

Parental divorce as a predictor of attachment style in children's adult intimate relationships: evidence from the Maldives

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ABSTRACT *A quantitative analysis was carried out to determine the impact of parental divorce as a predictor of children's attachment style in their adult intimate relationships using the Experiences in Close Relationship (ECR) Scale in combination with general demographics of the participants as well as their circumstances of the familial relationship with the divorced parents and stepfamilies. The questionnaire was set up using Google Form online tool. The link for the online questionnaire was shared among various social media groups, requesting participants aged 18 and above who have experienced parental divorce in their childhood. A total of 113 completed questionnaires were received (from 24 males and 89 females). The findings from this research construed anxious-preoccupied attachment style as the most prevalent among the participants. The analysis of the results show that these participants have a negative outlook on themselves and a positive outlook on others. The findings also show the importance of devising informed interventions and incorporating them in the relevant laws and policies to tackle the extremely high divorce rate in the Maldives.*

Keywords: parental divorce; attachment style; intimate relationships; divorce cycle

According to the Maldives National Bureau of Statistics (NBS, 2020), there were 3550 divorces registered in 2019 which was 12 percent more than the year before. With the high divorce rate in the Maldives, it is inevitable that a large proportion of Maldivians have experienced parental divorce. Divorce not only impacts the spouses but the children in the family too, and affects the society at different levels (Amato, 2000). While there is a shortage of research in the Maldives on various aspects of divorce, the existing findings from elsewhere show that individuals who experienced parental divorce are more prone to undergo divorce in their own lives (Walker & Ehrenberg, 1998; Cohen & Finzi-Dottan, 2005). Previous research has also shown that parental divorce impacts the attachment style formed by the children in their adult life (McNelis & Segrin, 2019). Therefore, it is important to study the effects of divorce to strengthen policy interventions to support and promote healthier intimate relationships for those who have experienced parental divorce during their childhood.

To create policies or to bring policy changes with regards to divorce, it is significant to understand the underlying issues associated with it and it is imperative to determine whether the divorces in Maldives have the same effect on children's

adult attachment style as documented in similar international research (e.g., Deshpande & Pandey, 2014; McNelis & Segrin, 2019; Walker & Ehrenberg, 1998). Accordingly, the purpose of this research is to determine whether parental divorce is a predictor of children's attachment style in their adult intimate relationships; and accordingly make policy recommendations in relation to divorce, specifically focused on the rules and regulations formed under the Family Law (2000) implemented by the Family Court of the Maldives. The null hypotheses adopted for this research are: (1) adult children whose parents had a divorce will have a negative outlook on themselves and others; and (2) that they will be more likely to show a fearful-avoidant attachment style in their intimate relationship.

Literature Review

Social relationships, ranging from family relations to the bond that exists between neighbours, friends, colleagues and so on are formed and broken to adhere to the needs of an individual. From all these attachments, a family is the most important relationship that affects a person's life (Lambert, 2007). This review will address attachment theory, effects of parental divorce, divorce in the Maldives, and evidence-based interventions to counteract the negative impact.

Attachment theory

Several theories have been developed over the years to understand and conceptualise how divorce can disrupt the attachment style formed by children who experience parental divorce. The basis for these theories is the expectation that a high level of parental conflict is associated with a troubled adult intimate relationship (Hayashi, 1993). John Bowlby's attachment theory is developed based on a similar framework and shows the importance of child-parent relationships in terms of their emotional, cognitive, and social development (Hayashi, 1993). The attachment theory focuses on describing learned behaviour and the emotional bonds between individuals, and suggests early attachments can leave a lasting mark on people's lives (Nair & Murray, 2005). There are many other theories such as conflict theory, structural functionalism theory, symbolic interactionism, family systems theory, family developmental theory, ecological theory and many more that can explain the interactions and relationships between individuals (Vareschi & Bursik, 2005). These theories are designed to study the larger global, societal, and social level of sociological phenomena.

In a relationship, attachment is mostly described as an emotional bond that is created with another person. The earlier the bond is formed, the greater is the impact and this applies to the attachment between children and their caregivers (Cohen & Finzi-Dottan, 2005). From a behavioural perspective, attachment is a learned process; and from an evolutionary perspective, it is an innate drive to create bonds to increase the chances of survival (McNelis & Segrin, 2019). Children are more likely to feel protected and comforted when child-parent proximity is maintained throughout their life. As asserted by Deshpande and Pandey (2014) a successful attachment is highly based on nurturance and responsiveness as the determinants of the attachment. Previous studies suggest that children show the most attachment towards who they grow up with – either be their parents, guardians,

or any caretakers – and the strongest bond is shown between the biological parent and the child (Deshpande & Pandey, 2014; Vareschi & Bursik, 2005).

