

THE LINK BETWEEN ATTACHMENT STYLES AND SHAME PRONENESS: THE ROLE OF CULTURAL FACTORS. A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW

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Abstract

Considering the dynamics of human emotions and relationships, this research explored the interaction between attachment styles and shame proneness in different cultural contexts by reviewing 19 studies following PRISMA guidelines. Although the role of cultural factors could provide new and valuable insights, the majority of studies focused on the strong relationship between attachment style, shame proneness, and shame management styles. Both anxious and avoidant attachment styles have significant indirect effects on psychological distress through shame proneness. Specifically, an anxious attachment style seems to influence psychological distress through a self-attacking shame management style. In contrast, an avoidant attachment style does so through an avoidance style of managing shame. These findings suggest that how individuals attach to others can influence how they experience and manage shame, affecting their overall psychological health. This examination sets the stage for understanding the nuances of shame proneness related to various attachment styles, highlighting the universality and variation of these experiences across different cultures.

Cuvinte-cheie: stiluri de atașament, predispoziție la rușine, cultura, review.

Keywords: attachment styles, shame proneness, culture, review.

1. INTRODUCERE

Attachment theory, initially developed by John Bowlby (1980), explains the significant impact of early interactions between infants and caregivers on subsequent emotional and social development (Akbag and Imamoglu, 2010). This foundational theory asserts that the nature of the bonding process between infants and their primary caregivers lays the groundwork for future interpersonal relationships (Akbag and Imamoglu, 2010; Sroufe and Siegel, 2011).

The reason infants form attachments to their caregivers is not because they are provided with food, but because these caregivers activate their innate tendency to seek proximity to someone who can offer protection (Sroufe and Siegel, 2011). The ideas proposed by Bowlby (1969) regarding the importance of attachment are considered universally applicable.

The relationship between attachment and emotions has been analyzed in numerous previous studies (Hazan and Shaver, 1987; Kobak and Sceery, 1988; Mikulincer and Orbach, 1995). Attachment theory assumes that the attachment

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figure not only provides a secure base but also encourages exploration of oneself and the environment in which the individual develops (Ainsworth *et al.*, 1978; Baumeister and Leary, 1995; Bowlby, 1980). Researchers who have studied this issue have observed that different attachment styles are associated with distinct emotional profiles (Consedine and Magai, 2003). Generally, secure attachment is linked to positive emotions, while anxious attachment is linked to negative emotions. Individuals with a secure attachment style are less prone to depression, anger, and hostility than those with anxious attachment (Mikulincer and Orbach, 1995).

Like other negative emotions, shame can arise from early relationships (Leary *et al.*, 2007). Shame is experienced in response to the perception (or inference) of devaluation by others (Tangney and Dearing, 2002). Malatesta-Magai and Dorval (1992) argued that shame forms in a child through the experience of defeat and parental attitudes; if parental reactions against the child's desire to explore are negative, the child internalizes these attitudes and may experience feelings of rejection and weakness.

Shame proneness refers to an individual's dispositional tendency to experience or feel shame in a variety of situations (Park and Shields, 2023). The tendency to feel shame is significantly linked to a wide range of mental health disorders, including depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress, and substance abuse. Attachment theory and interpersonal neurobiology suggest that a secure attachment style protects against shame proneness, while an insecure/anxious attachment style contributes to shame proneness (Park and Shields, 2023). Research indicates a strong relationship between shame proneness and shame management styles. Both anxious and avoidant attachment styles have significant indirect effects on psychological distress through shame proneness. Specifically, the anxious attachment style influences psychological distress through a self-attacking shame management style, while the avoidant style does so through an avoidance style of managing shame (Remondi *et al.*, 2023). These findings suggest that the way individuals attach to others can influence how they experience and manage shame, which, in turn, affects their overall psychological health (Remondi *et al.*, 2023).

CULTURAL INFLUENCES ON ATTACHMENT AND SHAME

The caregiver-child bond is a universal element in society, but the details of this relationship can vary significantly from one culture to another. In Western cultures, the concept of attachment often emphasizes a single primary bond between mother and child, often referred to as a monotropic bond (Akbag and Imamoglu, 2010). In contrast, in many non-Western cultures, a system of multiple caregivers is common. For example, among the Efë people in the Democratic Republic of Congo, infants are cared for by several women in the community, spending more time with other caregivers than with their biological mothers until the age of six weeks (Akbag and Imamoglu, 2010).

