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What Happened to Children with Avoidant Attachment? A Study of Social Relations-Based Behaviours of Avoidant Children from the Age of 6 to 19

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to assess the social relationship-based behaviors of 19-year-old children who are in the early stages of adulthood and had an avoidant attachment style at age 6. Based on criterion sampling, a purposive sampling method used in qualitative research, the study group of this research was selected from children whose attachment security had been previously identified. The study was conducted with 5 girls and 5 boys with avoidant attachment styles selected from the 26 available children who participated in the 2006 study that identified the attachment patterns of 110 children. The data collection instruments of the study are the IDFSS attachment scale used in 2006 and a semi-structured interview form and a student data form used in 2019. The study concludes that children who exhibited avoidant attachment at age 6 maintained their attachment patterns. They were found to fail in perceiving academic achievement, coping with emotional problems, relationships with parents and others, and trust in others.

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Keywords:

Avoidant attachment, social relations, early childhood, early adulthood

1. Introduction

Attachment is the emotional tie built between the caregiver and infant and shaped in the early stages of life, showing a lifelong impact on people's emotions, thoughts, and attitudes (Bowlby, 1969; 1982). The word "caregivers" in the definition often refers to mothers (Bowlby, 1973). The most prevalent theory describing attachment is Bowlby's attachment theory. Attachment theory analyses the causes of the emotional tie built between caregivers and infants, describes the development of attachment, studies the features of caregivers and infants in detail and further seeks an answer to what extent people's personalities and relations with other people are influenced by the type of attachment in early stages of life (Bowlby, 1980; 1988).

Ainsworth is another researcher who has studied Attachment Theory in detail. Ainsworth describes attachment as a bond that will affect future relationships (Ainsworth, 1969). Ainsworth made attachment into something measurable by developing Bowlby's theoretical study with his practical work. This study by Ainsworth is called the "Stranger Situation". In their study, Ainsworth et al. classified attachment into three types: secure attachment, ambivalent-uncertain attachment, and avoidant-insecure attachment (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978). Later, Main and Solomon (1990) added the disorganized-insecure attachment type to the attachment literature.

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1.1. Attachment Styles

Attachment is basically divided into two categories: secure and insecure attachment. Insecure attachment is classified as anxious-ambivalent and anxious-avoidant (Ainsworth et al., 1978). Disorganized attachment is listed under insecure attachment (Main & Solomon, 1990).

Secure attachment is the attachment style expected to occur when caregivers respond consistently to infants' needs with love and warmth. Securely attached infants/children develop a sense of confidence in themselves and the environment as they know that their caregivers will be available and value them when they need. Anxious-Ambivalent attachment is the attachment style expected to develop when caregivers respond inconsistently to infants' needs, such as warm, distressed, and neutral reactions in different cases or sometimes satisfy and sometimes fail to satisfy the infants. Children/infants who have this attachment pattern cannot be sure that their caregivers will be available and comfort them because of their inconsistent behaviors. Therefore, they are insecure with their environment and their self-conception is often negative. Anxious-Avoidant attachment is expected to occur when caregivers are repeatedly cold, indifferent, and insensitive to infants' needs. Infants/children in this attachment type are sure that their caregivers will neither be available nor comfort them when they need. They believe that self-sufficiency is the best strategy. They are indifferent to their environment. Their self-conception is often negative (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Hazan & Shaver, 1994; Simpson & Rholes, 1998; Barnett & Vondra, 1999). Disorganized attachment is often observed in children who are abused or neglected by their caregivers. It might occur when caregivers suffer mental problems or drug addiction. Infants/children in this attachment category are cold, depressive to their caregivers and lack confidence and motivation (Main & Solomon, 1986; 1990).

1.2. Effects of Attachment in Following Ages

According to Bowlby (1980), the first attachment situation with other individuals begins in infancy and might last up to school age, adolescence, and adulthood. Only the attachment relationship with the caregiver might add cheer and persistence to one's life. On the other hand, Ainsworth suggests that the attachment style between infant and caregiver will be repeated in close relations in adulthood (Ainsworth, 1989).