According to Nair and Murray (2005), though children argue with their parents, when in trouble at school or another matter, the first person that comes to their mind is either the mother or father. When this bond gets affected, it changes the cognitive process of the child and has been theorised to affect the attachment of a person throughout their life and quite specifically on adult intimate relationships which can lead to the formation of a secure or insecure attachment (Washington & Hans, 2013).

Effects of parental divorce

Children develop trust issues and sometimes attribute the parents' relationship failures to their life (Nair and Murray, 2005). Where the individual has experienced familial conflict in their childhood, when forming attachments with current or future partners, they might become avoidant or anxious; they may show fear of disclosing themselves or depending on another person; and they may show fear of being abandoned by their significant other. Such issues can lead to a breakup in their marriages and thus can lead to a cycle of divorce (Nair & Murray, 2005). A study by Thiessen (1993), to find the degree of emotional trauma faced by children after experiencing parental divorce investigated five factors: parenting styles, the resilience of the child, quality of attachment, quality of bonding and personality profiles of both parents. The findings showed that one of the most common outcomes of a divorce is the attachment issues a child faces regardless of their age (Thiessen, 1993). There are cases that some children forget the incident at a younger age; nonetheless, some carry the negative impacts of it into their adulthood and marriages (Thiessen, 1993).

While research shows that divorce affects children in various aspects especially in their adult intimate relationships, research also shows that parental divorce may not be the direct cause for the long-term relationship problems among adult children (Lambert, 2007). According to Lambert (2007), the direct causes could be the variables that are related to parental divorce such as the parent-child relationship, and the intensity and duration of their parental conflicts. Some studies have established that parental conflict has more negative impact, on their children's adult intimate relationship, than parental divorce (Shanoora, Hamsan, Abdullah, & Khir, 2020).

Divorces are usually led by a few arguments, heated conversations or simply because the parents fell out of love or needed space, yet it inadvertently affects children (Platt, Nalbone, Casanova, & Wetchler, 2008). Children start internalising messages such as: their parents left them by choice, relationships do not last, partners cannot be trusted, and so on. These beliefs can have a lasting impact on their perspectives of relationships in general and can lead to mild to severe attachment issues (Platt et al., 2008). According to Vareschi and Bursik (2005), stability is a major predictor for children's academic performance and when their family structure, residence and school are changed following a parental divorce, it impacts children's outcomes. They experience moving out of houses, switching schools, changing certain things in their lifestyles, and adjusting to the fact their parents are dating others (McNelis & Segrin, 2019). For children, divorce means

separation of parents and dealing with the negative consequences of it, hardly knowing the reasons for the divorce. One main cause for the confusions is that parents find it difficult to explain the situation to their children and this is especially difficult when the child is younger and does not know how to grasp what is going on (McNelis & Segrin, 2019). Children are, therefore, unsure of how to deal with such a circumstance and fill the gaps with their own doubts and assumptions.

A study conducted by Cashmore, Parkinson, and Taylor (2008), showed that when it came to non-residential parents, overnight stays were a good indicator for parental involvement and relationship quality between a parent and child. The findings state that frequency of overnight visits was inversely proportional to the conflict between parents. They also reported that adolescents who visit their non-residential parents more than every other weekend develop a higher level of closeness and attachment with that parent and consider the parent to be more involved in their life. This shows the importance of having quality time between parents and their children regardless of the conflicts between parents. However, after a divorce or separation, most of the non-residential parents grow further apart over time by blaming it on the visiting arrangements and hectic schedule; the activities participated together decreases, the frequency of visits minimises, and the closeness of the parent-child relationship weakens (Cashmore, Parkinson, & Taylor, 2008).

Parental divorce can bring about a negative impact on the child by minimising the formation of a safe and secure base due to the change in access and time with the primary caregiver (Washington & Hans, 2013). It could also affect the attachments that are formed by the children depending on the family income changes, quality of parenting, visiting patterns and the child's age and cognition (Washington & Hans, 2013). Parental divorce can increase the likelihood of children to develop insecure attachments and become preoccupied and fearful compared to children who have never experienced it (Washington & Hans, 2013). According to Lambert (2007), children who live with their fathers after a parental divorce tend to be more resilient if the resulting residential arrangements are routine and predictable. Children consider visiting arrangements as one of the biggest downsides to parental divorce (Lambert, 2007), and a participant in Lambert's study reported that they "never really felt settled in one spot" and had feelings of being an "annoyance" to the parent they visited (p. 68).

