Attachment Styles and Mental Health Among Orphans of Registered Orphanages in Benue State, Nigeria

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Abstract
The mental health of orphans is critical for their positive growth, recovery from grief and proper attachment. Many orphans, mostly those residing in orphanage homes are at high risk for poor mental health. Orphans in Benue State suffer from multiple psychological factors including poor attachment which has affected their quality of life. Although, how this menace affects their mental health is yet to be known especially in local communities in Benue State. Therefore, this study investigated attachment styles and mental health among orphans of registered orphanages in Benue State. In this cross-sectional survey, the participants were 205 orphans of registered orphanages in Benue state. Their ages ranged from 11-21years with a mean age of 16.149 years (SD=3.146). Among them, 125 (61%) were males and 80 (39%) were females. Proportionate sampling technique was used. The Attachment Styles Questionnaire, and the Positive Mental Health Scale were used for data collection. Regression was used for data analysis. Results indicated that there was a significant positive influence of secured attachment on mental health among orphans. Findings also indicated that there was a significant negative influence of fearful attachment on mental health among orphans. Findings indicated that there was a significant positive influence of preoccupied attachment on mental health among orphans. Findings also indicated that there was a significant negative influence of dismissive attachment on mental health among orphans. It was recommended that clinical psychologists should design and implement attachment-based interventions in orphanage settings. They should design and implement evidence-based programmes that foster secure attachment styles among orphans, such as attachment-based therapy, mentorship, or caregiver training for orphans and care-staff.

Key Words: *Attachment Styles, Mental health, Orphans, Benue State*

Introduction

Mental health is an important state of health for children and adolescents' development. It is also more important for the wellbeing of orphans who are often vulnerable and desperate (Greydanus & Merrick, 2022). Orphans with positive mental health states are able to recognize their own abilities, handle normal stresses in life and are able to contribute to their immediate community (World Health Organization, 2022). Some of the risk factors of poor mental health among orphans are diminished attachment, poverty, discrimination, and poor standard of living. These conditions are likely to affect the thoughts, emotions and eventual behaviours of orphans (Mohammadzadeh et al., 2017). Despite the salience of mental health among orphans and the general population, the exact impact of mental health on orphans is yet to be determined.

Global estimates have shown that 153 million children are orphans out of which 132 million are in developing countries [United Nations Children Fund (UNICEF) 2020]. Studies have also indicated that majority of orphans are in sub-Saharan Africa, Southern and South-eastern Asia with Southern and South-eastern Asia having the largest number of orphans up to 61 million (De-Luca, 2019). In Nigeria, an estimated 7.3 million children are orphans (National Bureau of Statistics, 2024). One of the variables implicated in predicting mental health among orphans is attachment. Attachment is a bond that exist and unites two or more interdependent individuals for the purpose of care, safety and security (Bhat et al., 2025). Attachment styles are classified into four dimensions; secure, fearful, avoidant and dismissive styles. These styles have varying linkages with mental health (Anhange et al., 2022). Securely attached people are autonomous but at the same time search for emotional help from their attachment figures when they need it (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2019), they tend to openly discuss problems and solve conflicts instead of avoiding them. Securely attached orphans tend to have more positive expectations about their ability to regulate negative moods and to resolve life-problems when compared to insecurely attached orphans (Nielsen et al., 2017). Secure attachment style is a protective factor against psychopathology. It is associated with a lower prevalence of depression, anxiety (Reynolds et al., 2024), personality disorders, criminal activities, and non-substance-related addictions (Estevez et al., 2017). For people with a fearful attachment style, fear of rejection stops them from starting intimate relationships or friendships, keeping a minimum social network, and thus implementing emotional suppression as an emotional regulation strategy (Reynolds et al., 2024; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2019). Another form of attachment; the preoccupied type is considered a non-specific risk factor for developing psychopathology (Nielsen et al., 2017) since it has been associated with a higher prevalence of depressive symptoms, suicidal thoughts, anxiety, alexithymia (Besharat & Shahidi, 2024), and personality disorders (Levy et al., 2017). Orphans with a dismissive attachment style have a high achievement orientation and their emotional regulation strategy consists of the denial of affective needs and of emotional self-sufficiency, trying to be invulnerable to rejection and negative feelings (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2019). However, there is paucity of research exploring the interplay of attachment styles and mental health among orphans in registered orphanages in Benue State.

