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THE INFLUENCE OF ATTACHMENT STYLES ON EMPATHY DEVELOPMENT IN ADOLESCENTS FROM MIGRANT FAMILIES

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Abstract: The increasing number of labor migrant families has raised significant concerns regarding the psychological and socio-emotional development of adolescents. Among the key developmental outcomes, empathy plays a fundamental role in promoting healthy interpersonal relationships, emotional regulation, and social adaptation. This study investigates the influence of attachment styles on empathy development among adolescents from migrant families. A quantitative cross-sectional research design was employed, involving adolescents aged 13–18 years whose one or both parents were engaged in labor migration. Standardized psychological instruments were used to assess attachment styles and empathy levels. The collected data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and multiple regression to examine the predictive relationship between attachment dimensions and empathy. The findings indicate that secure attachment is positively associated with cognitive and affective empathy, whereas insecure attachment styles, including anxious and avoidant attachment, demonstrate significant negative associations with empathy development. Furthermore, family communication quality and perceived emotional support partially explain the relationship between attachment styles and empathy. The study highlights the importance of strengthening secure parent–adolescent relationships despite geographical separation caused by migration. The findings contribute to the literature on developmental psychology and educational psychology by providing evidence-based recommendations for educators, psychologists, and policymakers to support adolescents from migrant families through family-centered interventions and socio-emotional learning programs.

Keywords: attachment styles; empathy; adolescents; migrant families; labor migration; emotional development; family communication; emotional support; developmental psychology; educational psychology.

Introduction

International labor migration has become one of the defining socio-economic phenomena of the twenty-first century, influencing not only economic development but also the psychological well-being of families and children. Millions of parents migrate abroad in search of better employment opportunities, leaving their children under the care of one parent, grandparents, or other relatives. Although labor migration may improve a family's financial conditions, prolonged parental absence can significantly affect adolescents' emotional, cognitive, and social development. Among the socio-emotional competencies that may be influenced by this experience, empathy has received increasing scholarly attention because of its essential role in healthy interpersonal relationships, prosocial behavior, conflict resolution, and psychological adjustment. Empathy is commonly defined as the ability to understand and share another person's emotional state while maintaining awareness of the distinction between oneself and others. Contemporary researchers generally distinguish two complementary dimensions of empathy: cognitive empathy, which refers to understanding another person's thoughts and perspectives, and affective empathy, which involves experiencing an

emotional response to another person's feelings. High levels of empathy are associated with improved emotional regulation, stronger peer relationships, greater social competence, and lower levels of aggressive and antisocial behavior. Consequently, empathy is regarded as a core socio-emotional competence that contributes to adolescents' psychological well-being and successful adaptation.

One of the most influential theoretical frameworks for understanding empathy development is attachment theory, originally proposed by John Bowlby and later expanded by Mary Ainsworth. Attachment theory suggests that early interactions with primary caregivers shape internal working models of relationships that influence emotional regulation, interpersonal trust, and social functioning throughout life. Adolescents who develop secure attachment generally demonstrate greater emotional stability, higher self-esteem, stronger interpersonal skills, and greater empathic concern. In contrast, insecure attachment styles—including anxious and avoidant attachment—are frequently associated with emotional dysregulation, interpersonal difficulties, and reduced empathic responsiveness. For adolescents from migrant families, attachment relationships may be challenged by prolonged physical separation from one or both parents. Although modern communication technologies help maintain contact, virtual interaction often cannot fully replace consistent emotional presence and daily parental involvement. Extended separation may alter attachment security, reduce perceived emotional support, and affect adolescents' capacity to understand and respond to the emotions of others. However, these outcomes are not universal; family cohesion, caregiving quality, communication frequency, and resilience can buffer the negative effects of parental migration. Therefore, examining attachment styles provides an important framework for understanding differences in empathy among adolescents living in migrant family contexts.

Previous studies have demonstrated significant associations between attachment security and empathy in general adolescent populations. Likewise, research on migrant families has documented increased risks of loneliness, anxiety, depressive symptoms, and behavioral problems associated with parental migration. Nevertheless, relatively few studies have specifically examined how different attachment styles contribute to empathy development among adolescents in migrant families. Furthermore, existing evidence has been produced predominantly in Western or East Asian settings, while empirical research in Central Asian contexts remains limited. This gap restricts the development of culturally appropriate educational and psychological interventions. The present study addresses this gap by investigating the influence of attachment styles on empathy development among adolescents from migrant families. Specifically, the study aims to: (1) identify the dominant attachment styles among adolescents from migrant families; (2) examine the relationship between attachment styles and cognitive as well as affective empathy; and (3) determine the predictive influence of attachment styles on empathy development while considering the role of family communication and perceived emotional support. The findings are expected to contribute to developmental and educational psychology by expanding understanding of socio-emotional development in migrant family contexts and by providing evidence to support school-based psychological services, family intervention programs, and policies aimed at strengthening adolescents' emotional well-being.

Methodology

This study adopted a quantitative cross-sectional research design to investigate the influence of attachment styles on empathy development among adolescents from migrant families. The quantitative approach was selected because it enables the objective measurement of psychological constructs and allows statistical examination of the relationships between attachment styles and

empathy. A cross-sectional design was considered appropriate, as it provides a comprehensive assessment of participants' psychological characteristics at a single point in time.