Various researchers have tested Ainsworth and Bowlby's different views on the life-long effects of attachment. Many subsequent studies have supported this view and concluded that attachment status overlaps with the following life periods (Fraleigh, 2002; Moss, Cyr, Bureau, Tarabulsky, & Dubois-Comtois, 2005; Seven & Ogelman, 2012; Waters, Hamilton, & Weinfield, 2000; Waters, Merrick, Treboux, Crowell, & Albersheim, 2000). For example, Waters et al (2000) assessed the attachment styles of a group of participants in infancy and 20 years later. Study results indicated that attachment styles were consistent.

Attachment styles formed in early childhood are not only enduring, but continue to affect social, emotional, and behavioral characteristics of the individual (Lewis, 1990; Pearson et al., 1993). In particular, it influences self-concept and perceptions of the environment through internal working models. Internal working models, clarified by attachment style and shaped by caregiver behavior, are the individual's perceptions of self and others. Positive perceptions of self and others develop in secure attachment, whereas negative perceptions develop in insecure attachment (Bretherton & Munholland, 1999). Clark (1996) indicates that adolescents with secure attachments have fewer social problems and have more confidence in themselves and others. Shaver & Mikulincer (2002) reported that attachment styles have an impact on the quality of interpersonal relationships in adulthood.

1.3. Current Study

This study aims to evaluate the social relations-based behaviors of 19-year-old children who are accepted to be in the initial adulthood period and had avoidant attachment style 13 years ago at the age of 6. In the attachment classification of Ainsworth et al. (1978), avoidant attachment is the attachment style where mother-infant interaction is the poorest and perception of self and others is negative. In the avoidant attachment style, infants believe that self-sufficiency is the best strategy, avoid asking caregivers for help in times of distress and keep indifferent to the existence and absence of their caregivers (Hazan & Shaver, 1994; Bretherton, 2003). Studies have revealed that individuals with avoidant attachment avoid close relations, are disturbed by social attention, and have difficulty trusting others (Cooper, Shaver, & Collins, 1998; Shaver & Brennan, 1992).

Avoidant attachment is the most prevalent attachment style in Turkey according to studies conducted with 6-year-old children (Seven, 2010; Seven & İlhan-Ildız, 2020). Longitudinal studies in Turkey and worldwide on children with avoidant attachment, a type of insecure attachment, in relation to their coping styles in social problems and emotional matters from early childhood to early adulthood are quite limited. Therefore, it is important that this study addresses the social relationships and emotional coping strategies of individuals in early adulthood diagnosed with avoidant attachment at age 6. It is anticipated that the study of individuals with avoidant attachment styles longitudinally will contribute to the attachment literature. The purpose of this study is to examine the social relationship-based behaviors of 19-year-old children who had an avoidant attachment style at age 6.

2. Methodology

2.1. Research Model

Qualitative researches might be defined as a research type where qualitative data collection tools such as observation, interview and document analysis are used and a qualitative process is followed to reveal perceptions and cases in a natural setting with a realistic and holistic approach (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2000). An embedded multiple case study, one of the case studies types, was used in this study (Yin, 2003). This case study model was selected in order to reveal the social status of individuals who had an insecure avoidant attachment in 2006 at the age of 6.

2.2. Study Group

Based on criterion sampling, a purposeful sampling method used in qualitative research, this research's study group was selected among children whose attachment security was previously identified. The study was carried out with 5 girls and 5 boys with avoidant attachment selected among 26 children available who participated in the study in 2006 where attachment patterns of 110 children were identified.

The criteria used for identifying the research sample are given below.

- 1st Criteria: Taking the IDFSS in 2006
- 2nd Criteria: Having an avoidant attachment
- 3rd Criteria: No parent death or divorce

10 of 12 individuals having these criteria were involved in the study.

