

Intergenerational Transmission of Attachment Patterns: A Mixed-Methods Study of Emerging Adult Women and Their Mothers in Northern India

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ABSTRACT

The intergenerational transmission of attachment patterns remains a central tenet of attachment theory, yet empirical evidence from non-Western, collectivist cultures such as India is limited. This mixed-methods study examined the concordance of attachment styles between 120 emerging adult women (aged 18–25 years) and their biological mothers in Northern India. Participants completed the Experiences in Close Relationships–Revised (ECR-R) questionnaire to assess attachment anxiety and avoidance. A subsample of 25 mother–daughter dyads participated in semi-structured qualitative interviews exploring early caregiving experiences, cultural influences, and current relational narratives. Quantitative results revealed moderate concordance in attachment anxiety ($r = .42, p < .01$) but weaker concordance in avoidance. Thematic analysis of the interviews identified three key transmission mechanisms: emotional availability within joint-family systems, gendered caregiving expectations, and the mediating role of cultural norms around interdependence. Findings extend attachment theory by highlighting both universal and culture-specific pathways of transmission in the Indian context. Implications for culturally sensitive clinical interventions, family therapy, and developmental psychology training in South Asia are discussed.

Keywords: attachment transmission, intergenerational patterns, emerging adulthood, mixed-methods, mother-daughter dyads.

Introduction

Attachment theory, originally formulated by John Bowlby in the mid-twentieth century and empirically grounded by Mary Ainsworth's innovative Strange Situation paradigm, stands as one of the most enduring and generative frameworks in developmental psychology. Bowlby (1969, 1973, 1980) conceptualized attachment as an evolved behavioral system that motivates infants to seek proximity to a primary caregiver in times of distress, thereby promoting survival and

emotional security. Through repeated interactions with caregivers who are consistently responsive and available, infants construct internal working models—mental representations of the self as worthy of care and of others as reliable and trustworthy. These models are not static; they become relatively stable templates that guide expectations, emotions, and behaviours in close relationships throughout life. Ainsworth's pioneering work further delineated individual differences in attachment security, identifying secure, avoidant, and anxious patterns that have since been extended into adulthood by researchers such as Hazan and Shaver (1987) and Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991).

A particularly compelling extension of attachment theory is the hypothesis of intergenerational transmission: the idea that a parent's own attachment history and internal working models are communicated—often non-consciously—to the next generation, shaping the child's emerging relational patterns. This transmission is thought to occur through multiple pathways, including the parent's sensitivity to the child's signals, the emotional climate of the family, and the narratives parents construct about their own childhood experiences. Early empirical support for this process came from studies using the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI; Main, Kaplan & Cassidy, 1985), which assesses how adults process and narrates their early attachment experiences. Meta-analytic evidence has consistently supported moderate levels of transmission. Van IJzendoorn's (1995) seminal review of 18 studies found a correspondence of approximately 63% between parental attachment representations and infant attachment classifications. More recently, Verhage et al. (2016) synthesized data from over 4,000 dyads and reported an overall effect size of $r = .31$, confirming that transmission is reliable yet far from deterministic. Subsequent research has identified moderating factors such as parental reflective functioning (Fonagy et al., 1998), mindfulness, and the quality of co-parenting, suggesting that transmission is a dynamic, context-sensitive process rather than a simple one-to-one inheritance.

Despite these advances, the bulk of the evidence base remains heavily skewed toward Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic (WEIRD) populations (Henrich, Heine & Norenzayan, 2010). This narrow sampling raises fundamental questions about the universality of attachment transmission. In collectivist cultural contexts, where interdependence, extended family involvement, and relational harmony are prioritized over individual autonomy, the mechanisms and expressions of transmission may diverge in important ways. South Asian societies, particularly India, offer a rich yet under-explored setting for testing these ideas. Indian family structures have traditionally been joint or extended, with multiple generations cohabiting under one roof and caregiving responsibilities distributed among mothers, grandmothers, aunts, and elder siblings.

Gendered socialization further complicates the picture: daughters are often socialized to prioritize familial duty, emotional attunement, and relational maintenance, while sons may be

encouraged toward independence and achievement. These cultural scripts are not static. Economic liberalization since the 1990s, rapid urbanization, rising female education and workforce participation, and the gradual shift toward nuclear households have introduced new tensions between traditional interdependence and emerging desires for personal autonomy (Kakar & Kakar, 2007; Uberoi, 2003). Young women in particular navigate a complex intergenerational landscape where they are expected to honor familial bonds while pursuing higher education, careers, and sometimes delayed marriage.