Secure Attachment and Mental Health

Dyege (2025) investigated life satisfaction and mental health among orphans in registered homes in Benue State: the mediating role of emotional intelligence and attachment. The study adopted cross-sectional survey design where a sample of 254 orphans in Benue state were used. The result

showed that emotional intelligence and attachment significantly mediated the between life satisfaction and mental health among orphans. It was recommended that the government, private agencies and non-governmental organizations should look into the basic medical, psychological and social needs of orphans. Salinas-Quiroz et al. (2023) examined the impact of attachment styles, need for social approval, and emotional regulation on mental health: a parallel mediation model. Securely attached individuals had the highest psychological wellbeing and used cognitive re-evaluation as an emotion regulation strategy. NSA is conceived as a favorable social adjustment strategy that impacts individual's mental health, influenced by attachment styles in interaction with emotion regulation. The authors made recommendations for research and practice. However, these two studies differ since the reviewed study used general population while the present study used only orphans. Anhange et al. (2022) investigated emotional abuse, attachment styles and psychological distress among orphans in Makurdi metropolis. The study employed cross-sectional survey design where One Hundred and Fourteen (114) orphans consisting of 46 (40.4%) males and 68 (59.6%) females were used for the study. Findings indicated that, attachment styles significantly predicted psychological distress among orphans in Makurdi metropolis. It was therefore recommended that the Child Right Act should be reinforced by the government so that issues of emotional abuses by parent, relatives and caregivers which are some of the likely causes of psychological distress will be reduced.

Fearful Attachment and Mental Health

Yang et al. (2024) examined the relationships between attachment style, social support, and mental health states, as well as the mediation mechanism within this relationship. A multiple mediator model was used to explain how social support could mediate the relationship between attachment and mental health states during COVID-19 quarantine. The direct effect of adult attachment styles on mental health states during COVID-19 quarantine was significant. These findings highlighted that social support played a mediation role between attachment style and mental health states. Thus, offering social support during a crisis might be useful for those individuals with an insecure attachment. This study was however limited to health care workers during the COVID-19 era.

Vowels et al. (2023) examined the causal links between attachment styles (secure, fearful, avoidant), mental health outcomes (depression, anxiety, loneliness) and adherence to social distancing behaviours during the first several months of the UK lockdown (between April and August 2020). The results showed that insecure attachment styles were causally linked to poorer mental health outcomes, mediated by loneliness. Only attachment avoidance was causally linked to non-adherence to social distancing guidelines. They concluded that fearful attachment is a risk factor for poorer mental health outcomes and that future interventions to improve mental health outcomes should focus on mitigating feelings of loneliness. Tan et al. (2023) examined the relationship between parent–child attachment and adolescent mental health exploring the mediating role of psychological quality and the moderating role of coping styles. The moderated mediation model yielded the following findings: (a) parent–child attachment significantly and positively predicted adolescents' mental health; (b) psychological quality partially mediated the relationship between parent–child attachment and adolescents' mental health; (c) the association between psychological quality and mental health was moderated by task-focused coping. Therefore, their results indicated that parent–child attachment indirectly impacts mental health, influenced by internal and external factors. These findings carry significant implications for safeguarding and promoting adolescents' mental well-being.

Preoccupied Attachment and Mental Health

Ma (2024) explored the relationship between attachment styles and mental health (depression and anxiety) among Chinese university students. The findings revealed that significant differences in depression and anxiety levels between attachment types. Individuals with secure attachment styles exhibit significantly lower levels of depression and anxiety compared to those with insecure attachment styles, such as preoccupied, dismissive. In addition, attachment-related anxiety and avoidance scores could predict depression and anxiety levels. These results underscored the protective nature of secure attachment and highlighted the importance of considering attachment styles in mental health interventions. Ierardi et al. (2023) investigated the role of attachment styles in affecting psychopathological problems and post-traumatic symptoms during the COVID-19 pandemic in a sample of Italian adults (N=1548). The results showed that 41% of the participants had symptoms of clinical and subclinical relevance during the pandemic. Anxious and preoccupied insecure attachment styles predicted psychopathological problems and post-traumatic symptoms, whereas secure attachment style was a protective factor. Their results highlighted the significant role played by the quality of attachment styles on adult mental health during the pandemic, providing valuable elements for targeted psychological support interventions.