Cultural differences also extend to the development of attachment styles. Research has shown that the distribution of attachment styles within a culture can be approximately one and a half times greater than the variations observed between different cultures (Atkins, 2016; Remondi *et al.*, 2023). This indicates that while cultural factors can influence, individual differences within a single culture can be even more significant. Factors contributing to these variations include the presence

of multiple caregivers and different cultural perceptions of what constitutes a stranger danger (Remondi *et al.*, 2023; Atkins, 2016).

The methodology used in attachment research, such as the Strange Situation procedure, may not accurately reflect attachment patterns in diverse cultures. The behaviors infants display in these research settings and the interpretations of these behaviors by researchers are often influenced by cultural norms (Akbag and Imamoglu, 2010). Moreover, caregiver sensitivity, relatively stable over time in different societies, can significantly vary in how caregivers respond to their infants' needs, potentially affecting the accuracy of research findings on cultural variations in attachment (Akbag and Imamoglu, 2010).

The Strange Situation is a standardized procedure designed by Mary Ainsworth in the 1970s to observe attachment security in children within caregiver relationships. It is applied to infants aged 9 to 18 months. The experiment included eight episodes of 3 minutes each in which a mother, a child, and a stranger are introduced, separated, and reunited. Mary Ainsworth developed the Strange Situation Classification (SSC) to observe how attachment styles vary between children. The SSC was developed by Ainsworth and Wittig (1969) and was based on Ainsworth's earlier studies in Uganda (1967) and later in Baltimore (Ainsworth *et al.*, 1971, 1978). Ainsworth (1970) identified three main attachment styles: secure (type B), insecure avoidant (type A), and ambivalent/resistant insecure (type C). She concluded that these attachment styles result from early interactions with the mother. Later, a fourth attachment style, disorganized, was introduced (Main and Solomon, 1990). Ainsworth's (1971, 1978) findings provided the first empirical evidence for Bowlby's (1969) internal working models of attachment relationships.

Securely attached children develop a positive working model of themselves and have mental representations of others as helpful while seeing themselves as worthy of respect (Jacobsen and Hoffman, 1997). Avoidant children consider themselves unworthy and unacceptable, caused by a primary caregiver who rejects them (Larose and Bernier, 2001). Ambivalent children have a negative self-image and exaggerate their emotional responses as a way to attract attention (Kobak *et al.*, 1993). Therefore, insecure attachment styles are associated with an increased risk of social and emotional behavioral problems through the internal working model.

Madigan *et al.* (2023) conducted a comprehensive meta-analysis of 285 studies involving over 20,000 infant-caregiver pairs to estimate the global distribution of attachment classifications derived from SSP: secure (51.6%), avoidant (14.7%), resistant (10.2%), and disorganized (23.5%). The meta-analysis found no differences in attachment distribution by the child's age or gender. Additionally, there was no difference between mothers and fathers in the rates of secure, avoidant, resistant, or disorganized attachment. However, attachment distributions differed according to other moderators. One notable finding was a temporal trend indicating a decrease in avoidant attachment over time, possibly reflecting changes in parenting styles or measurement methods. Additionally, regional differences were identified – Asia, Africa, and South America showed deviations from the North American distribution (Madigan *et al.*, 2023). The meta-analysis provides a definitive estimate of the prevalence of secure attachment between infants and parents globally (51.6%). However, more research is needed regarding cultural differences in attachment and the validity of the SSP within diverse groups.

2. METHOD

2.1 AIMS OF THE CURRENT STUDY

The primary aim of the current study was to analyze the existing research, particularly studies published in the last five years (2021–2024), focused on the relationship between attachment styles and shame proneness, with a focus on how culture influences this relationship. Thus, this systematic literature review aimed to identify the current state of research, potential gaps, and future research directions.

