

## **MOTHER-CHILD ATTACHMENT IN THAILAND: A REVIEW ARTICLE**

Nujjaree Chaimongkol

*Faculty of Nursing, Burapha University, Chon Buri 20131, Thailand.*

### **ABSTRACT**

Mother-infant attachment in Thailand was crucial, and needed to be assessed as a result of effects of economic and social changes. Presently, mothers with young children were increasing engaged in the labor force in greater number. Over three-fifths of all families in Thailand, a developing non-western country, had working mothers. This situation affected the family socialization functions and also might decrease the quality of mother-child interactions. Consequently, concerns regarding mother-infant attachment in the Thai context was raised. Literature related to attachment studies in Thailand was limited, and most of it published in Thai. Relationships among young children at home, childcare setting and hospital, adolescents, mother-fetus, mothers with different living areas, young, abused and genetic defect carrier mothers were presented. Two studies compared results with attachment theory, which were generalizable to the theory. Instruments developed from western cultures using to measure attachment in Thai sample were discussed.

**Key words:** Mother-child attachment, Thailand, cross-cultural, measurement.

## INTRODUCTION

Mother-child attachment has been described as an affectional bond or tie between a mother and a child, and it is reciprocal. Attachment security has been evolved from very early age of the child's life and beyond with his primary caregiver, which usually is a mother. These tenets are derived from attachment theory originated by Bowlby (1969) and later extensively collaborated working between Ainsworth and Bowlby (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Bowlby, 1969). Attachment theory explains and points out that parent's special relationship with the child has an influence on the child's social, emotional and personality development later in life. The attachment styles are influenced by psychological variables such as the quality, timing, and pacing of adult/child encounters. Secure attachment is seen more often in the context of parenting that is dependable and sensitive to the child's need, enabling the child to count on the caregiver's future availability and assistance. In addition, maternal employment, with dual roles of working and child rearing, has a major impact on mother-child attachment.

### **Current situation affecting Thai mother-child attachment**

Thailand is a developing non-western country that is currently experiencing considerable economic and social changes. Nationwide, more than half of all mothers are employed in the paid labor force, providing additional economic resources for their families (Youngblut et al., 1998). Employment of mothers outside the home is no longer considered a non-traditional life-style for families with young children. In most cases, mothers work in order to share responsibility for family finances (Chaimongkol and Flick, 2006).

Mothers with young children are entering the labor force in greater numbers as a result of the current economic and social changes in Thailand. In fact, currently, over three-fifths of all families in Thailand have working mothers (National Statistic Office, 2010). Although the male or the father is considered the leader of all family members, but the task of child-rearing ends to fall to the mother

or other female members, like grandmothers or aunts, of the family. In Thailand, involvement of the extended family in child rearing has been the norm, specifically, in the past, when grandparents living within the family influenced child-rearing practices. However, in recent decades, the preference for separate nuclear households, without other relatives in the family, has been increasing among young newly married Thai couples (UNICEF, 2012). Due to the economic necessity for both parents to work outside the home, Thai women fill a variety of roles in addition to that of motherhood. This is an important social change that affects the family socialization function and also may decrease the quality of mother-child interactions, which may have an influence on mother-child attachment. To date, many families leave their children with either a formal/professional or non-formal child caregiver during work time. The types of childcare, such as informal home nursery, official nursery, leaving the child with relatives, neighbors or paid childcare worker, enlisted is considered to impact mother-child attachment in Thailand.

The unequal access to media and subsequent changes in child rearing approaches lead to intergenerational conflicts particularly between urban mothers and rural grandmothers. When a grandmother comes from the country to live in the city, her traditional ways often clash with modern ideas. Rural and urban mothers have been found to possess difference expectations regarding child outcomes. Urban and highly educated mothers tend to put more emphasis on children's cognitive development, teaching and disciplining them at an early age. Rural mothers focus more on their children's psychosocial behaviors (Piamjariyakul, 1996). Rural mothers considered toys and books to be unaffordable or unnecessary for the development of very young children (Piamjariyakul and Williams, 2000). In addition, Thai women's literacy rate increases so does the access to books, magazines, the Internet, and others media resources containing advice on child rearing. This increased access to information is especially prevalent among mothers living in urban areas, and often influences their child rearing.