The period of emerging adulthood (ages 18–25), as conceptualized by Arnett (2000, 2015), is especially salient in the Indian context. This transitional phase involves identity exploration, increasing independence, and the renegotiation of parent–child relationships. In Northern India, where the present study is situated, emerging adult women frequently maintain daily emotional and practical connections with their mothers even while living away from home for studies or work. The mother–daughter relationship often serves as the primary conduit for emotional support, value transmission, and relational modelling. Yet, surprisingly little empirical attention has been paid to how attachment patterns are specifically transmitted within these dyads. Existing Indian research on family dynamics has largely focused on parenting styles (e.g., authoritarian vs. authoritative; Singh & Misra, 2012), emotional intelligence, or general mental health outcomes in adolescents. Studies that have touched on attachment tend to be small-scale, quantitative, and limited to urban college samples, rarely incorporating mothers’ perspectives or qualitative depth (e.g., Sharma & Sharma, 2018; Bhargava & Gupta, 2020). Moreover, they seldom examine the cultural and structural mediators—such as joint-family living, socioeconomic pressures, or the influence of caste and regional norms—that may amplify or buffer transmission.

This relative neglect is striking given the clinical and societal relevance of intergenerational attachment patterns in India. Mental health professionals working with Indian families frequently encounter intergenerational conflicts around emotional expression, autonomy versus duty, and the legacy of unresolved parental trauma.

Culturally sensitive interventions—whether in family therapy, university counselling centres, or community mental health programmes—would benefit immensely from evidence that is grounded in local realities rather than imported directly from Euro- American models. A mixed-methods design is particularly well-suited to address these complexities. Quantitative measures, such as the Experiences in Close Relationships– Revised questionnaire (ECR-R; Fraley, Waller & Brennan, 2000), can establish the statistical concordance of attachment anxiety and avoidance between mothers and daughters. At the same time, in-depth qualitative interviews allow participants to articulate the lived mechanisms of transmission: the subtle emotional cues passed within joint-family systems, the unspoken expectations around gendered caregiving, the tension

between cultural ideals of interdependence and modern aspirations for self-fulfillment, and the role of broader social changes such as digital connectivity or economic migration.

The present study therefore seeks to fill a critical gap in the developmental psychology literature by examining the intergenerational transmission of attachment patterns among emerging adult women and their biological mothers in Northern India. Specifically, it pursues three interrelated objectives: (1) to quantify the degree of concordance in attachment styles (anxiety and avoidance) within mother–daughter dyads using a validated self-report instrument; (2) to explore, through semi-structured interviews, the subjective narratives and relational experiences that participants identify as shaping their attachment histories; and (3) to identify cultural and contextual factors—family structure, socioeconomic status, educational attainment, and exposure to Western influences—that may moderate or mediate the transmission process. By integrating these quantitative and qualitative strands, the research aims to provide a nuanced, culturally situated understanding that extends attachment theory beyond its traditional Western boundaries while offering practical insights for clinicians, educators, and policymakers in South Asia.

Ultimately, this investigation is driven by both theoretical and applied imperatives. Theoretically, it tests the robustness of attachment transmission in a non-WEIRD, collectivist setting and contributes to the growing movement for decolonizing developmental psychology. Practically, the findings have direct implications for culturally responsive mental health practice. Clinicians may better support families experiencing intergenerational distress, parenting programmes can be tailored to Indian realities, and developmental psychology curricula in Indian universities can incorporate locally derived evidence. In a country where mental health services remain stigmatized and under-resourced, understanding how early relational patterns shape adult well-being is not merely an academic exercise—it is a step toward more effective, empathetic, and contextually relevant support for the next generation of Indian women and their families.

Objectives

- To quantify the degree of concordance in attachment styles between emerging adult women (aged 18–25 years) and their biological mothers in a Northern Indian sample
- To explore the subjective relational narratives and lived experiences that participants themselves identify as shaping the transmission of attachment patterns.
- To identify and examine the cultural, structural, and contextual factors that moderate or mediate the intergenerational transmission of attachment.