Zhang et al. (2022) meta-analyzed 224 studies examining the associations between adult attachment and mental health, using robust variance estimation with random effects. Specifically, there were moderate associations between attachment avoidance and negative mental health and positive mental health. Likewise, there were moderate associations between attachment anxiety and negative mental health and positive mental health. Furthermore, the association between the attachment dimensions and mental health outcomes was also moderated by several variables (e.g., gender, age). Thus, the results supported robust links between adult attachment and mental health. This may have implications for future research and mental health treatments.

Dismissive Attachment and Mental Health

Damagan (2024) investigated the relationship between the attachment styles and psychological distress among young adults with drug dependence in Quezon City Drug and Treatment Rehabilitation Center "Tahanan". The results revealed that of all the levels, there is a positive and significant relationship between dismissive attachment style and psychological distress. The findings indicated that higher levels of dismissive attachment style may positively impact the psychological distress of young adults with drug dependence. However, the dismissive attachment style was not a predictor of psychological distress. Furthermore, the results of the study served as a basis for a proposed mental health program. Yang et al. (2024) examined the relationships between attachment style, social support, and mental health states, as well as the mediation mechanism within this relationship. They conducted a survey among healthcare workers during the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) epidemic quarantine. A multiple mediator model was used to explain how social support could mediate the relationship between attachment and mental health states during COVID-19 quarantine. The direct effect of adult attachment styles on mental health states during COVID-19 quarantine was significant. The total indirect effect also showed statistical significance. Moreover, the total effect of adult attachment styles on mental health states was significant. Al-Assadi (2021) tested the relationship between attachment styles and major depressive disorder among 69 young adults in a homogeneous Lebanese culture. A multiple regression analysis indicated a statistically significant adverse correlation between insecure

attachment style (anxious and dismissive) and depression. Dismissive attachment styles predicted severe levels of depression. Moreover, this study was an initial step for further research that would help understand the environmental and cultural influences for major depression development, allowing future intervention and prevention plans leading to positive social change.

Hypotheses

i. Secure attachment will significantly influence mental health among orphans of registered orphanages in Benue State.
ii. Fearful attachment will significantly influence mental health among orphans of registered orphanages in Benue State.
iii. Preoccupied attachment will significantly influence mental health among orphans of registered orphanages in Benue State.
iv. Dismissive attachment will significantly influence mental health among orphans of registered orphanages in Benue State.

Design

This study adopted cross-sectional survey design to investigate attachment styles and mental health among orphans of registered orphanages in Benue State. This design was appropriate because the researchers used questionnaires to sample the opinions and views of orphans in order to make relational inferences. Using this design, the independent variable was attachment styles while the dependent variable was mental health.

Population

The population of this study was 424 orphans in 14 orphanage homes in Benue State. This figure includes both male and female, children and adolescents.

Sample Size Determination

The sample for this study was determined using the Krejcie and Morgan's Table. Using this table, a population of 424 yielded a sample of 205.

Sampling Technique

This study used proportionate sampling to draw the sample for the study. This sampling technique was chosen because the researchers ensured that the sample drawn from each orphanage home is proportionate to the original of the orphanage home.

s/n	Name of Orphanage	Population	Sample
1.	NKST Community Based orphanage Mkar	52	(52/424) x 205 = 25.14 ≈25
2.	Divine Charity Orphanage Home, Makurdi	9	(9/424) x 205 = 4.35 ≈4
3.	Divine Care Foundation Christian Academy Makurdi	10	(10/424) x 205 = 4.83 ≈5
4.	Gidan Bege City Ministries of EMS of Ekwa, Makurdi	98	(98/424) x 205 = 47.38 ≈47
5.	Benita Children's Home Oduda Amejo, Okpokwu	17	(17/424) x 205 = 8.22 ≈8

