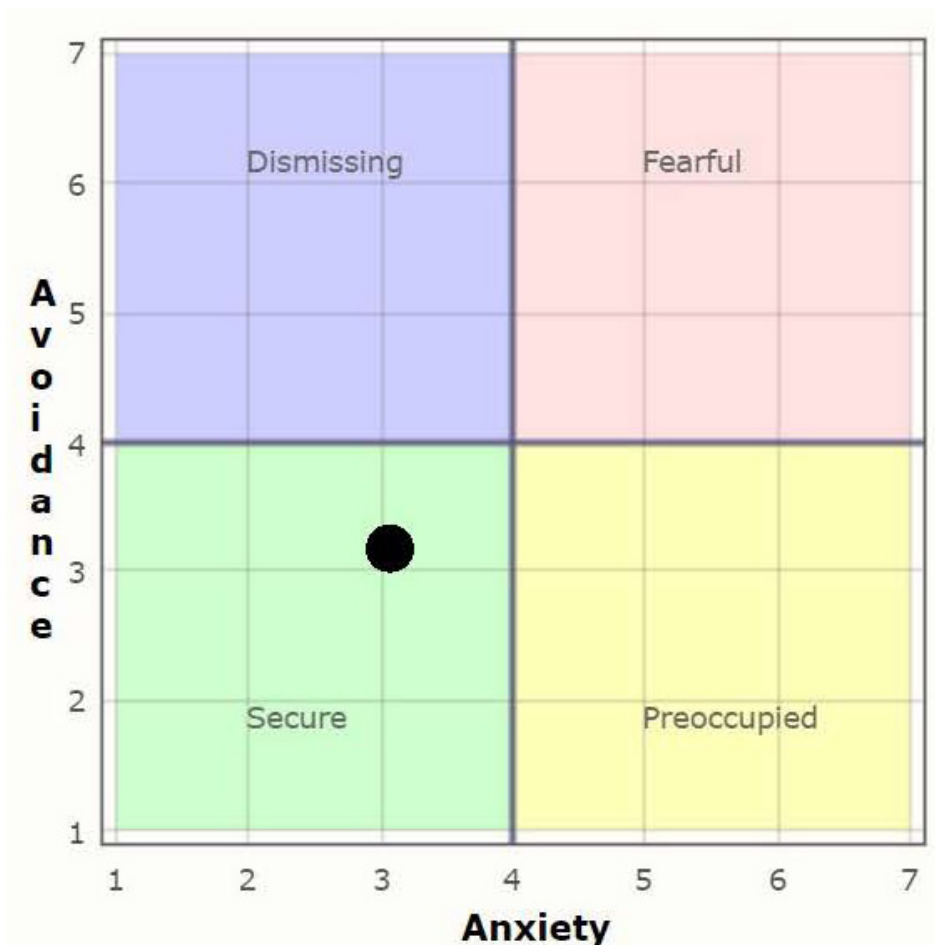


Figure 2. Average ECR-R dimensions

5.4 Demographic Factors

There were no significant correlations found between gender, age, or grade point average and the adult attachment styles. A one-way ANOVA was conducted to determine the effect of academic classification (freshman, sophomore, junior, and senior) on attachment styles. The results indicate no significant effects, [$F(2,96) = 0.140; p = .870$].

6. Discussion

This study explored the attachment styles of African American college students as measured by the Original Attachment Three-Category Measure, the Relationship Questionnaire, and the Experiences in Close Relationship-Revised instruments. African American college students are a population with unique individual differences due to cultural diversity, so the more we investigate factors that impact them, the better institutions of higher learning can serve their academic needs. Furthermore, as a heterogeneous group, African American college students represent ethnic, racial, and cultural ecosystems of life in the United States of America. Although research samples consisting of only college students have their own limitations, research on and inclusive of African Americans participants can make a significant contribution to the body of knowledge, help increase cultural competency, and aid in the reduction of disparities. Most importantly, studying how African Americans live and survive in American society is a great benefit.

The Original Attachment Three-Category Measure indicated that the majority of African American college students have either an avoidant or secure style of adult attachment. However, when those same participants were administered the RQ, which is a revised form of the Original Attachment Three-Category Measure with the addition of a fourth category termed *dismissing-avoidant*, the number who self-reported a secure style was reduced by 50%. As the secure category decreased, the dismissing-avoidant category increased by nearly the same

percentage. This further suggests the scale has high discriminant validity for the constructs of secure and dismissing avoidant. With the addition of the fourth category, the avoidant style became the most represented adult attachment style (45.7%). There was a 21.7 percentage point difference between avoidant and the next category, dismissing-avoidant (24%). Both instruments confirm that African American college students overwhelmingly report an avoidant style of adult attachment.