In order to identify social relationship patterns based on the process of mother-child bonding between the ages of 6 and 19, the author conducted a study of children who participated in the IDFSS in 2006. As a result of the study in the immediate area, likely participants were identified based on available participants. Participants were contacted and informed of the time and place of the interview. They were interviewed on the agreed day and time. The demographic properties of children and families involved in the study are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. *Demographic Properties of the Children and Families*

	n	%
Gender		
Boy	5	50.0
Girl	5	50.0
Mothers' Educational Status		
Primary school	3	30.0
Secondary school	6	60.0
High School	1	10.0
Family Structure		
Nuclear family	6	60.0
Extended family	4	40.0
Economic Status		
Low	4	40.0
Middle	5	50.0
High	1	10.0

According to the demographic properties of the children and families presented in Table 1, girls comprised 50.0% (n=5) and boys comprised 50.0% (n=5) of the study group. The educational status data of the mothers show that 30.0% of the mothers (n=3) were graduates of primary school and 60.0% (n=6) secondary school, while 10.0% of the mothers (n=1) were graduates of high school. In terms of family structure, 60.0% of the families (n=6) were nuclear and 40.0% of the families (n=4) were extended family. In terms of the mother's economic status, 40.0% (n=4) had low economic status, 50.0% (n=5) middle economic status and 10.0% (n=1) of the mothers had high economic status.

2.3. Data Collection Tools

The research data collection tools are the IDFSS attachment scale used in 2006 and semi-structured interview form and student data form used in 2019.

2.3.1. IDFSS

It was developed by Cassidy (1988) to reveal mental representations of 6-year-old children on attachment status by means of stories. There are six stories on the scale, and it takes nearly three minutes for the child to complete each story. Stories are scored on a 5-point scale. Stories that reflect the secure relationship with the attachment figure are scored 4 and 5 while stories reflecting hostile, negative relationship are scored 1 and 2 and stories reflecting avoidant relationship are scored 3. Maximum scores in IDFSS is 30 while the minimum score is 6. 30 define maximum attachment security and 6 defines maximum insecurity. IDFSS was adapted to Turkish by Seven (2006), who found its alpha coefficient 0.83 and split-half reliability 0.83 for scale scores.

2.3.2. Interview Form

Semi-structured interview form involves questions to identify self-perception styles of youngsters in social situations.

2.3.3. Student Data Form

The authors developed student data form to learn demographic distributions of the children and families.

2.4. Data Analysis

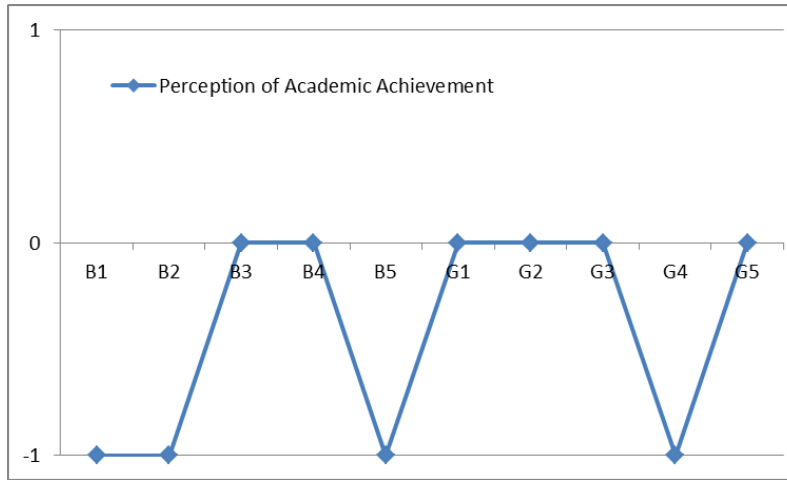
Children were classified into attachment types with IDFSS in 2006. Descriptive-interpretive data analysis was carried out in 2019. Data are reduced, put in a certain order, selected, and interpreted in this type of analysis. Interpretations are given a place on descriptions (Ekiz, 2007). In this study, data are analyzed; categories are established, graded, and revealed on graphs.

2.5. Data Collection Procedure

In the baseline of the study, 2006, a private room carrying suitable criteria for IDFSS was used for implementing IDFSS. Data were collected in the second point, 2019 spring. Ethics board permission was granted before data collection for doing and voice-recording the interviews. Research for people to interview was carried out and probable participants were contacted by means of available participants. Each participant was informed about the research before the interviews.

