



Insights into Students' Understanding of Attachment Theory

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Background

Attachment theory is a theoretical framework that explains how early relationships with caregivers shape an individual's emotional and social development.

Attachment theory is one of the most popular developmental theories among psychologists, child welfare professionals, and others.

This may be due to a combination of extensive research highlighting the role of child-caregiver attachment quality in child development (see Figure 1), and the intuitive terminology used (e.g., secure vs. insecure).

Recently, scholars have pointed out a gap between the scientific understanding and practical application of attachment theory, which may have unintended consequences.

The present study

At the Department of Psychology, we have a unique opportunity to address this gap in our education. To do so effectively, it is necessary to first map psychology students' (mis)conceptions about attachment theory.

This study aims to explore students' understanding of attachment theory and its practical application, with the goal of identifying areas that need further emphasis in the education.

Methods

Participants

The study included 80 psychology students (hereof 26 BA students) enrolled at the Department of Psychology, University of Copenhagen.

The number of ECTS achieved at the current level of education was on average 126 (SD = 34) for BA students and 33 (SD = 50) for MA students.

Procedure

Participants answered an online survey.

Convenience sampling: Students were recruited via invitations posted in a Facebook group for psychology students at the University of Copenhagen, and announcements during one MA and one BA lecture delivered by the author.

It was emphasized that the purpose of the survey was to assess their current knowledge based on the education they had received thus far.

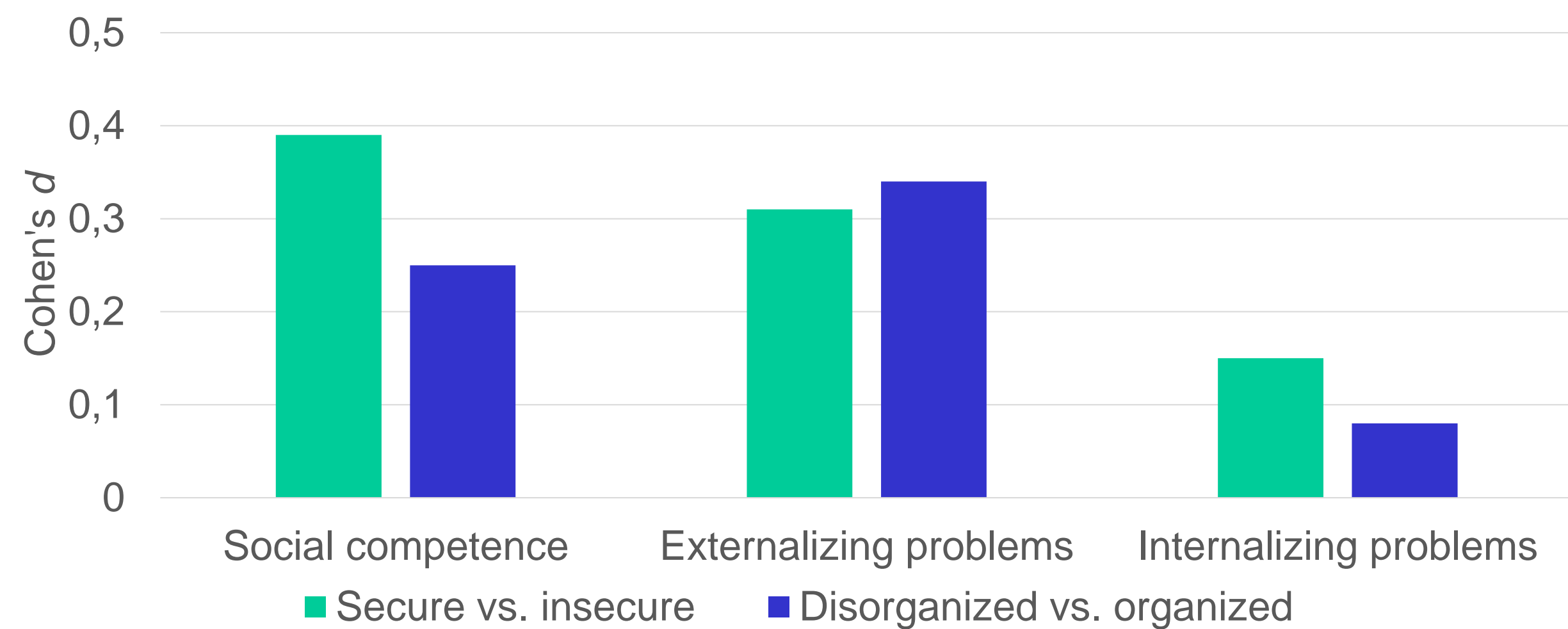


Figure 1. Meta-analytic effect sizes of the associations between the quality of early attachment relationships and later child development.

Reference: Groh, A. M., Fearon, R. P., van IJzendoorn, M. H., Bakermans-Kranenburg, M. J., & Roisman, G. I. (2017). Attachment in the early life course: Meta-analytic evidence for its role in socioemotional development. *Child Development Perspectives*, 11(1), 70-76.

Measures

Background information

Educational level: ECTS points achieved.

Future career intentions: Their perceived likelihood of working with children and families and attachment theory in their future practice as psychologists.

Understanding of Attachment Theory

Questions were selected from a previous study targeting the understandings of attachment theory among child protection workers in Sweden (Hammarlund et al., 2022).

The selected questions focused on the students' general understanding of attachment theory (e.g., "A child's attachment quality can be different with different caregivers.") and the perceived importance of these concepts in practice (e.g., "If a child has an insecure attachment, it signals insufficient caregiving capacity in the caregivers.").