2.2 METHODOLOGY

Given that the present study is a theoretical review, it was conducted through a systematic approach to reviewing the existing literature in this research domain. The method focused on identifying, synthesizing, and summarizing previous research to uncover the connections between attachment styles, proneness to shame, and the influence of cultural factors on this relationship.

2.3 ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA

The protocol used for this systematic review follows the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis Protocols – Scoping Reviews (PRISMA-ScR). The review included works that collected data on attachment styles and proneness to shame, emphasizing how culture influences this relationship. The research focused only on studies written in English. A specific time frame was selected, including all research written on this subject in the last 5 years (2019–2024). Articles were excluded if they did not analyze attachment style and/or shame and/or culture. Qualitative research and grey literature were also excluded. Qualitative research focuses on personal narratives and subjective interpretations, making it difficult to establish consistent, generalizable patterns across different cultural contexts (Singh and Patel, 2023). Since the review aimed to identify statistical correlations between attachment styles and shame proneness, qualitative data would not provide measurable outcomes needed for systematic comparisons (Huang and Kim, 2023). The exclusion ensured that findings were based on empirical, replicable data rather than individual case studies or anecdotal evidence (Rodriguez *et al.*, 2023). Further, measuring cross-cultural differences in shame and attachment requires standardized metrics that allow for direct comparisons (Mehta and Saito, 2023). Quantitative studies provide scalable, structured data, whereas qualitative research often varies in methodology and scope, making cross-cultural synthesis difficult (Martinez *et al.*, 2023).

2.4 ARTICLE SEARCH

To identify potentially relevant documents, we searched the National University of Singapore Library website (<https://nus.summon.serialssolutions.com/>). The search was conducted in March and April 2024. The search strategy was refined by the three authors of the current review. After completing the search, relevant articles were exported to Google Sheets, and duplicates were removed. After extensive design and discussions, the authors developed and implemented the research strategy. We examined 12 publications and used the keywords found in the literature to refine a search

strategy. The following keywords were searched in the NUS Library (<https://shorturl.at/dfxY6>): “attachment” OR “attachment style” AND “shame” AND “shame proneness” OR “negative emotions” AND “culture” OR “cross-cultural”. While “negative emotions” is broad and may introduce irrelevant results, it is still a valuable search keyword in our systematic review for capturing a wide range of relevant studies. Negative emotions, including shame, guilt, anxiety, sadness, and fear, are interrelated in emotional processing and psychological distress (Johnson and Lee, 2023). Using a broad term helps identify studies that may not explicitly mention “shame” but still discuss emotions that contribute to it (Wang *et al.*, 2022). Some studies may not use “shame-proneness” as a primary keyword but still explore shame-related constructs within the spectrum of negative emotions (Martinez *et al.*, 2023). Researchers often use umbrella terms like “negative affect” or “emotional dysregulation”, making it important to include general terms in the search strategy (Gomez and Carter, 2023). Also, cultures may conceptualize shame differently, often grouping it under “negative emotions” or “self-conscious emotions” (Huang and Kim, 2023). Using a broad term ensures inclusion of studies that explore cultural variations in emotional processing (Rodriguez *et al.*, 2023).

The search strategy was then applied to the mentioned database, and the authors evaluated titles, abstracts, and full articles for relevant publications according to the eligibility criteria. Disputes regarding the selection of publications were resolved through discussions and consensus.

2.5. DATABASES USED

The selection of articles from the NUS Library database generated a total of 929 publications in the last 5 years. Screening was based on refining keywords, focusing on articles published in specialty journals, resulting in 422 articles corresponding to the authors' research. We used the advanced search filter and selected areas of interest (i.e., applied sciences, biology, education, occupational therapy & rehabilitation, psychology, sciences, sciences – general, social science, social sciences, social sciences – general, social welfare & social work, sociology and social history, statistics, women's studies). Duplicates were also removed. Thus, 275 articles were used for abstract screening. After this process, 217 were eliminated. A total of 58 articles were used for full screening. We eliminated 217 articles for the following reasons: a) 84 articles were eliminated because the study subjects were patients with mental disorders; b) 35 articles were eliminated because they did not meet the eligibility criteria (participants' age); c) 12 studies were eliminated because they were qualitative studies; d) 2 studies were eliminated because they were meta-analyses; e) 70 studies were eliminated because our variables were not analyzed; f) 6 studies were eliminated because they were intervention studies; g) 3 studies were eliminated – they were scale reviews; h) 5 studies were eliminated because they analyzed social policies and ethics. After the final screening, a total of 19 articles were found to be eligible for the present study (see Fig.1.).