Furthermore, facing the shifting of roles in the family can affect children's behaviours too (Vareschi & Bursik, 2005; Schaan & Vögele, 2016). When living with a single parent and in cases of younger siblings, the eldest quite often takes responsibilities at an early age. Sometimes they quit studying and get employment just to help the single parent manage the family financially. Some children lose the chance to follow their dreams and associate it with the divorce and may hate the idea of marriage in their life (Schaan & Vögele, 2016). Moreover, seeing the parent try to overcome the divorce with the help of potential partners can be seen very negatively by the children; they have potential parent figures who will keep disappearing and this can weaken the children's attachments they form in the future (Cohen & Finzi-Dottan, 2005). They also start to think that it is okay to jump from one person to the other while dating; and if the mother or father does not meet any partner, the children may assume that marriage itself is a hopeless case (Cohen & Finzi-Dottan, 2005).

According to Ozen (2004), inconsistent interactions with separated parents can also become confusing for the children. One thing allowed by the mother in her place might not be allowed by the father in his house. These contradicting actions may lead children to plan their behaviour in each house. This phenomenon exists in almost all the families where parents are married too, yet it becomes more confusing when the parents get divorced (Ozen, 2004). Some children exhibit behaviour associated with self-denial, losing interest in activities such as family outings unless it is with both parents, as a form of defence mechanism to protect themselves against emotional sadness (Walker & Ehrenberg, 1998). Most importantly, during childhood, parents are the children's first role models for all sorts of behaviour (Walker & Ehrenberg, 1998). This includes the things that are intentionally taught to them and unintentionally shown to them. Children look up to their parents and assume parents know everything and can make the best choices. They believe that they are meant to follow through the guidance given by the parents. Therefore, when parents get divorced, the image of ideal role models in their head shatters leading to view relationships as temporary and these cognitive thoughts can lead to them sabotaging their own relationships in the future (Walker & Ehrenberg, 1998).

Research conducted by Platt et al. (2008), to study parental conflict and infidelity as predictors of adult children's attachment style and infidelity, showed a negative effect of parental conflict on children. Though this study provided partial support for the hypotheses, the instrument titled Experiences in Close Relationships scale (ECRS) was highly reliable for the variables that were being scored. The results showed that individuals who experienced inter-parental conflicts or felt threatened, showed more negative views of themselves and others.

The proceeding sections further elaborate about divorce in the Maldives followed by a brief review of applicable effective evidence-based interventions.

Divorce in the Maldives

The Maldives is frequently listed as the country with the highest divorce rate in the world. According to the Family Law review report by UNFPA (2004), Maldives had eleven divorces for every thousand people which was far higher than the rest of the 92 countries that were studied. The study also showed that a Muslim nation, Turkey, saw only 0.5 divorces for every thousand people and the closest to Maldives was Guam with a divorce rate of 4.3 for every thousand people; these show the severity of divorce as an issue in the Maldives.

To discourage divorce by making divorce more difficult to obtain, the Maldives adopted the Family Law (2000) in 2001. This reduced the rate of divorce from 22.89 divorces on average per week in 2000 to 15.39 per week in 2002 and 9.73 per week in 2003 (UNFPA, 2004). The effect of the Family Law (2000) was short-lived and the number of divorces re-escalated from 2003 and has been on the rise ever since (Aboobakuru & Riyaz, 2021). In 2000, the Maldives registered 3829 marriages and 1928 divorces, whereas 3550 divorces were registered in 2019 (NBS, 2020). The adherence to the Family Law itself does not address the qualitative aspects of the family relations that are important in mitigating divorces. The Family Law does not help to identify healthy or strong relations and does not indicate the exact support mechanisms that could have impacted the parents and

children (UNFPA, 2004).

Maldives is a Muslim nation and therefore marriage is a central part of life among its citizens; at the same time, divorce has been a common occurrence that is socially accepted without much stigma (Siedler, 1980; UNFPA, 2004). The aspiration for marriage does not seem to extend to an equal desire to maintain it. Siedler's (1980) survey across the Maldives to study the life of island women showed that on average a woman marries four people and three of them occur by the age of thirty, in which she will have a total of three husbands where she marries one of them twice. In a similar survey, Razee (2000) found that 52 percent of women were married two or three times. Furthermore, findings from a quantitative survey, studying the stress level of divorced women in the Maldives, asserts the likelihood of one in every three women in the Maldives under the age of 30 to have undergone at least one divorce (Aboobakuru & Riyaz, 2021).

While there is a shortage of systematic research on the factors for the high divorce rate in the Maldives (Aboobakuru & Riyaz, 2021; Shanoora et al., 2020) there are certain factors that can be deduced from everyday life such as congested households, high living expenses and even interpersonal conflicts (Thiessen, 1993). There is also no systematic research on details about children who have experienced parental divorce (Razee, 2000; Aboobakuru & Riyaz, 2021). In the case of children of parental divorce, the Family Law (2000) recognizes two separate principles of custody and legal guardianship. Custody related to the raising and nurturing of the child rests usually with the mother. On the other hand, guardianship is about who has the authority and rights to supervise the child, and this is usually granted to the father. The Family Law obligates fathers to pay for child maintenance even if the children are to stay with their mother after divorce. However, monthly statistics from the Family court show that there is a considerable number of cases reported due to lack of any financial contribution from the father (UNFPA, 2004; Aboobakuru & Riyaz, 2021). The Single Parent Allowance (SPA) program, implemented under the Social Protection Act by the National Social Protection Agency (NSPA) in 2010, aims to address this negligence to some extent, by ensuring every child stays above the poverty line irrespective of their parent's marital status (NSPA, 2021). The SPA is a form of direct welfare support to children of parental divorce. However, it does not involve the rest of the aspects of a social protection platform such as counselling programs, life skills programs and so on. The next section of this review looks at evidence-based positive policy interventions from elsewhere.