3. Findings

3.1. Perception of Academic Achievement



* -1 negative achievement perception/ 0 Neutral/ 1 Positive Achievement perception

Figure 1. Academic Achievement Perception of the Avoidant (B: Boys and G: Girls).

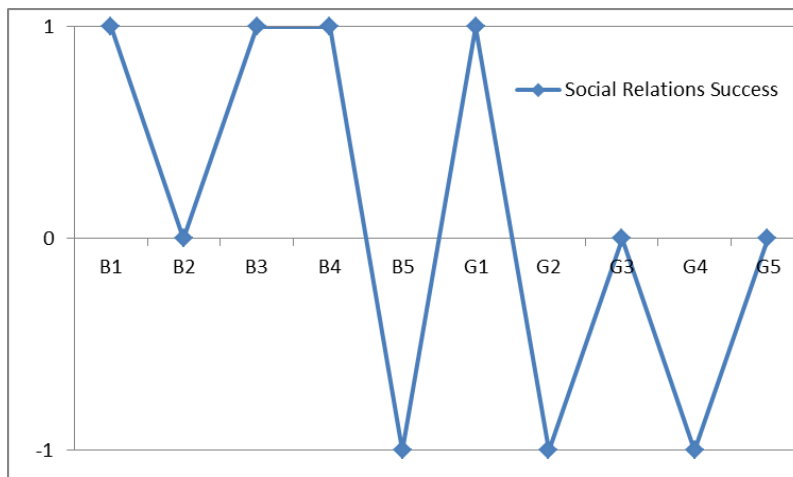
None of the avoidant girls and boys finds themselves successful in academic terms. They see them under their potentials. It is observed that they lack confidence in academic achievement.

Example statements

B2 I don't find myself academically capable due to the incapability of others.

B1 Am I successful? I am not sure. I can't see strength in myself.

3.2. Social Relations Success



* -1 Unsuccessful / 0 Neutral- uncertain/ 1 Successful

Figure 2. Social Relations Success (B: Boys and G: Girls).

Even when they reported being successful in social relationships, they gave detailed examples of poor relationships and even confessed that they had failed. Transitions were observed from parents to friends and from friends to parents. This indicates that the status of their social relationships is shaped in the context of their relationships with the social environment. Boys were more likely to avoid relating to their relationships with their parents. Escape from mother to brother or father was observed. Intimacy problems in relationships were also mentioned.

Example statements

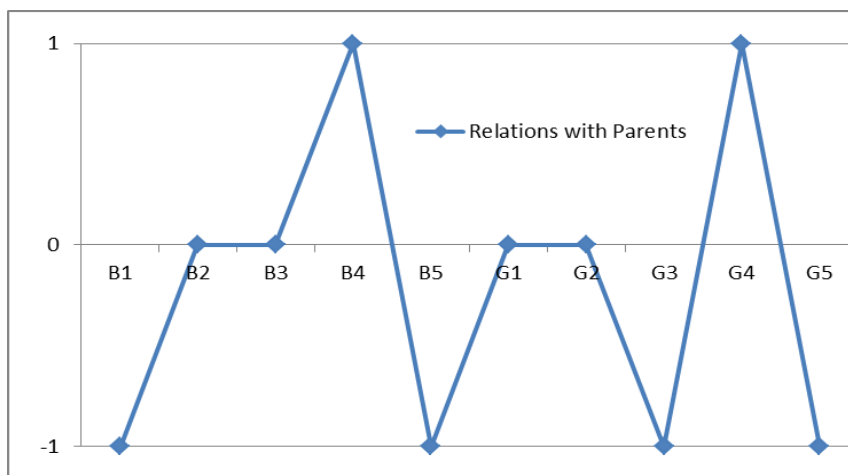
G3 I find myself successful, but we might have conflicts. I don't know my position in social circle. I have problems with mum when I am with friends and I have problems with friends when I get closer to mum.

B4 I have excellent relations with people. Most of them love me. I am good at it.

G2 I don't trust others. My friends let me down. I am unsuccessful.

B5 I don't use social media. I stay far away from everyone in case they make fun of me.

3.3. Relations with Parents



* -1 Unsuccessful, avoiding talking about the relation/ 0 not sure, conditional/ 1 Successful/ feel close

Figure 3. Relations with Parents (B: Boys and G: Girls).