6.	Mother Theresa's Orphanage Home, Aokpe Road, Okpokwu	4	(4/424) x 205 = 1.93 ≈2
7.	Heritage Orphanage Home, Opu Road Otukpo	2	(2/424) x 205 = .97 ≈1
8.	Erninya Orphanage Home, Iga Okpaya Apa	27	(27/424) x 205 = 13.05 ≈13
9.	Restoral of Pact Care Foundation, Otukpo	24	(24/424) x 205 = 11.60 ≈12
10.	Bethesda Orphanage & Community Orphanage Care, Oju	21	(21/424) x 205=10.15 ≈10
11.	Children of Mary Orphanage, Otukpo	47	(47/424) x 205 =22.72 ≈23
12.	Faith Orphanage Home, Gboko	13	(13/424) x 205 =6.9 ≈ 7
13.	Tivid Orphanage Home International, Makurdi	50	(50/424) x 205 =24.17 ≈24
14.	Mama Abayol Children's Home, Makurdi	50	(50/424) x 205 =24.17 ≈24
	Total	**424**	**205**

The table above shows the proportions of the samples drawn. Based on this table, the sample for the study was 205 orphans.

Participants

The participants for this study were 205 orphans of registered orphanages in Benue State. Their ages ranged from 11-21years with a mean age of 16.149 years (SD=3.146). Among them, 125 (61%) were males and 80 (39%) were female. Still among them, 121 (59%) were Tiv, 74 (36.1%) were Idoma while 10 (4.9%) were from other ethnic groups. In terms of their religion, 185 (90.2%) were Christians, 16 (7.8%) were Muslims while 4 (2%) indicated practicing other religions. As for their education, 87 (42.4%) were in primary schools, 105 (51.3%) were in secondary schools while 13 (6.3%) were in tertiary schools. Concerning their durations in orphanage homes, 12 (5.8%) were there for less than 1 year, 124 (60.5%) were there for 1-5years, while 69 (33.7%) were there for over 5 years.

Instruments

The instruments used for data collection included the Attachment Styles Questionnaire and the Positive Mental Health Scale.

Attachment Styles Questionnaire: Attachment was measured using the Attachment Styles Questionnaire developed by Van-Oudenhoven et al. (2003). This scale assesses the different forms of attachment people form. The scale has 22 items with four dimensions. This scale is scored using a 5-point Likert format, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Items 20, 21 and 33 must be reverse-scored prior to computing the total scores while the rest were directly scored. The total score on the scale is obtained by summing all the scores of individual items on the scale. High scores on this scale indicated high levels of the dimension measured and vice versa. The four dimensions of the scale are: Secure (items 1, 3, 7, 9, 12, 13, 16 and 20), Fearful (items 2, 4, 18 and 21), Preoccupied (items 6, 8, 10, 15, 19 and 22), and Dismissive (items 5, 11, 14 and 17). The authors obtained alpha coefficients as follows; Secure α=.78; Fearful α=.79; Preoccupied α=.81 and Dismissive α=.58. The present study obtained an overall reliability coefficient of .80; while the subscales had; Secure α=.82; Fearful α=.71; Preoccupied α=.88 and Dismissive α=.78. Sample of items include; "I feel at ease in relationships I have with people around me children", "I avoid close ties with friends".

Positive Mental Health Scale: Mental health was measured using the Positive Mental Health Scale developed by Lukat et al. (2016). The scale is used as a self-report instrument consisting of nine items rated on a four-point rating scale ranging from 0 ("do not agree") to 3 ("agree"). The range of scores is from 0-27 with scores from 0-9 indicating poor mental health, 10-18 indicating average mental health and 19-27 indicating good mental health. The author found an alpha coefficient of .76 while the present study reported .85. The total score on the scale is obtained by summing all the scores of individual items on the scale. Sample of items include; "I enjoy my life", "I manage well to fulfill my needs".