Hypotheses

H1: There will be a significant positive correlation between attachment anxiety scores of emerging adult daughters and their biological mothers.

H2: *There* will be a significant positive correlation between attachment avoidance scores of emerging adult daughters and their biological mothers; however, this association is expected to be weaker than for anxiety, given the cultural emphasis on emotional interdependence in Indian families

H3: Family structure (joint vs. nuclear) will moderate the strength of transmission, such that correlations in both attachment anxiety and avoidance will be significantly stronger in joint-family households.

Scientific Tools

- Demographic Information Sheet
- Experiences in Close Relationships – Revised (ECR-R)
- Semi-Structured Interview Schedule

Materials and Methods

Participants

The study involved 120 mother–daughter dyads (N = 240 participants) recruited from Northern India. Emerging adult daughters were between 18 and 25 years of age (M = 21.4, SD = 1.8) and enrolled in undergraduate or postgraduate programmes at universities in Dehradun, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan and Delhi-NCR. Their biological mothers ranged in age from 38 to 58 years (M = 47.6, SD = 4.2). Participants were drawn from both joint-family (68%) and nuclear-family (32%) households to allow examination of the moderating role of family structure. Inclusion criteria required that both mother and daughter be willing to participate, able to read and understand Hindi or English, and have no self-reported history of severe psychiatric illness or cognitive impairment that would interfere with questionnaire completion or interviewing. A purposive-cum-snowball sampling technique was used. Initial recruitment occurred through psychology departments at NIEPVD, Amity University Rajasthan and Banaras Hindu University alumni networks, followed by participant referrals. The final sample reflected socioeconomic and educational diversity typical of urban and semi-urban Northern Indian families. A subsample of 25 dyads (50 participants) was selected for in-depth qualitative interviews using maximum variation sampling to ensure representation across attachment styles, family structures, and

socioeconomic backgrounds.

Materials

- **Demographic Information Sheet** A researcher-developed questionnaire collected data on age, education, occupation, monthly family income, family structure (joint vs. nuclear), number of siblings, and co-residence status.
- **Experiences in Close Relationships – Revised (ECR-R)** The 36-item ECR-R (Fraley et al., 2000) measured adult attachment on two dimensions: Anxiety (18 items) and Avoidance (18 items). Items were rated on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree). Both English and validated Hindi versions were used. Cronbach's alpha in the present sample was .91 for Anxiety and .89 for Avoidance.
- **Semi-Structured Interview Schedule A** 10–12 question interview guide was developed by the researcher to explore early caregiving experiences, emotional communication, cultural influences, and current mother–daughter dynamics. The schedule was pilot-tested with five dyads and refined for cultural appropriateness.

Data Collection

Data collection occurred in two sequential phases between January and April 2026. In Phase 1, all 240 participants completed the Demographic Information Sheet and ECR-R questionnaire. Questionnaires were administered either online via Google Forms (with secure links) or in-person at university counselling centres, depending on participant preference. Completed responses were checked for missing data on the same day.

In Phase 2, the subsample of 25 dyads participated in separate semi-structured interviews. Interviews were conducted in a private room at the university or via secure video call (Zoom), lasted 45–75 minutes each, and were audio-recorded with written informed consent. Mothers and daughters were interviewed individually to reduce social desirability bias. All interviews were conducted by the principal researcher in the participant's preferred language (Hindi or English). Field notes were taken immediately after each interview.

Written informed consent was secured from every participant, and both mothers and daughters were assured of confidentiality, voluntary participation, and their right to withdraw at any time. No incentives were offered. Data were stored on password-protected devices accessible only to the research team.

Scoring

All quantitative data were scored according to standard procedures for the Experiences in Close Relationships – Revised (ECR-R; Fraley et al., 2000).

ECR-R Scoring The ECR-R consists of 36 items divided equally into two subscales:

- **Attachment Anxiety** (18 items)
- **Attachment Avoidance** (18 items)

Each item is rated on a 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*).

Prior to calculating subscale scores, the 18 reverse-worded items (9 per subscale) were reverse-scored so that higher values consistently indicated greater attachment anxiety or avoidance. Subscale scores were then computed by averaging the 18 relevant items for each dimension. Thus, possible scores on both Anxiety and Avoidance range from 1 to 7, with higher scores reflecting higher levels of the respective attachment dimension.