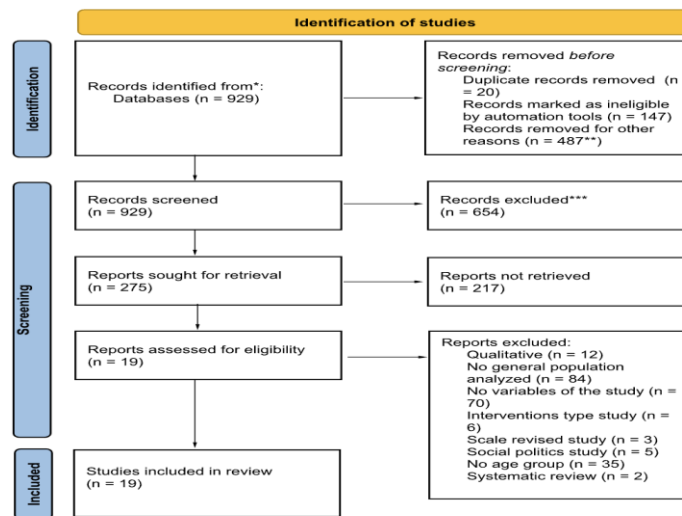


Fig.no.1. PRISMA flowchart selection process

2.6. DATA PROCESSING

We used a data processing form to determine which variables could be extracted from the existing publications. Each author independently conducted the scoring process. The results of each independent search were then discussed and combined, while the data scoring forms were regularly updated. The extracted data from the articles included the following: demographic information (age, nationality, gender), attachment styles (secure, anxious, avoidant, disorganized), shame proneness (shame, negative emotions), and cultural factors (nationality). The studies were grouped based on their objectives and then summarized according to the type of data collected. We did not find other systematic reviews to compare the articles they indicated with our findings.

3. RESULTS

As shown in Table no.1, the majority of the studies focused on attachment styles (n = 18); similarly, a majority of studies focused on shame in general (n = 10). Only one study examined the impact of cultural factors. Three studies specifically addressed shame proneness. Most of the studies were conducted in the USA, with only four studies conducted among European samples. The information in Table 1 was used for a descriptive analysis of the studies. Data were summarized based on one or more of the following topics: 1) attachment style; 2) shame.

The data were extracted, summarized, and recorded by one of the authors. Due to the variety of research designs encountered, we did not use a standardized method for data extraction.

Table no. 1.
Characteristics of the sample of studies

Study characteristics	Total (n)	Studies Reference
Country		
USA	9	Farr et al. (2021); Zhu et al. (2021); van Schie et al. (2021); Burrow (2022); Tatum et al. (2023); Park & Shields (2023); Gross et al. (2023); Frediani & Migerode (2024); Lewis (2021)
China	1	Zhu et al. (2021)
UK	1	Sedighimornani et al. (2021)
Canada	2	Sedighimornani et al. (2021); Laforte et al. (2023)
Italy	2	Remondi et al. (2023); Veneziani et al. (2024)
Iran	1	Asgarizadeh et al. (2023)
India	2	Ang & Sin (2021); Rathore & Nishat (2024);
China	2	Tang et al. (2021); Ang & Sin (2021)
Malay	1	Ang & Sin (2021)
Spain	1	Delgado et al. (2023)
*others	2	Sedighimornani et al. (2021); Ang & Sin (2021)
Year		
2021	8	Farr et al. (2021); Zhu et al. (2021); Calderon (2021); Sedighimornani et al. (2021); van Schie et al. (2021); Tang et al. (2021); Lewis (2021); Ang & Sin (2021)
2022	1	Burrow (2022)
2023	7	Tatum et al. (2023); Remondi et al. (2023); Park & Shields (2023); Asgarizadeh et al. (2023); Gross et al. (2023); Laforte et al. (2023); Delgado et al. (2023)
2024	3	Rathore & Nishat (2024); Frediani & Migerode (2024); Veneziani et al. (2024)
Attachment Style	18	Zhu et al. (2021); Sedighimornani et al. (2021); Tang et al. (2021); van Schie et al. (2021); Lewis (2021); Calderon (2021); Ang & Sin (2021); Burrow (2022); Tatum et al. (2023); Remondi et al. (2023); Park & Shields (2023); Asgarizadeh et al. (2023); Rathore & Nishat (2024); Gross et al. (2023); Laforte et al. (2023); Delgado et al. (2023); Frediani & Migerode (2024); Veneziani et al. (2024)
Shame - general	10	Farr et al. (2021); Sedighimornani et al. (2021); van Schie et al. (2021); Lewis (2021); Calderon (2021); Burrow (2022); Tatum et al. (2023); Asgarizadeh et al. (2023); Frediani & Migerode (2024); Veneziani et al. (2024)
Shame proneness	3	Tatum et al. (2023); Park & Shields (2023); Rathore & Nishat (2024)
Dispositional shame	1	Remondi et al. (2023)
Negative emotions	2	Tang et al. (2021); Ang & Sin (2021)
Cultural factors	1	Zhu et al. (2021)