One boy and one girl perceive their relationships with parents as positive, while other participants either avoid talking about their relationships or describe them as unsuccessful. Example statements:

B4: Thanks God! it is fine with my parents. They love me and I love them (This boy reports that they did not have good relations previously, but he overcame this problem by displaying unconditional respect to parents after he received religious education)

B1. I cannot approach mum. My relations are poor. I am trying not to be a burden on my family.

3.4. Coping with Emotional Matters

All participants find themselves incapable of coping with emotional matters. Another thing they have in common is that they try to solve their emotional problems on their own.

Example statements

G1 I am unsuccessful. I weep and fail to defend myself. I do not turn to others. I wait until it is over.

B1 Unsuccessful. I cannot manage on my own. I need support but I cannot open to my family.

B3 When I am upset, I go somewhere where I can be alone.

3.5. Confidence in Others

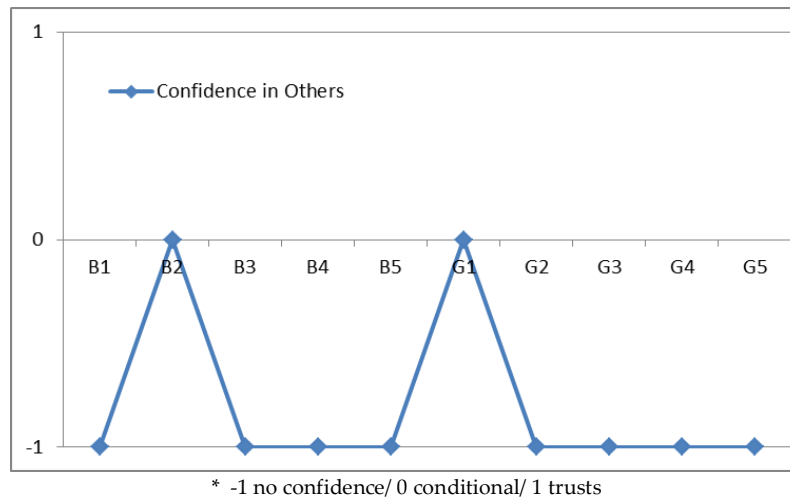


Figure 4. Confidence in others (B: Boys and G: Girls).

Two of the participants trust only conditionally, while others are completely suspicious. They are likely to come closer to the family if they feel distrust of others. Example statement

G1 They have to be like me if I am to trust others (trust depends on them being like me)

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of this study is to assess the social relationship-based behaviors of 19-year-old children who are in the first stage of adulthood and had an avoidant attachment style at age 6-13 years ago.

None of the boys and girls with avoidant attachment styles who participated in the study succeeded academically. Okpycha and Courtneyb (2018) conclude in their longitudinal study that adolescents with avoidant attachment style do not attend their schools regularly, have poor grades, and perform poorly in school. Kerns (2014) suggests that children who exhibit avoidant attachment characteristics may have difficulty regulating emotions, which could affect anxiety and academic performance. There are numerous studies in the literature that indicate a relationship between anxiety and academic achievement (Vatasari et al., 2010; Dan, Bar & Kurman, 2014; Lewis-Morrarty et al., 2015). Thus, it is believed that secure attachment creates a sense of security in children and has a positive impact on academic performance. On the other hand, it could be said that children who exhibit insecure attachment characteristics suffer from severe anxiety and their academic performance is negatively affected. The participants in the study see themselves as below their means. Even though they claim to manage social relationships well, they detail examples of poor relationships. In a similar study, Uluç and Oekten (2009) conclude that children who have an avoidant attachment style are less popular with their peers than children who have a secure attachment style. According to Cassidy, Kirsh, Scolton, and Parke (1996), attachment style influences children's relationships with peers and provides a foundation for other relationships, while Granet and Maysel (2001) suggest that attachment style acts as a mediating variable in peer relationships. In this case, it is expected that the social relationships of individuals with avoidant attachment will be negatively affected. There are also studies that suggest that children with avoidant attachment style are likely to suffer from behavioral and emotional problems in the future (Yalom, 2014) and are less extroverted than children with secure attachment style (Kochanska & Kim, 2013) and that these factors affect their social relationships. There are also studies that suggest that children with avoidant attachment style are unfavorably affected in establishing social relationships in adulthood and their relationships are short and weak (Granet & Maysel, 2001; Moss, St-Laurent, Dubois-Comtois, & Cry, 2005; Lee, 2008; Wiltz, 2005). The authors observed that individuals avoid talking about relationships with peers, in addition to fleeing from mother to brother, father. Intimacy problems in relationships were also mentioned. According to Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991), avoidant attachment is an attachment pattern in which the person's perception of self is positive, but the perception of others is negative. People with avoidant attachment style have high self-esteem but negative attitudes toward others and reject the need for close relationships. Therefore, these individuals avoid forming close relationships. Mikulincer, Shaver, and Solomon (2015)