Interventions

In a randomised and controlled trial, three group programs were tested to find the effectiveness of preventive interventions (Rhodes, O'Hara, Vélez, & Wolchik, 2021). One was a multimodal program to find the attitudes about divorce, positive program effects on depression and scholastic and athletic competence of children. The second program focused on expressing feelings, problem-solving and educating about divorce to address the depression and anxiety associated with divorce. In this program, the behaviour problems were addressed by focusing on social role-taking and communication skills. The third was an online program for children and adolescents that focused on promoting coping efficacy. The findings show that these programs led to significant reductions in the children's mental

health problems (Rhodes et al., 2021).

In other trials, as reported by Rhodes et al. (2021), the Children's Support Group (CSG), and Children of Divorce Intervention Program (CODIP) were tested. Both programs focused on social support, emotion identification and coping skills. In one multiple quasi-experimental and experimental trial, the CODIP improved divorce-related perceptions and reduced a variety of adjustment problems such as anxiety and classroom problems among children from kindergarten to sixth grade. Likewise, in two quasi-experimental trials with children and adolescents, CSG showed positive effects on adjustment problems, self-esteem, and social skills (Rhodes et al., 2021).

Grych and Fincham (1992), conducted research to examine the effects of divorce on children, specifically focussing on how the interventions affected the children with their academic problems, interpersonal relations, use of mental health services, internalising and externalising problems. Their findings concluded that effective parenting is the most significant factor to help children adjust to parental divorce. Another program that focussed on increasing mother-child relationship quality concluded that children's coping processes can be modified through parenting programs (Vélez, Wolchik, Tein, & Sandler, 2011).

According to Wallerstein (1991), the intactness and morality of parents, and the sensitivity and commitment of the parents to the child are two major factors for children's positive adaptation to parental divorce. As summarised by Wallerstein (1991), mediation and restorative programs are important to help families avoid the economic and psychological stresses that are associated with divorced or remarried families. After the testing of counselling and therapy programs, Wallerstein (1991), concluded that programs designed to address the issues related to parents or parenting were the most effective in helping children. However, the lack of baseline measurements of how families were doing with the pre- or non-divorce related issues is one of the key difficulties in measuring the effectiveness of these programs for divorced families (Wallerstein, 1991).

In summary, the literature shows that children from divorced families may start to look at themselves and others negatively. The attachment they form with others varies depending on how the divorce has affected them. As children are vulnerable to such situations which can lead to an overall negative outlook in their adulthood, it is important to address the effects of divorce. With a high divorce rate as is the case in the Maldives, the chances for this negative cycle to repeat are higher. Based on these findings with the indicative cycle of divorce in the Maldives, and the shortage of local research on these aspects, it is timely to investigate these further.

Research design

As there is limited research on experiences of parental divorce in the Maldives, this research was designed more from an exploratory perspective than to generalise findings. The findings will nonetheless be useful to better understand divorce and their impact in Maldivian society. A quantitative survey was utilised to recruit as many people as possible, also to minimise the intrusiveness given the sensitive nature of the topic. An online survey is also more convenient to a country like the Maldives where the islands are geographically dispersed across the ocean (Riyaz, Musthafa, Abdul-Raheem, & Moosa). The approval of the Research Ethics

Committee of the Maldives National University was sought before conducting this research (RE/2021/B-09).

A survey conducted by the NBS to identify family structures and households of Maldives in 2006 showed that, from a total population of 117,362 children under the age of 18 years, 83,760 children lived with both parents (NBS, 2006). This leads to the assumption that the rest of the 33,602 children were from divorced families. Using this assumption, estimating there to be currently at least 33,602 adults who had experienced parental divorce, a sample of at least 380 individuals would be needed to generalise the findings with a 95% confidence level. As the focus is on adult children of divorced parents and because such statistics and the contact details of the target population are not available, convenient sampling was adopted to recruit participants with the aim to reach as many as possible within the data collection period of 4 weeks.

Instrument, data collection, & analysis

The participants self-administered the online survey questionnaire, which was open to the public in April 2021, with the inclusive criteria of having experienced parental divorce during their childhood, aged over 18 years at the time of the survey and have been involved in an intimate relationship. The link to the questionnaire was shared widely through social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter and shared via online communication channels such as Viber, Telegram and WhatsApp community groups; 113 individuals completed the questionnaire.