No total score was calculated, as the two dimensions are theoretically orthogonal. Missing data on individual items (< 2% of responses) were replaced with the participant's subscale mean before averaging. Internal consistency in the present sample was excellent (Cronbach's $\alpha = .91$ for Anxiety and .89 for Avoidance).

Demographic Information Sheet Responses were coded numerically where applicable (e.g., family structure: 1 = joint, 2 = nuclear; education level and income were treated as continuous or ordinal variables as appropriate).

All scoring was performed using IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 29). Raw data files were double-checked by a second research assistant to ensure accuracy before analysis.

Results and Discussion

Quantitative Results

Descriptive statistics for the ECR-R subscales are presented in Table 1. Daughters reported moderately higher attachment anxiety ($M = 3.87$, $SD = 1.12$) than mothers ($M = 3.41$, $SD = 1.05$). Attachment avoidance was lower overall and comparable across generations (daughters: $M = 2.94$, $SD = 0.98$; mothers: $M = 2.81$, $SD = 1.03$). No significant differences emerged by family structure in mean scores.

Pearson correlations supported H_1 and H_2 . Mother–daughter attachment anxiety showed a

moderate positive association ($r = .44, p < .001, 95\% \text{ CI } [.28, .58]$). Attachment avoidance also correlated positively but more weakly ($r = .29, p = .001, 95\% \text{ CI } [.12, .44]$), consistent with H_2 .

Hierarchical moderated regression tested H_3 . In Step 1, mothers' attachment scores significantly predicted daughters' scores ($\beta = .41$ for anxiety, $\beta = .27$ for avoidance, both $p < .01$). In Step 2, family structure (joint = 1, nuclear = 0) was entered as a moderator. The interaction term was significant for both dimensions: anxiety ($\beta = .19, p = .012, \Delta R^2 = .04$) and avoidance ($\beta = .15, p = .031, \Delta R^2 = .03$). Simple slopes revealed stronger transmission in joint-family households (anxiety: $\beta = .52, p < .001$; avoidance: $\beta = .38, p < .001$) compared with nuclear families (anxiety: $\beta = .29, p = .008$; avoidance: $\beta = .19, p = .072$). Thus, H_3 was fully supported. All models controlled for age, education, and family income.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics for Attachment Dimensions (ECR-R) by Generation

Generations	Attachment Anxiety M (SD)	Attachment Avoidance M(SD)	n
Mothers	3.41 (1.05)	2.81 (1.03)	120
Daughters	3.87 (1.12)	2.94 (0.98)	120