emphasize that attachment styles often remain stable over time, while they may change as a result of powerful experiences that influence people's beliefs about "the value of asking the attachment figure for help and the possibility of accessing safety." Again, another study concludes that children who have an avoidant attachment style have high levels of anxiety in subsequent years and this situation leads to avoidance (Shamir-Essakow, Ungerer, & Rapee, 2005).

All the participants stated that they are not good at handling emotional situations. They feel that they are left alone with their problems. Evirgen-Geniş and Goezuen-Kahraman (2018) investigated the correlation between attachment status and self-concept. They concluded that most of the participating children developed avoidant attachment. Moreover, they suggest that children's attachment status is positively correlated with their self-concept and social self-concept. Children with insecure attachment are far from self-sufficient and feel unhappy. This perception is consistent with the finding that study participants with avoidant attachment feel alone. Stevens (2014) similarly examined whether individuals with different attachment styles exhibit different abilities in defining and regulating emotions. He found that individuals with avoidant attachment had no awareness of defining emotions and showed less response to their emotions. This finding supports Mikulincer, Shaver, and Pereg's (2003) model that people deal with emotions in different ways depending on their attachment style. For example, individuals with avoidant attachment avoid reflecting on their emotions. Rholes, Simpson, Friedman (2006) conclude that couples with avoidant attachment style suffer from emotional problems and severe stress after birth and are dissatisfied with the experience of parenthood.

All participants indicated that they were either conditionally or unconditionally distrustful of others. Paktuna-Keskin (2014) in another study concludes that attachment is necessary for the child to gain trust in others, become aware of himself and the environment, and develop self-confidence. In a similar study, Ozturk (2017) concludes that mother-father attachment style significantly predicts self-confidence. In a longitudinal study, Simpson (1990) analyzed the effects of secure, anxious, and avoidant attachment styles on relationships and concluded that individuals with avoidant attachment have less confidence and satisfaction in their relationships than individuals with secure attachment. According to attachment theory, the attachment style developed in early childhood forms the basis for close friendships, personality, socio-emotional characteristics, and relationship development in subsequent life stages (Chow, 2008; Nathanael & Mark, 2018; Suemer, 2006; Rholes, Simpson & Friedman, 2006; Thompson, Grace & Cohen, 2002; Waters, Hamilton and Weinfield, 2000). This study supports the literature. It concludes that children who had avoidant attachment at age 6 maintained their attachment patterns and therefore failed in this area: Perception of academic achievement, coping with emotional problems, relationships with parents and others, and trust in others.

This study demonstrates the importance of identifying preschool children's attachment status. There are risks if preschool children with avoidant attachment status are not treated. The study also shows that the IDFSS, introduced in 2006, provides accurate results about children's security patterns. It is believed that the conclusions of the study will contribute to theoretical knowledge and become a reference for researchers. In this study, which assesses the social relationship-based behaviors of 19-year-old children with avoidant attachment patterns in childhood, an expansion of the study group and the use of other measurement instruments could be recommended.

Considering that attachment is a two-way process and there is often a correlation between the parents and the child's attachment style, it might be advisable to include the parents and other community members who play a role in the child's life rather than focusing only on the child. An investigation into the causes of avoidant attachment in the Turkish community might also be recommended.

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