Section A of the online questionnaire elicited demographic details of the participant. Section B covered questions on how the participant viewed their parental divorce and asked participants to rate their childhood and relationships with parents/step-parents and siblings/step-siblings. Section C consisted of the 36 items from the Experiences of Close Relationship Scale (ECRS). The instrument was pilot tested, and sections A and B were streamlined accordingly.

Section C, the ECRS (adopted from Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998; Farley, Waller & Brennan, 2000; Platt et al., 2008) was used to measure attachment to the participant's significant other (the intimate partner). The ECRS contains two subscales: avoidance and anxiety. The avoidance subscale measures the individual's uneasiness in getting close to others or depending on others. The anxiety subscale measures the individual's fear of abandonment and rejection. The scores of the two subscales can be used to measure the type of attachment the participants have with their partner which can be classified into four attachment styles: preoccupied, dismissing, secure, and fearful (Farley, Waller, & Brennan, 2000). According to the study done by Platt et al. (2008), it was found that the ECR scale is reliable with Cronbach's alphas of .91 and .92 for anxiety and avoidance subscales respectively.

In the current study, Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient was construed as .93 for the 36 items of ECRS, indicating a high internal consistency of the responses. The generally accepted rule is that a Cronbach's alpha of 0.6-0.7 indicates an acceptable reliability value and 0.8 or higher indicates a very good reliability value scale (Ursachi, Horodnic, & Zait, 2015).

The auto-generated data from the Google Form was converted to the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Statistical tests were run using SPSS such as the 2 tailed Pearson correlation tests to find the significant difference between

variables and the Cronbach's Alpha test to check the reliability of the ECRS scores

Results

The survey was carried out to determine the most common attachment style exhibited by adults in an intimate relationship and understand the direction of the adult's outlook on themselves and others. A total of 113 individuals (78.8% females and 21.2% males) who had experienced parental divorce in their childhood participated in the online survey.

Demographics

Most of the participants were relatively young, with 54% aged 18-25 years, 37.2% aged 26 to 35 years, and only 8.8% of the participants identified as aged 36 and above. Over half of the participants (55.8%) indicated that they had not yet married, while 14 (12.4%) participants indicated having gone through a divorce, and 3.5% of the participants indicated they were currently not in a relationship.

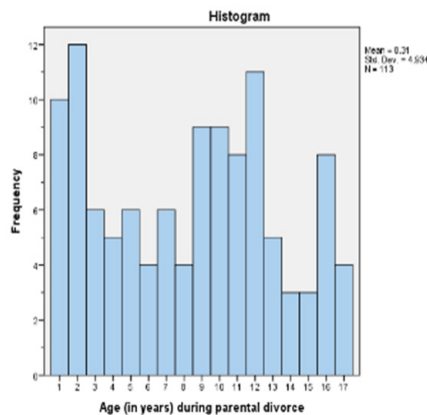


Figure 1. Age (in years) during parental divorce

The age of the respondents at the time of their parents' divorce varies (see Figure 1), with a considerable number of participants reporting that they were aged 1 or 2 years and 9 to 12 years. More than half (59.3%) of the participants' parents got divorced once from each other whereas 40.7% participants reported that their parents got divorced more than once from each other. Almost half (52.2%) of the participants responded that both of their parents re-married to stepparents while the rest said one of their parents remarried (38.1%) or none of them remarried (9.7%). Most of the participants (75.2%) lived with their mother during their childhood, while 14.2% of the participants lived with their father and 5.3% lived with another family member.

Views on parental divorce and relationship experiences

Most (63.7%) of the participants believe the divorce of their parents had a negative impact on themselves while 13.3% believe there was no impact and 23% were

undecided. Likewise, 64.6% participants believe the divorce of their parents had a negative impact on their relationship views while 19.5% believe there was no impact and 15.9% were undecided.

Only 39.8% of the participants rated their childhood as either very good or good and almost a quarter of the participants rated their childhood as unfavourable (either not good or not at all good). Over half (58.4%) of the participants rated their relationship with their mother during childhood as very good or good while 28.3% rated the relationship negatively. Conversely, the responses (see Table 1) show that compared to the relationship with their mother, most participants (42.5%) reported a negative relationship with their father while only less than a quarter of the participants rated their childhood relationship with their father as positive. Of those who reported having stepparents, 38.6% rated the relationship with their stepparents as neutral while almost one-third rated it negatively. Relationships with step-siblings were more negatively rated for those on father's side compared to step-siblings from mother's side (Table 1).