### **Mother-child attachment studies within Thailand**

Research related to mother-child attachment has spanned several fields within the Thai context, such as counseling, education, psychology, nursing and public and mental health, where most of this research has been published locally in the Thai language. There have also been master's theses and doctoral dissertations addressing mother-child attachment in Thailand. Mother-child attachment has been referred to as mother-fetal / mother-child bonding, relationship and linking not only to Bowlby's attachment theory (1969) but also Klaus and Kennell's mother-infant bonding (1976), Rubin's bonding in the postpartum period (1977), Cranley's maternal-fetal attachment (1981), and Mercer's maternal roles (1981).

There were two studies regarding to child behaviors in formal childcare settings in Bangkok (Phonyotin, 1993; Williams et al., 2003). Phonyotin (1993) reported that separation and reunion behaviors of young children were found to be associated with both the time that parents spent working and with overall maternal stress. In this study, when confronted with situations of separation from their mothers, children would demonstrate behaviors such as crying, fussing, clinging to objects or bottles, and refusing to join in activities, including eating or sleeping. When reunited with their mothers at day end, the children adjusted quickly demonstrating happy behaviors and leaving willingly. No difference was found between girls' and boys' behaviors. The researchers did not find a significant relationship between specific attachment behaviors of security and dependency. They attributed this to the fact that some children were in the nursery for consistent, short time periods and developed security in the knowledge that their parents were returning to them. Another study (Williams et al., 2003) exploring mother-toddler interactions at home indicated that Thai mothers had few verbal exchanges with their children and the researchers. The authors of this study suggested that this might be a typical characteristic of Thai mothers.

A qualitative study using interpretive

phenomenology methodology explained women's multiple roles, breastfeeding, and the mother-child relationships (Yimyam, 1998; Yimyam and Morrow, 1999). Its findings showed that most mothers who stopped work and maintained breastfeeding expressed satisfaction with their choices and roles. However, some mothers were conflicted with their roles between being mother and worker as they had to help support their family income and also wanted to provide optimal caring and nurture the child. Mothers who returned to work and stopped breastfeeding often developed negative feelings, such as guilt, and failure of their maternal role regardless of their rationale for returning to work. This suggests a mother/worker's role conflict may develop and negatively impact the relationship with her child.

Maternal attachment to preterm infants admitted to the Newborn Intensive Care Unit (NICU) has been observed (Orapiriyakul et al., 2007). It was found that the attachment started and gradually developed soon after the mother accepted her pregnancy. Maternal/infant contact was disrupted when the preterm baby was transferred to NICU while the mother was at the postpartum unit, but resumed when the mother was permitted to visit her baby. The mothers were found to adjust emotionally to the crisis, demonstrating appropriate concern while seeking closeness and showing appropriate concern as the mothers and infants engaged in mutual interactions. Many conditions were found to influence mother-infant attachment, including the mother's anxiety, previous experiences, degree of encouragement for the motherly roles from the health care system, family support, and religious beliefs and practices (Orapiriyakul et al., 2007).

Another study examined parent-child interactions associated with aggressive behavior of Thai hospitalized children. Parents of children who were more aggressive were found to demonstrate less warmth and interest in their children. In contrast, parents of children who were not aggressive showed more love, interest, and offered more explanations to their children (Urerak, 1984). Suvannathat and Kasemnet (1989) indicated that Thai children whose parents encouraged independence and decision

making, and who offered reasons to justify their requests were well-adjusted, socially responsible, and demonstrated self-control.

In addition to young children, relationships between Thai adolescents and their parents were also studied (Boonchome and Ucharatana, 1999; Tuicharoen et al., 1998). It was found that girls showed greater attachment, obedience, and respect to the parent than boys. This might be due to variations in child rearing practices. In Thai culture daughters are in closer proximity to their parents as they are taught to care for parents and the home. An association between adolescent substance abuse and authoritarian parenting was found. The increase of single parent families in Thailand influenced parent-adolescent relationships, which influenced adolescents' self-concept, role, dependency, and view of other relationships.

The issue of orphan babies resulting from unintended pregnancy has been of interest in nursing disciplines in Thailand. Attachment among young, abused, HIV-infected, or genetic defect carriers (such as hemoglobin disorders and bleeding disorders) mothers and their fetuses and/or infants were examined. It is hypothesized that when mothers have their own physical and/or psychosocial problems during pregnancy mother-infant bonding may decrease. Early attachment between mothers and their babies can influence later attachment security, which plays an important role in social and emotional development of the child. A number of studies show a clear relation between the quality of early attachment and how well the child functions later (Park and Waters, 1989).