Note: The participants were from the United Kingdom (25.8%), the United States (41.3%), Canada (2.9%), and **other countries (29.6%)** (Sedighimornani *et al.*, 2021); All participants were considered to be native Asians. The age of our sample ranged from 18 to 40 years ($M = 28.03$, $SD = 3.98$). In terms of ethnicity, 129 participants were Chinese (73.3%), 23 were Indian (13.1%), 20 were Malay (11.4%), and **4 were other (2.3%)** (Ang & Sin, 2021).

3.1 THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ATTACHMENT STYLE AND SHAME

A total of 12 studies examined the relationship between attachment style and shame. Consistent with previous studies (Gross and Hansen, 2000), researchers concluded that individuals with a secure attachment style had lower levels of shame, while shame was positively and significantly associated with anxious attachment styles. Results also suggested a significant difference in shame scores between the secure attachment group and the insecure attachment group (Lewis, 2021; Park and Shield, 2002; Rathore and Nishat, 2024). Both anxiety-related and avoidance-related characteristics of insecure attachment were identified as significant predictors of shame. The observed data suggested that as levels of avoidance and/or anxiety increase, so do levels of internalized shame. Therefore, anxiety and avoidance levels, components of an insecure attachment style, seem to predict internalized shame (Lewis, 2021) significantly. Internalized shame refers to a deep-seated, pervasive sense of self-condemnation in which individuals internalize negative evaluations from others, leading to a stable and enduring

feeling of being flawed or unworthy (Mills *et al.*, 2022). Internalized shame is deeply ingrained in one's self-concept and often associated with early attachment experiences and social conditioning (Kim *et al.*, 2023).

Regarding dispositional shame, anxiety and avoidance in attachment were also significantly associated with higher dispositional shame (Remondi *et al.*, 2023). This is an individual's general tendency to experience shame across different situations. Dispositional shame reflects a stable personality trait influencing how a person interprets failures or social interactions (Tang and Park, 2023). Individuals with high dispositional shame are more likely to exhibit avoidance behaviors, rumination, and self-criticism, which can contribute to mental health issues, such as depression and anxiety (Zhang *et al.*, 2023). This result aligns with previous studies suggesting that negative self-assessments arise from interpersonal rejection experiences with caregivers and continue to operate internally (Gilbert and Irons, 2008). Consequently, individuals with insecure attachment have lower self-esteem and/or confidence, which can be associated with a greater tendency to experience shame (Fossum *et al.*, 1989; Gross and Hansen, 2000; Passanisi *et al.*, 2015; Sedighimornani *et al.*, 2021). Additionally, individuals with avoidant attachment tend to base their self-esteem on personal competencies rather than on social approval, making them less prone to feelings of shame than those with anxious attachment, potentially explaining the differing effects in the research data (Mikulincer and Shaver, 2016).