Table 1
Childhood relationship experiences

	Very good	Good	Neutral	Not good	Not at all good
How would you rate your childhood?	9.7%	30.1%	25.7%	17.7%	16.8%
Rate your relationship with your mother	36.3%	22.1%	13.3%	21.2%	7.1%
Rate your relationship with your father	15.0%	16.8%	25.7%	16.8%	25.7%
Relationship with stepparents	14.5%	15.7%	38.5%	8.4%	22.9%
Relationship with siblings	32.3%	32.3%	20.8%	11.5%	3.1%
Relationship with step-siblings (mother's side)	34.7%	16.3%	32.7%	8.2%	8.2%
Relationship with step-siblings (father's side)	9.4%	14.1%	37.5%	17.2%	21.9%

Experiences in close relationship scale

The first 18 items of ECRS comprise the attachment-related anxiety scale and the last 18 comprise the attachment-related avoidance scale. The answer scale ranges from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). To obtain a score for the attachment-related anxiety scale and attachment avoidance scale, the scores of the reversed keys were used and the average response was calculated for both the scales separately. A low anxiety score indicates that the individual is secure, and a high anxiety score indicates a dismissive individual. A low avoidance score shows a preoccupied individual, and a high avoidance scale shows a fearful-avoidant

person. The middle ground for anxiety and avoidance scales is 4 and this is used to determine whether the person has a moderate level of anxiety or avoidance. For this research and for easier analysis, such scores are highlighted as neutral.

In reference to the anxiety scale, 'dismissive' proves to be the most frequent attachment style (58.4%) followed by a secure attachment style (39.8%). Two participants showed a score in between the answer range and is thus noted as neutral. In the avoidance scale, the most frequent attachment style is shown to be preoccupied (69%) followed by fearful avoidant (30.1%). One participant's response was scored as neutral.

The variables were cross tabulated to see any pattern among them and at the same time, a bivariate Pearson correlation test was conducted to see the correlation coefficient between some of these groups.

Age, Gender, Employment Status, Marital status

The results show no statistically significant relationship to the participants' attachment style with the age categories, gender, employment status, and marital status.

Duration of relationships

When the duration of the recent relationship was compared with the anxiety and avoidance scale, the categories, 'not in a relationship', 'less than 6 months', '6 to 12 months', and '1 to 2 years' mostly showed a dismissive attachment style. However, the categories '2 to 5 years' and 'more than 5 years' mostly showed a preoccupied attachment style. These results indicate that an individual's attachment style has a correlation with the relationship duration.

Table 2
Duration of relationships, anxiety, and avoidance scale

		Anxiety Score	Avoidance Score	Recent Relationship Duration
Anxiety Score	Pearson Correlation	1	.361**	-.366**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000	.000
	N	113	113	113
Avoidance Score	Pearson Correlation	.361**	1	-.327**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		.000
	N	113	113	113
Recent Relationship Duration	Pearson Correlation	-.366*	-.327**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	
	N	113	113	113

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

A 2 tailed Pearson correlation test was conducted to find the significant difference between the relationship duration with the anxiety and avoidance scores. The result shows negative correlation coefficients (-3.66, -3.27) respectively, and it can be said that the attachment styles are inversely correlated to the duration of the intimate relationships but only to a very small extent.

Age during parental divorce

Cross tabulation of age during parental divorce with the anxiety scale showed that dismissive attachment style was more frequent with the children who faced parental divorce at older ages such as 11, 12 and 16 years. They were more secure when parental divorce was experienced at a younger age such as 1, 2, 5 and 9. However, there was no significant observed pattern between age of parental divorce and the attachment related avoidance scale.

Table 3
Correlation: Age during parental divorce, anxiety, and avoidance scale

		Anxiety Score	Avoidance Score	Recent Relationship Duration
Anxiety Score	Pearson Correlation	1	.361**	.102
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000	.281
	N	113	113	113
Avoidance Score	Pearson Correlation	.361**	1	.063
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		.504
	N	113	113	113
Recent Relationship Duration	Pearson Correlation	.102	.063	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.281	.504	
	N	113	113	113

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

A 2 tailed Pearson correlation test was conducted to find the significant correlation between the age during parental divorce, with the anxiety and avoidance scores. The result shows positive correlation coefficients (0.102, 0.063) respectively, with a higher correlation difference between age during parental divorce and the anxiety scores. Though the extent of correlation is very small, it can be said that the anxiety attachment styles are more correlated to the age during parental divorce.

Times of parental divorce

The frequency of dismissive and fearful avoidant attachment styles was greater among participants whose parents divorced only once in comparison to parents who divorced more than once.