Procedure

This study was conducted among orphans residing in orphanages in Benue State. The researchers sought approval from the Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development. Thereafter, the approval of the ministry was taken to each sampled orphanage home to obtain permission to collect data from orphans. All ethical measures were taken into consideration in the data collection process. The consent of the orphans was sought in the presence of their caregivers. They were instructed and given orientation on how to tick their responses appropriately. They were assured of how confidential their information would be treated and that the study would not constitute any harm to them. The researchers visited all the sampled orphanage homes where data collection was done. The drawn sample was then exposed to the questionnaire. After the administration of 210 copies of the questionnaire, a total of 205 copies representing a return rate of 97.6% were returned and found useful for statistical analysis.

Data Analysis

Data for this study were analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistics. The researchers used descriptive statistics including frequencies and simple percentages, mean and standard deviation to summarize data on the demographic characteristics of respondents. On the other hand, Simple Linear Regression was used to test hypothesis one to four.

Results

Table 1: Summary of Simple Linear Regression showing the influence of secured attachment on mental health among Orphans.

Variables	R	R^2	F	df	β	t	sig.
Constant	.586	.344	86.991	1,203		-4.562	.000
Secured Attachment					.586	9.327	.000

The result presented in Table 1 indicated that there was a significant positive influence of secured attachment on mental health among orphans [R^2=.344, F(1,203)=86.991, p<.001]. This means that orphans will experience better mental health if they are more securely attached to their caregivers. The result further indicated that secured attachment explained 34.4% of the variation in mental health. Thus, hypothesis one was accepted.

Table 2: Summary of Simple Linear Regression showing the influence of fearful attachment on mental health among Orphans.

Variables	R	R^2	F	df	β	t	sig.
Constant	.320	.102	18.876	1,203		2.060	.000

Fearful Attachment	-.320	-4.345	.000

The result presented in Table 2 indicated that there was a significant negative influence of fearful attachment on mental health among orphans [R^2=.102, F(1,203)=18.876, p<.001]. This means that orphans will experience poor mental health if they are more fearfully attached to their caregivers. The result further indicated that fearful attachment explained 10.2% of the variation in mental health. Thus, hypothesis two was accepted.

Table 3: Summary of Simple Linear Regression showing the influence of preoccupied attachment on mental health among Orphans.

Variables	R	R^2	F	df	β	t	sig.
Constant	.880	.775	570.611	1,203		-.962	.000
Preoccupied Attachment					.880	23.887	.000

The result presented in Table 3 indicated that there was a significant positive influence of preoccupied attachment on mental health among orphans [R^2=.775, F(1,203)=570.611, p<.001]. This means that orphans will experience better mental health if their attachment to their caregivers is preoccupied. The result further indicated that preoccupied attachment explained 77.5% of the variation in mental health. Thus, hypothesis three was accepted.

Table 4: Summary of Simple Linear Regression showing the influence of dismissive attachment on mental health among Orphans.

Variables	R	R^2	F	df	β	t	sig.
Constant	.808	.653	312.167	1,203		5.673	.000
Dismissive Attachment					-.808	-17.668	.000

The result presented in Table 4 indicated that there was a significant negative influence of dismissive attachment on mental health among orphans [R^2=.653, F(1,203)=312.167, p<.001]. This means that orphans will experience poor mental health if their attachment to their caregivers is dismissive. The result further indicated that dismissive attachment explained 65.3% of the variation in mental health. Thus, hypothesis four was accepted.

Discussion

Hypothesis one was tested to find out if secured attachment will significantly influence mental health among orphans of registered orphanages in Benue State. Findings indicated that there was a significant positive influence of secured attachment on mental health among orphans. Secure attachment is a healthy emotional bond formed between a child and their primary caregiver, characterized by consistent responsiveness to needs, trust, and safety. It is thus more likely that children who experienced this bond will have better mental health than those who don't, as their internal working models foster adaptive coping and positive self-regard even after loss. This finding therefore tallies with Salinas-Quiroz et al. (2023) who revealed that securely attached individuals had the highest psychological wellbeing and used cognitive re-evaluation as an emotion regulation strategy, a mechanism consistent with Bowlby's proposition of secure individuals' effective emotion regulation. Similarly, Dyege (2025) indicated a significant positive influence of life satisfaction on mental health among orphans. A related study by Anhange et al. (2022) found that attachment styles significantly predicted psychological distress among orphans in Makurdi metropolis, further supporting the theory's claim that the quality of early attachment bonds shapes later psychological outcomes.