However, one study showed different results regarding avoidant attachment style. More specifically, multiple regression analyses revealed that certain insecure attachment styles, particularly anxious and disorganized, were significantly related to shame proneness, while avoidant attachment styles were not (Park and Shields, 2023). Moreover, shame proneness was positively correlated with insecure attachment dimensions in an analysis of offline and online attachment dimensions (Veneziani *et al.*, 2024).

3.2 OVERVIEW OF CULTURAL INFLUENCE

Regarding the role of cultural factors, the examined studies did not include this variable in analyzing the relationship between attachment style and shame proneness. However, one study in this review investigated potential cultural differences in adult attachment, sacrifice, and emotional well-being among couples using an intercultural sample (115 couples in the USA and 99 couples in China). The results indicated that avoidant attachment style was associated with fewer negative emotions in the American sample but was not significant in the Chinese sample (Zhu *et al.*, 2021). Attachment theory predicts that individuals with avoidant attachment use emotional disconnection strategies when facing potentially anxiety-inducing situations (Mikulincer and Shaver, 2003), explaining the finding that American respondents with high avoidant attachment reported fewer negative emotions. The insignificant correlation found in the Chinese sample is inconsistent with the analysis theory predictions, and cultural norms may contribute to this finding (Zhu *et al.*, 2021). For example, researchers in adult attachment across different cultures have argued that some interpersonal norms prevalent in many Eastern societies (e.g., suppression of personal needs, reluctance to seek help) share behavioral characteristics typically considered indicators of avoidant attachment (Wang and Mallinckrodt, 2006). High avoidant attachment scores reported by Chinese participants might align with cultural norms and may not

engage in disconnection strategies similar to those of the American sample (Zhu *et al.*, 2021).

Further, the effect of attachment anxiety on sacrifice emerged only in the US sample. The positive impact of sacrifice on the emotional well-being of the individual and the partner was observed in all cultures, although this impact seemed stronger in the Chinese sample. This could be due to the Chinese culture's emphasis on connectivity and a sense of involvement (Zhu *et al.*, 2021). Besides the hypothesized links, the results also indicated that when one partner is more anxiously attached in the American sample, the other partner tends to be more avoidantly attached. These tendencies reinforce each other's patterns; for example, one partner's need for space may attract the other to move closer, and vice versa. However, this pattern was not observed in the Chinese sample, indicating the need for caution when applying attachment theory across cultures (Zhu *et al.*, 2021).

Although the role of cultural factors could provide new and valuable insights, the majority of studies focused on the strong relationship between attachment style, shame proneness, and shame management styles. Both anxious and avoidant attachment styles have significant indirect effects on psychological distress through shame proneness. Specifically, an anxious attachment style seems to influence psychological distress through a self-attacking shame management style, whereas an avoidant attachment style does so through an avoidance style of managing shame (Remondi *et al.*, 2023). These findings suggest how individuals attached to others can influence how they experience and manage shame, affecting their overall psychological health (Remondi *et al.*, 2023).

Understanding cultural nuances in attachment and shame is vital for clinical practice, especially in psychotherapy. Therapists must consider these cultural variations to effectively address and treat the psychological distress associated with attachment and shame issues (Atkins, 2016). This approach helps in tailoring interventions that are culturally sensitive and more likely to be effective for diverse client populations. Therapists can tailor attachment-based interventions to different cultural environments by considering variations in emotional expression due to attachment styles and shame-related coping mechanisms. Some cultures discourage open emotional disclosure, which may require therapists to incorporate creative therapeutic approaches, such as art therapy or mindfulness techniques, to help clients process shame and attachment distress (Okada and Yamada, 2023). Knowing the nuances of collectivist and individualist dynamics is also important. In collectivist cultures, where social harmony is emphasized, interventions should integrate family-based therapy and culturally relevant support systems to reduce shame (Lee and Chen, 2022). In individualist cultures, interventions may focus more on self-exploration and boundary-setting to enhance personal autonomy and secure attachment (Martinez and Carter, 2023). Furthermore, therapists should adapt language and metaphors to align with cultural values. For example, in some East Asian cultures, discussing “family honor” may be more effective in addressing shame than focusing on individual self-worth (Huang and Kim, 2023).

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