Table 4
Correlation: Times of parental divorce, anxiety, and avoidance scale

		Anxiety Score	Avoidance Score	Recent Relationship Duration
Anxiety Score	Pearson Correlation	1	.361**	.016
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000	.867
	N	113	113	113
Avoidance Score	Pearson Correlation	.361**	1	.046
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		.625
	N	113	113	113
Recent Relationship Duration	Pearson Correlation	.016	.046	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.867	.625	
	N	113	113	113

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

A 2 tailed Pearson correlation test was conducted to find the significant correlation between the times of parental divorce with the anxiety and avoidance scores. The result shows positive correlation coefficients (0.16, 0.47) respectively, and it can be said that the attachment styles are somewhat correlated to the times of parental divorce but only to a very small extent.

Parental remarriage

When parents never remarried or when one parent remarried, participants mostly showed a dismissive attachment style whereas, when both the parents got married, most participants showed a preoccupied attachment style. This indicates that the fear of abandonment and rejection increases in children of divorce when they perceive the unavailability of both parents than a single parent.

Table 5
Correlations: Parental remarriage, anxiety, and avoidance scale

		Anxiety Score	Avoidance Score	Recent Relationship Duration
Anxiety Score	Pearson Correlation	1	.361**	-.098
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000	.304
	N	113	113	113

Avoidance Score	Pearson Correlation	.361**	1	-.121
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		.202
	N	113	113	113
Recent Relationship Duration	Pearson Correlation	-.098	-.121	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.304	.202	
	N	113	113	113

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

A 2 tailed Pearson correlation test was conducted to find the significant correlation between the parental remarriage with the anxiety and avoidance scores. The result shows negative correlation coefficients (-0.098, -0.121) respectively, with a higher correlation difference between parental remarriage and the avoidance scores. Therefore, it can be said that the attachment styles are inversely correlated to parental remarriage.

Persons lived mostly with after parental divorce

There is no statistically significant relationship to the participants' attachment style and with the person they mostly lived with after the parental divorce.

Effect of parental divorce on self-view

Table 6

Correlations: Effect of parental divorce on self-view, anxiety, and avoidance scale

		Anxiety Score	Avoidance Score	Recent Relationship Duration
Anxiety Score	Pearson Correlation	1	.361**	-.093
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000	.326
	N	113	113	113
Avoidance Score	Pearson Correlation	.361**	1	-.003
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		.976
	N	113	113	113
Recent Relationship Duration	Pearson Correlation	-.093	-.003	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.326	.976	
	N	113	113	113

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

A 2 tailed Pearson correlation test shows that there is almost no statistically

significant relationship to the participants' avoidance attachment scores and the effect of parental divorce on their self-views. However, there is a negative 0.93 significance correlation between participants' anxiety attachment scores and the effect of parental divorce on their self-views and this indicates that these participants are more anxious after a parental divorce with a more negative outlook on themselves.

Effect of parental divorce on relationship views

Table 7

Correlations: Effect of parental divorce on relationship views, anxiety, and avoidance scale

		Anxiety Score	Avoidance Score	Recent Relationship Duration
Anxiety Score	Pearson Correlation	1	.361**	-.180
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000	.057
	N	113	113	113
Avoidance Score	Pearson Correlation	.361**	1	-.075
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		.432
	N	113	113	113
Recent Relationship Duration	Pearson Correlation	-.180	-.075	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.057	.432	
	N	113	113	113

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

A 2 tailed Pearson correlation test was conducted to find the significant difference between the effect of parental divorce on relationship views with the anxiety and avoidance scores. The result shows negative correlation coefficients (-1.80, -0.75) respectively, with a higher correlation difference between effect of parental divorce on relationship views and the anxiety scores. This indicates that these participants are more anxious after a parental divorce and start to have a negative outlook on relationships.

Support mechanisms

There is no statistically significant relationship to the participants' attachment style and the support mechanisms that were received after parental divorce. When asked to identify the support mechanisms which were there for the participants during their parental divorce, 46.9% responded that they did not receive any form of support while 2.7% said they were too young to remember. Those who received support cited a family member (38.1%) or friends (23%) as their support mechanism, while none of the participants identified support from relevant

authorities.

When asked what support they believe children need to deal with parental divorce, most participants responded that they want support programs with both the parents (62.8%), one-to-one counselling sessions (52.2%), and support programs with another family member (19.5%). The other responses received to the open-ended question show the need for divorcing parents to adopt better communication strategy and to ensure children are not exploited to get at each other or asked to take sides.

Number of siblings/step-siblings

There is no statistically significant relationship to the participants' attachment style and number of siblings they have. Participants were mostly dismissive (17) and fearful avoidant (16) with zero stepsiblings. They were mostly preoccupied (23) and secure (14) with 2 stepsiblings. This indicates that the number of stepsiblings may have a significant relationship to the participants' attachment styles.