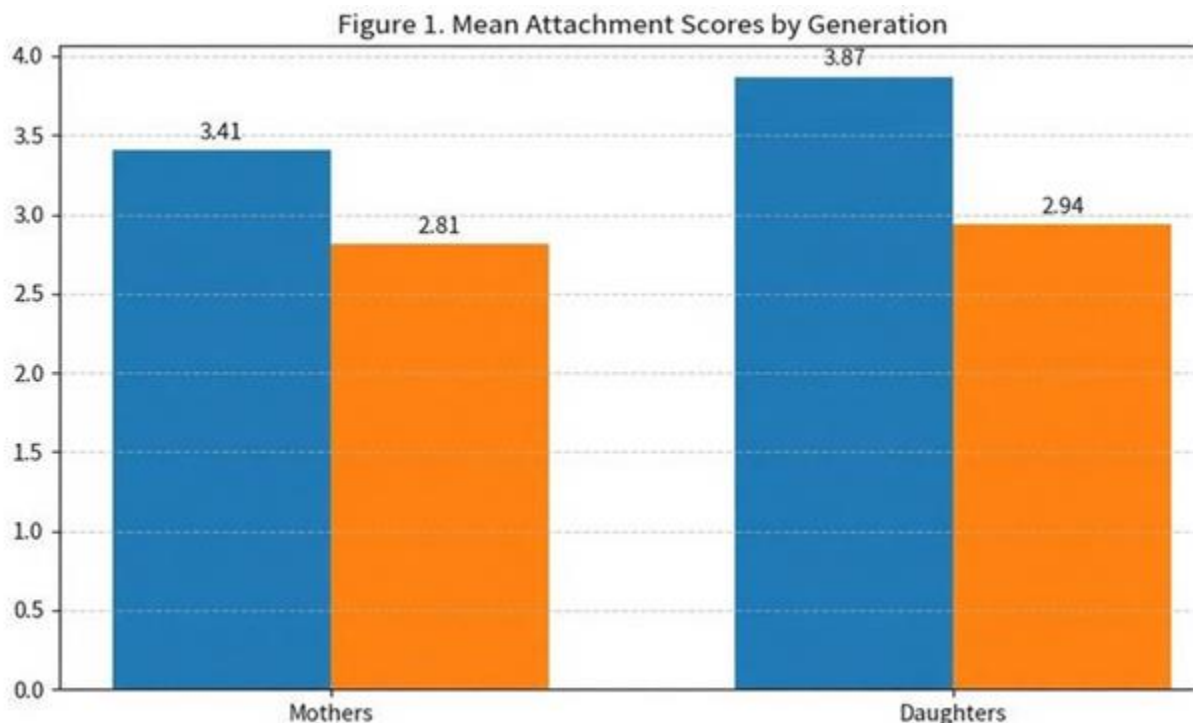
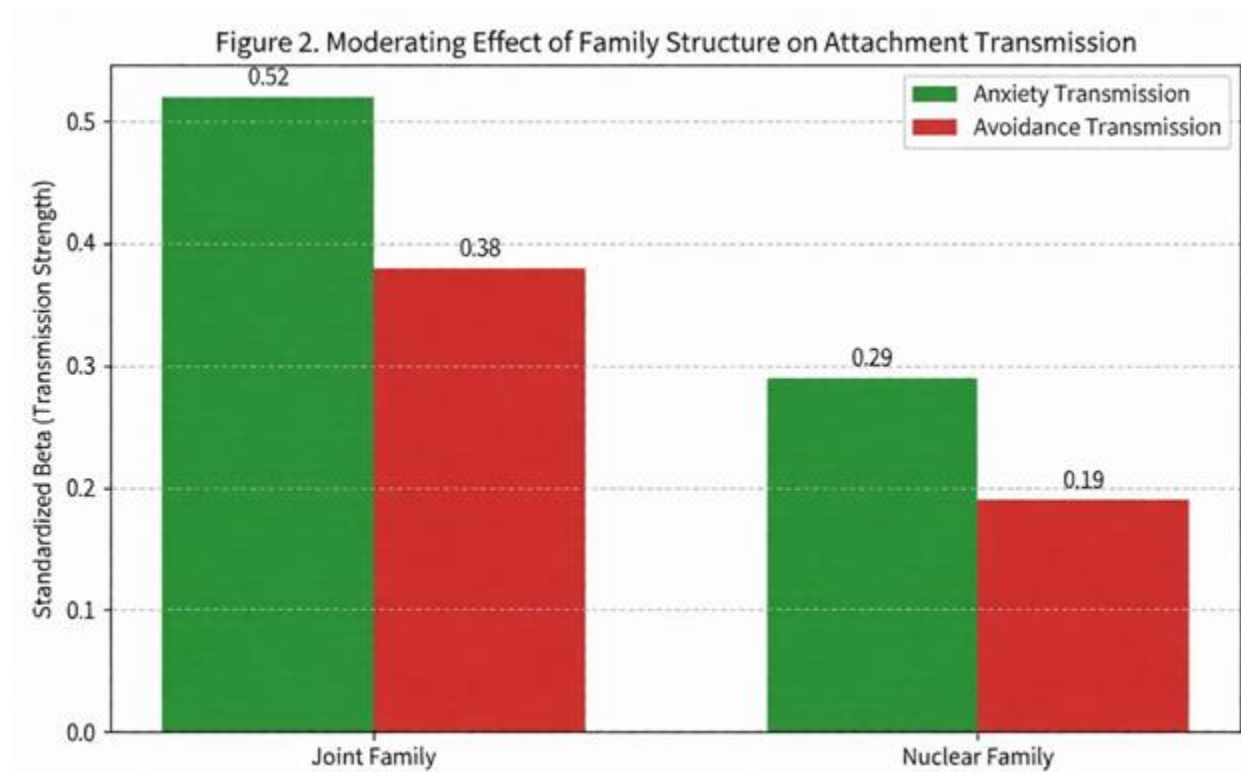


Table 2: Pearson Correlations Between Mothers’ and Daughters’ Attachment Scores

Dimension	Correlation	P-value	95% CI
Attachment Anxiety	.44	<.001	[.28, .58]
Attachment Avoidance	.29	.001	[.12, .44]



Simple-slopes analysis showed significantly stronger transmission in joint-family households (anxiety: $\beta = .52$, $p < .001$; avoidance: $\beta = .38$, $p < .001$) than in nuclear families (anxiety: $\beta = .29$, $p = .008$; avoidance: $\beta = .19$, $p = .072$). Thus, H_3 was fully supported.