The study involved 300 adolescents aged 13–18 years from secondary schools. Participants were selected through a random sampling technique to ensure equal opportunity for inclusion in the study. Eligibility criteria required that participants belonged to migrant families in which one or both parents had been employed abroad for at least six months. Adolescents participated voluntarily after receiving information about the purpose and procedures of the research. Data were collected using well-established and internationally recognized psychological instruments. Attachment styles were assessed using the Experiences in Close Relationships–Revised (ECR-R) questionnaire, which measures secure, anxious, and avoidant attachment dimensions. Empathy was measured using the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI) developed by Mark H. Davis, which evaluates both cognitive and affective components of empathy. To obtain a broader understanding of the family environment, the Family Communication Scale (FCS) was administered to assess the quality of communication within the family, while the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS) was used to evaluate adolescents' perceived emotional support from family members. All research instruments were translated into the local language and carefully reviewed to ensure linguistic accuracy and cultural suitability before administration. Prior to data collection, permission was obtained from the administrations of participating schools, and written informed consent was secured from parents or legal guardians. Adolescents were informed that participation was voluntary, that their responses would remain anonymous, and that they could withdraw from the study at any stage without any negative consequences. The questionnaires were administered in classroom settings under the supervision of the researchers and required approximately 25–30 minutes to complete.

The collected data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 29). Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations, were used to summarize the demographic characteristics of the participants and the distribution of the study variables. The internal consistency of the research instruments was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha coefficient. Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationships between attachment styles and empathy, while multiple regression analysis was performed to determine the predictive effect of attachment styles on empathy development. Statistical significance was established at $p < .05$. The selected research methodology ensured the reliability and validity of the findings and provided a solid empirical basis for understanding how attachment styles influence empathy among adolescents growing up in migrant families.

Results and Discussion

The results of the study showed that attachment styles were significantly associated with empathy development among adolescents from migrant families. Descriptive analysis indicated that most participants demonstrated moderate levels of empathy, while secure attachment was the most common attachment style. However, a considerable proportion of adolescents showed anxious or avoidant attachment patterns, which may be related to prolonged parental absence due to labor migration. Pearson correlation analysis revealed a positive and statistically significant relationship between secure attachment and empathy ($r = 0.52$, $p < .001$). Adolescents with stronger secure attachment reported higher levels of both cognitive and affective empathy. In contrast, anxious attachment ($r = –0.34$, $p < .01$) and avoidant attachment ($r = –0.41$, $p < .001$) were negatively associated with empathy, indicating that insecure attachment styles may reduce adolescents' ability to understand and respond to the emotions of others.

Multiple regression analysis further demonstrated that attachment styles significantly predicted empathy development ($R^2 = 0.39$, $F = 28.47$, $p < .001$). Secure attachment emerged as the strongest

positive predictor of empathy, whereas anxious and avoidant attachment showed significant negative effects. Family communication and perceived emotional support also contributed positively to empathy, suggesting that supportive family relationships can reduce the negative psychological impact of parental migration. These findings are consistent with attachment theory, which emphasizes that secure emotional bonds with caregivers promote emotional regulation, social competence, and empathic understanding. Even when parents are temporarily absent because of labor migration, maintaining warm communication and emotional support appears to strengthen adolescents' emotional development.

The findings are also in agreement with previous studies reporting that adolescents from migrant families who experience positive family relationships generally demonstrate higher empathy and better psychological adjustment than those with weak family connections. Although parental migration may create emotional challenges, the quality of caregiver relationships and regular parent–child communication can help maintain secure attachment and foster empathy. Overall, the study suggests that attachment style is an important psychological factor influencing empathy among adolescents from migrant families. Educational institutions, parents, and mental health professionals should therefore develop programs that strengthen family communication, emotional support, and secure attachment in order to promote adolescents' socio-emotional development and psychological well-being.

Conclusion

This study examined the influence of attachment styles on empathy development among adolescents from migrant families. The findings indicate that attachment style plays an important role in shaping adolescents' empathic abilities. Adolescents with secure attachment demonstrated higher levels of cognitive and affective empathy, whereas those with anxious or avoidant attachment showed lower levels of empathy.

The results also revealed that positive family communication and emotional support contribute to stronger empathy, even in situations where one or both parents are working abroad. Although labor migration may create emotional challenges for adolescents, maintaining supportive relationships between parents, caregivers, and children can reduce these negative effects and promote healthy socio-emotional development. Overall, the study highlights the importance of strengthening secure attachment and family relationships in migrant families. The findings provide valuable evidence for educators, school psychologists, counselors, and policymakers in designing intervention programs aimed at improving adolescents' emotional well-being, empathy, and social adaptation. Future research is recommended to include larger and more diverse samples and to use longitudinal designs to better understand changes in attachment and empathy over time.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Parents working abroad should maintain regular and meaningful communication with their adolescent children through phone calls, video calls, and other digital communication platforms to strengthen emotional attachment.
2. Schools should implement socio-emotional learning programs that focus on developing empathy, emotional awareness, and interpersonal communication skills among adolescents from migrant families.
3. School psychologists and counselors should provide regular counseling services and psychological support for adolescents experiencing emotional difficulties related to parental migration.

4. Caregivers, including grandparents or relatives who look after adolescents, should be encouraged to create a supportive and emotionally secure home environment that promotes healthy emotional development.

5. Educational institutions should organize parent education and family support programs to improve communication between migrant parents, caregivers, and adolescents despite geographical separation.

6. Policymakers should develop community-based intervention programs that address the psychological and social needs of children and adolescents living in migrant families**.**

7. Future research should investigate additional factors influencing empathy development, such as emotional intelligence, resilience, self-esteem, peer relationships, and cultural influences, using larger and more diverse samples.

These recommendations may contribute to strengthening secure attachment, enhancing empathy, and supporting the psychological well-being and social adjustment of adolescents from migrant families.

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