Based upon adult attachment theory, we can also make inferences about child-parent relationships. Adult attachment styles not only describe how adults tend to behave in intimate relationships, but they also say as much about how the individual was parented and how they behaved in infant relationships. Parenting styles are revealed through adult attachment styles. As Fraley (2018) articulates, “Research on adult attachment is guided by the assumption that the same motivational system that gives rise to the close emotional bond between parents and their children is responsible for the bond that develops between adults in emotionally intimate relationships.” Adult attachment styles provide a window into the past all the way back to the crib. According to Fraley (2018), “Although Bowlby was primarily focused on understanding the nature of the infant-caregiver relationship, he believed that attachment characterized human experience from ‘the cradle to the grave’.” As a developmental construct, adult attachment is presumed to be continuous, stable, and consistent across the lifespan.

Hazan and Shaver (1987) found “roughly 60% of adults...classify themselves as secure and the remainder...split fairly evenly between the two insecure types, with perhaps a few more in the avoidant than in the anxious/ambivalent category” (Hazan & Shaver). Likewise, Campos et al., (1983) concluded that American infants in their study were 62% secure, 23% avoidant, and 15% anxious/ambivalent. Similar results were hypothesized and expected in this sample; however, this expectation was not supported by the data. This finding can be characterized in two ways: (1) either the results from the original study no longer hold or (2) this African American sample is uniquely different from the one observed in the original study. There is an approximate 35-year difference between the data collection of this study and the reported findings of both Hazan (1987) and Campos (1983). Two entirely different American generations are represented by the samples. Thus, it is difficult to assess whether the differences are due to possible generational shifts or cultural differences or both. This further warrants the question, “Have parenting styles of the late 2010s changed much from the parenting styles of the 1980s?” Because there is no way to parse the 1980s data to control for ethnicity, there is no way to ascertain whether there were significant ethnic and cultural differences. The attachment style is developed as a response to parenting styles and environmental interactions with others (Meyer & Pilkonis, 2001). More research is needed to determine the roles of racial socialization, ethnicity, and culture in this relationship and discover how they function as causal factors in the shift in dominant attachment styles.

Individuals who are characterized as avoidant “seem both excessively self-reliant and uncomfortable with closeness” (Shaver et al., 2000, p. 26). They tend to be independent and struggle to rely on others. In the context of the academic environment, these same attachment styles may also influence help-seeking behaviors and learning styles. More research in this area is needed.

The ECR-R yielded no significant differences between the avoidant and anxious subscales. The average scores for the anxious ($M = 3.06$; $SD = 1.23$) and avoidant ($M = 3.28$; $SD = 1.09$) placed the students along the moderately secure dimension. Some caution should be exercised, however, when ascribing individuals to a specific category, dimension, domain, or typology. These categorical assessments are indicative but not fixed. Persons may experience, based upon the context, environment, and emotional requirements, various “styles” or modes of engagement to satisfy their attachment needs.

Culture plays a significant role in the development of childhood attachment patterns. Culture influences the way parents perceive the child, the child’s distress signals, and their own responses to satisfy the needs of the child. Race, culture, and class intersect to form common ethnic experiences, including child-rearing practices, which are shared and transferred through the home. These practices, shaped by tradition, social learning, generational trends, and societal and environmental demands, create group differences in child-parent attachment. Factors such as discrimination, poverty, and social inequalities and disparities also contribute to the attachment process. Consequently, African Americans as a minority group are highly impacted by these variables in the social environment. The role of culture cannot be understated as a mediator and moderator of attachment behavior.

7. Conclusion

The avoidant and secure attachment styles were dominant among the African American college students. In theory, adult attachment styles represent the child-parent interactions that have endured across the developmental lifespan. The adult attachment styles further indicated either a generational or culturally influenced shift in contemporary African American attachment styles. Additional research should be conducted on the role of African American culture and attachment styles.

7.1 Declaration of Interest Statement

We wish to confirm that there are no known conflicts of interest associated with this publication, and there has been no significant financial support for this work that could have influenced its outcome.

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