Studies of adolescent Thai mothers indicated they had moderately close relationships with their baby. Strong maternal relationships were associated with adolescent mothers who perceived their childbirth experiences as positive and who demonstrated lower levels of anxiety (Usaha et al., 1999). It was shown that both adolescent and adult pregnant women with abusive partners had low attachment to their fetus and infant after birth. Adolescent and abused pregnant women who received a supporting-activity program to promote maternal-fetal bonding had

better maternal-fetal and mother-infant attachment than those who did not receive (Buaboon, 2001; Yakasem, 2006). The family cohesion and support were associated with maternal-fetal attachment (Sa-Ngunprom, 2006).

HIV-positive and HIV-negative mothers demonstrated similar attachment to their baby during their first few days of life, whereas a month later, HIV-negative mothers were found to be more attached to the infant than the HIV-positive mothers. Although the HIV-positive mothers were asymptomatic, they were on antiviral medications and thought to be preoccupied with their future health conditions (Nettip et al., 1998), as opposed to focusing on the relationship with their baby.

#### **Applying attachment theory across cultures: Thailand and the U.S.**

There are three studies that specifically examined mother-child attachment in Thailand based on Bowlby's (1969) attachment theory (Chaimongkol and Flick, 2006; Nettip, 2004; Phonyotin, 1993). Phonyotin's study (1993) claimed that Thai preschoolers were able to use their mothers as a secure base from which to explore the environment. Although the attachment security for the Thai children was similar to those of the U.S. children, their dependency was higher. Contributing factors may be that current child rearing practices of Thai parents are predominantly authoritarian, and Thai parents tend to be more protective, both of which may lead to less independence among Thai children.

Of particular interest when addressing the generalize ability of attachment theory to Thailand is the study conducted by Chaimongkol and Flick (2006). Reciprocal behaviors between mother and child were observed in the home environment in a suburban sample in Thailand. It is the only study published in English and accessible through electronic databases that examined maternal sensitivity and attachment security in Thai culture. The researchers employed western tools to measure Thai maternal sensitivity and attachment security. Infant attachment was found to be highly positive correlated with maternal sensitivity. No cases in the disorganized group were found. Contrary to Belsky

(1988) and Belsky and Rovine (1988) studies, there was not an increase in insecure attachment among infants of mothers working more than part time. This may be explained in terms of the cultural differences in Thailand compared to the U.S. In Thai culture, about half of the Thai children are cared for by the extended family with whom they share a home, or by a neighbor or close friend. Formal day care settings are rare as opposed to the U.S. and other Western countries where formal day care and babysitting situations are the norm (NICHD 1997, 1999).

The previous studies of mother and children relationships in Thailand made some contributions to attachment literature. However, it was still unclear that the degree to which attachment theory was generalizable to Thai culture. Chaimongkol and Flick's (2006) and Nettip's (2004) studies provided support to the central assumptions of attachment theory. They suggested that one of the conditions contributing to the development of a secure attachment relationship might be the attachment figure's sensitivity in responding to the baby's signals (Bleher et al., 1977; Boris et al., 1999; Nichols et al., 2001). The proportional representation of the three attachment categories among Thai children was comparable to studies with Western samples, supporting the classical categories of attachment. Overall, the results of these studies suggested that quality of childcare, employment satisfaction, and maternal sensitivity contributed to the prediction of infant attachment.

## CONCLUSION

Thailand is a developing country in Southeast Asia, where the culture differs significantly from the U.S./Western developed countries. Mothers' responsive behavior is the major indicator of infant attachment, and it has been found that Thai children use their mothers as a secure base. As globalization reaches Thailand, and more mothers enter the workforce, there are increased concerns about quality of mother-child interaction. However, the study of attachment in Thailand is in the fledgling stages. More studies are needed to further test the reliability and applicability

of instruments such as the MBQS, the HOME, and the AQS, and to further address the various categories of attachment in Thailand. The changing social-economic environment of Thailand presents unique opportunities to observe the impact that mothers entering the workforce have on attachment in this collectivist society. It also offers the setting to study the dynamics of attachment in an extended family/community of primary and secondary caregivers, and to compare attachment differences with varied child rearing practices in traditional rural and the more modern media-influenced urban communities. A further study addressing the degree to which Thai infants experience disorganized attachment would be beneficial. The current research in Thailand reiterates the importance of examining individual test item compatibility of attachment measures to cultural norms in Thailand and other non-western countries.

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