All questions were answered on a 6-point Likert-scale going from "Strongly Agree" (= 6) to "Strongly Disagree" (= 1) with an additional "Not sure" option.

Statistical analyses

Descriptive statistics were calculated to identify:

- The items with **the greatest spread** among the students' answers (i.e., the items with the largest interquartile range, IQR)
- The items where most students answered **"not sure"**
- The items that most students **agreed** with (i.e., the items with the highest median)

Discussion

- Students have a good understanding of basic attachment theory concepts (e.g., definition and insecure attachment)
- Student uncertainties could be addressed in a seminar course at the clinical psychology track at the MA-level: **"Applying Attachment Theory in Practice with Families and Children"**
- The proposed key learning outcomes displayed in Figure 3 are aligned with the general learning outcomes for the seminar courses in clinical psychology.
- How could practice be integrated in teaching?
 - Value creation pedagogy.
 - Collaboration with external stakeholders to identify and develop solutions for real-life problems related to attachment theory.

Limitations and future perspectives

- Selection bias, but perhaps the students that would be most likely to use attachment theory in their future practice as psychologists (80% answered that this was likely to some or a high degree).
- Qualitative data could have provided more in-depth insight into student understandings and uncertainties.
- Will some of these competences be covered in the last part of the education? Conduct a survey with students who have just finished their education.
- How does the proposed course influence student understandings? Conduct pre-post tests in the first course.

Results

Figure 2. Bar charts illustrating student responses to selected questions.

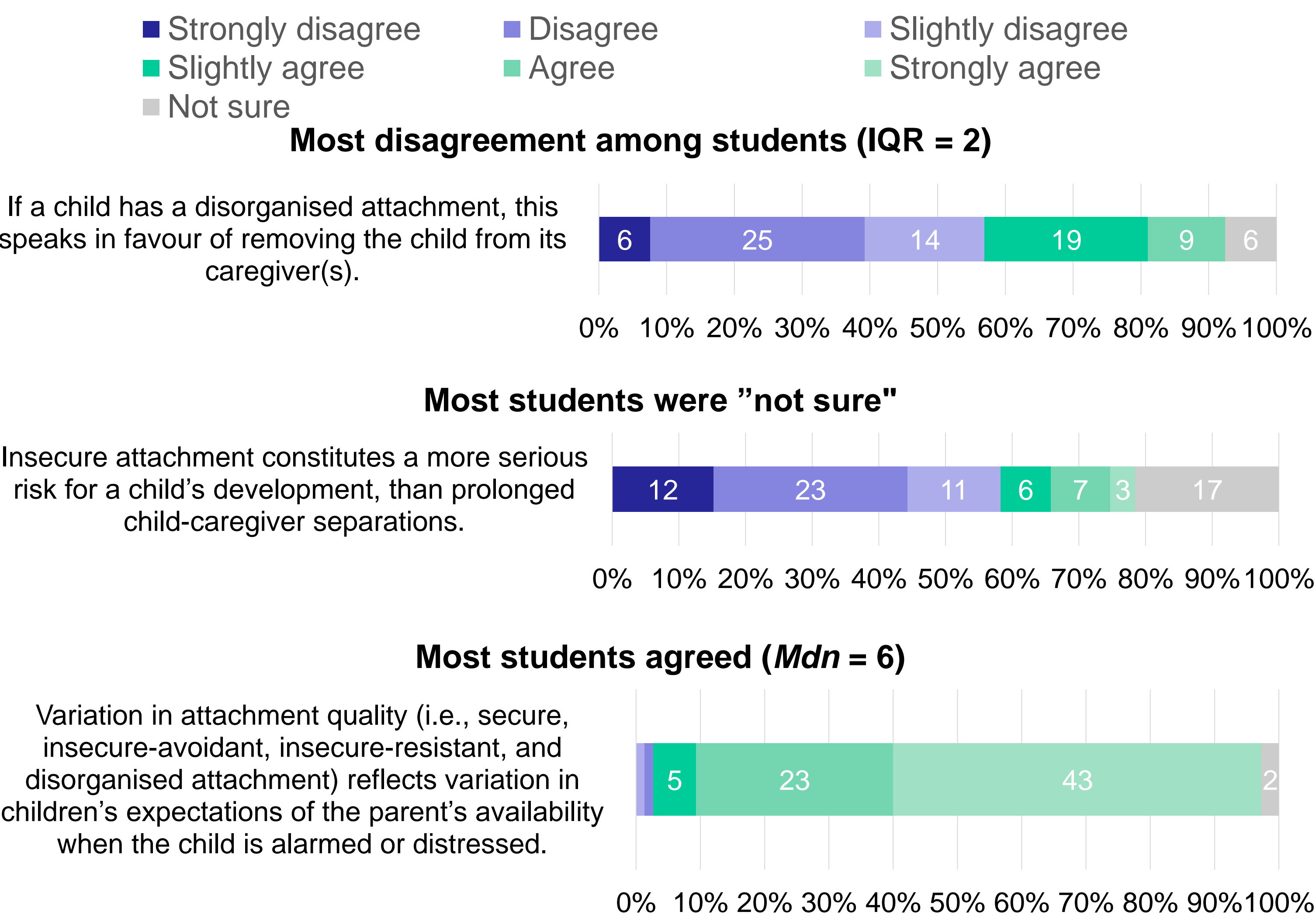


Figure 3. Key learning objectives in the proposed MA-course "Applying Attachment Theory in Practice with Families and Children"



Reference

Hammarlund, M., Granqvist, P., Elfvik, S., Andram, C., & Forslund, T. (2022). Concepts travel faster than thought: An empirical study of the use of attachment classifications in child protection investigations. *Attachment & human development*, 24(6), 712-731.