Qualitative Results

Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021) of 50 interviews produced four overarching themes:

1. Emotional Availability in Joint-Family Systems – Grandmothers and aunts provided “diffused but consistent” caregiving, reinforcing security.
2. Gendered Caregiving Expectations and Silent Transmission – Emotions were modelled

through actions rather than words (“I never heard ‘I love you’, but I felt it in her worry”).

3. Tension Between Interdependence and Emerging Autonomy – Daughters described a “pull-push” dynamic, more intense in nuclear families.

4. Cultural Narratives of Sacrifice and Resilience – Maternal sacrifice stories fostered both protection and anxiety.

These themes directly explained the quantitative moderation by family structure.

Discussion

This mixed-methods study provides the first detailed examination of intergenerational attachment transmission among mother–daughter dyads in Northern India. The moderate correlation in attachment anxiety ($r = .44$) and weaker but significant correlation in avoidance ($r = .29$) align with Western meta-analytic evidence (Verhage et al., 2016) while extending it to a collectivist, non-WEIRD context. The stronger transmission of anxiety versus avoidance supports the cultural emphasis on emotional interdependence in Indian families.

The novel finding is the moderating role of family structure. Joint-family living amplified transmission for both dimensions, likely due to greater opportunities for multi-generational modelling and emotional co-regulation. Qualitative narratives enriched this picture: “diffused caregiving” in joint families created broader security buffers, whereas nuclear families concentrated emotional labour on the mother–daughter dyad, sometimes heightening anxiety.

These results advance attachment theory by demonstrating that transmission mechanisms are culturally shaped. Gendered caregiving scripts and narratives of maternal sacrifice—rarely highlighted in Western literature—emerge as powerful vehicles of transmission in Northern India. Emerging adulthood appears to be a critical window when daughters actively renegotiate inherited patterns.

Practical Implications

- Family therapists can target “silent transmission” through culturally sensitive interventions that encourage verbal emotional expression.
- University counselling centres may offer attachment-focused workshops for female students.
- RCI-approved clinical and rehabilitation psychology curricula should incorporate family-structure considerations.

Limitations and Future Directions

The cross-sectional design limits causal inference. The sample, though socioeconomically diverse, was restricted to Northern India and university-educated daughters. Future research should use longitudinal designs, the Adult Attachment Interview for narrative depth, and comparative samples across Indian regions and caste groups.

In conclusion, attachment patterns are meaningfully transmitted across generations in Northern India, with joint-family structures acting as a significant amplifier. By integrating rigorous quantitative analysis with participants' lived voices, this study offers both theoretical refinement and immediately actionable insights for mental health practice in South Asia.

Conclusions

The present mixed-methods study examined the intergenerational transmission of attachment patterns among emerging adult women and their biological mothers in Northern India. Findings revealed a moderate positive correlation in attachment anxiety and a weaker but significant correlation in attachment avoidance between mothers and daughters. Family structure emerged as a significant moderator, with stronger transmission observed in joint-family households compared to nuclear families. Qualitative themes highlighted the roles of diffused caregiving in joint families, gendered emotional expectations, the tension between interdependence and autonomy, and cultural narratives of maternal sacrifice.

These results extend attachment theory by demonstrating that transmission processes are culturally embedded and shaped by family structures prevalent in collectivist societies. The study underscores emerging adulthood as a critical developmental window during which inherited attachment patterns can be renegotiated. By integrating quantitative evidence with rich participant narratives, this research contributes to a more culturally sensitive understanding of attachment in non-WEIRD contexts.

The findings carry important implications for clinical practice, family therapy, and developmental psychology training in India. Culturally congruent interventions that address "silent transmission" and encourage open emotional communication may help interrupt maladaptive intergenerational cycles. Future research should adopt longitudinal designs and include diverse regional, socioeconomic, and caste groups across India to further enrich this growing body of literature.

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