Hypothesis two was tested to find out if fearful attachment will significantly influence mental health among orphans of registered orphanages in Benue State. Findings indicated that there was a significant negative influence of fearful attachment on mental health among orphans. Fearful attachment combines high anxiety and high avoidance, characterized by a push-pull pattern where children crave closeness but fear rejection and vulnerability. Rooted in childhood trauma or inconsistent caregiving, it leads to difficulty trusting others, intense emotional volatility, and self-sabotaging behavior. Thus, it is common place for children with this attachment style to have poor mental health. This finding tallies with Yang et al. (2024) who should a direct effect of adult attachment styles on mental health states. Another related study by Vowels et al. (2023) showed that insecure attachment styles were causally linked to poorer mental health outcomes. A later study by Tan et al. (2023) revealed that parent–child attachment significantly and positively predicted adolescents' mental health.

Hypothesis three was tested to find out if preoccupied attachment will significantly influence mental health among orphans of registered orphanages in Benue State. Findings indicated that there was a significant positive influence of preoccupied attachment on mental health among orphans. Preoccupied attachment is an attachment style characterized by a deep fear of abandonment, low self-worth, and a chronic need for reassurance. It stems from inconsistent childhood caregiving, causing orphans to be highly sensitive to rejection and emotionally dependent on caregivers. This finding tallies with Ma (2024) who revealed that individuals with secure attachment styles exhibit significantly lower levels of depression and anxiety compared to those with insecure attachment styles, such as preoccupied, dismissive. Similarly, Ierardi et al. (2023) found that anxious and preoccupied insecure attachment styles predicted psychopathological problems and post-traumatic symptoms. Another study by Zhang et al. (2022) found associations between attachment anxiety and negative mental health and positive mental health. A later study by Khan and Moghal (2021) found a direct predictive relationship between pre-occupied attachment style in adult patients with schizophrenia, and Substance-Related and Addictive Disorders.

Hypothesis four was tested to find out if dismissive attachment will significantly influence mental health among orphans of registered orphanages in Benue State. Findings indicated that there was a significant negative influence of dismissive attachment on mental health among orphans. Dismissive attachment is an insecure attachment style characterized by extreme independence, emotional distance, and a distrust of connections, often stemming from childhood neglect. This finding thus tallies with Damagan (2024) who revealed a significant relationship between dismissive attachment style and psychological distress. Another concordant study by Yang et al. (2024) found direct effect of adult attachment styles on mental health states. Also, Al-Assadi (2021) revealed that dismissive attachment styles predicted severe levels of depression. Finding from Shenkman et al. (2021) and Shen et al. (2021) revealed that dismissive attachment was significantly associated with self-esteem, adult attachment, and psychological distress.

Recommendations

Based on the findings obtained from this study, the following recommendations were made:

i. Clinical psychologists should design and implement attachment-based interventions in orphanage settings. They should design and implement evidence-based programs that foster secure attachment styles among orphans, such as attachment-based therapy, mentorship, or caregiver training for orphans and care-staff. This can help improve mental health outcomes of orphans.

ii. Clinical psychologists should extend their support to orphanages and should endeavour to tailor mental health support for orphans who develop insecure attachment styles. They should provide targeted support for orphans with fearful, preoccupied, or dismissive attachment styles. These support systems could be in the form of individualized therapy or group counseling sessions and groups.

Contributions to Knowledge

i. This study has provided credible confirmations, that even among orphans in local communities in Benue State, attachment styles have potentials to determine the mental health of orphans. The study highlights the significant role of attachment styles (secure, fearful, preoccupied, and dismissive) in predicting mental health outcomes among orphans, contributing to the understanding of attachment theory in this context.

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