Table 6
Correlations: Number of stepsiblings, anxiety, and avoidance scale

		Anxiety Score	Avoidance Score	Recent Relationship Duration
Anxiety Score	Pearson Correlation	1	.361**	-.057
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000	.551
	N	113	113	113
Avoidance Score	Pearson Correlation	.361**	1	-.028
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		.764
	N	113	113	113
Recent Relationship Duration	Pearson Correlation	-.057	-.028	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.551	.764	
	N	113	113	113

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

A 2 tailed Pearson correlation test was conducted to find the significant correlation between the number of step-siblings and with the anxiety and avoidance scores. The result shows negative correlation coefficients (-0.057, -0.028) respectively, with a higher correlation difference between number of step-siblings and the anxiety scores, however, the extent of correlation is significantly small.

Childhood ratings

There is no statistically significant relationship to the participants' attachment style and how they have rated their childhood.

Ratings of relationship with mother, father, stepparents, siblings, and stepsiblings

There is no statistically significant relationship to the participant's attachment style with the rating of the relationship with their mother, father, stepparents, siblings, and stepsiblings on either mother or father's side.

Discussion

The present study attempted to determine the individuals' attachment styles in adult intimate relationships based on two subscales, avoidance, and anxiety, using the ECRS. Bowlby's attachment theory (Hayashi, 1993) was adopted to predict whether the occurrence of parental divorce is related to the attachment styles formed by children while growing up, with a stronger correlation to adult intimate relationships. The findings from ECR scale were used to evaluate the existing policy interventions in the Maldives that alleviate negative effects on children because of parental divorce, with the help of the support mechanisms highlighted by the participants in the questionnaire.

First Hypothesis

The first hypothesis of the present study is that adults who experienced parental divorce in their childhood are more likely to show a fearful-avoidant attachment style to their intimate partners. However, the results show that the attachment style of adults who had undergone parental divorce in their childhood is as follows: preoccupied (69.0%), dismissive (58.4%), secure (39.8%) and fearful avoidant (30.1%). Hence, the results do not support the hypothesis as adults of parental divorce mostly showed a preoccupied attachment style and infrequently showed a fearful-avoidant attachment style.

According to Van-Buren and Cooley (2002), the anxious-preoccupied attachment style is demonstrated by individuals who possess a negative view of themselves and a positive view of others. They tend to seek high levels of approval, responsiveness and intimacy from their attachment figures and sometimes become overly attached and dependent on them (Van-Buren & Cooley, 2002). In comparison to a secure attachment style, adults with a preoccupied style have a less positive view of themselves, often doubt their worth as a person, and blame themselves for how unresponsive their romantic partner is (Van-Buren & Cooley, 2002). Individuals with a preoccupied attachment style may also exhibit emotional dysregulation, impulsiveness, worry and emotional expressiveness in their relationships (Wallerstein, 1991). According to Wallerstein (1991), this form of anxiousness existing within a person can only recede when they are in contact with their attachment figure and thus needs consistent emotional intimacy.

On the other hand, a fearful-avoidant attachment style is demonstrated by people who possess an unstable or negative view of themselves and others (Lambert, 2007). This type of attachment style is seen mostly among adults who have experienced a traumatic event such as sexual abuse during childhood or adolescence (Lambert, 2007). Therefore, one reason the participants did not display a more frequent fearful-avoidant attachment style could be due to the inexperience of trauma in

their lives. It is also a possibility for them to associate the parental divorce as a conflict rather than a trauma.

Individuals with an insecure fearful avoidant attachment style could be vulnerable to mental health problems such as anxiety disorders and this could cause them to develop new attachment styles during their adulthood (Van-Buren & Cooley, 2002; Nair & Murray, 2005). This could also be a reason for the results to show a more anxious preoccupied attachment style and not a fearful-avoidant attachment style. The results also showed that participants were more secure when parental divorce was experienced at a younger age such as 1, 2, 5 and 9 compared to older ages such as 11, 12 and 16 in which they showed a more dismissive attachment style. This also adds support that it is a possibility for attachment styles to change over the years.

Research conducted to see the change in stability and change in adult attachment styles in association with personal vulnerabilities, life events and global construal of self and others showed that across a two-year period, 46% of the participants changed their attachment style (Cozzarelli, Karafa, Collins, & Tagler, 2003). This suggests that these attachment styles are somewhat flexible and there is a chance for this to have occurred among the participants in the current study too. According to Cozzarelli et al. (2003), among the women who changed their attachment style to a secure one showed an increase in self-esteem and perceptions of social support over time. In case of parental divorce, such social security can be provided by a family member, a caretaker, a stepparent or even an older sibling (Cozzarelli et al., 2003). However, it is mostly women who take the guardianship of the children, and this increases their risk of poverty because of an imbalance of income and household expenditure (Platt et al., 2008). Hence, women suffer long terms of stress more when compared to men after a divorce (Platt et al., 2008). Therefore, personal and interpersonal experiences along with dispositional risk factors need to be identified in future research related to attachment styles. Furthermore, a longitudinal study can be conducted in the future, across a group of individuals throughout their adolescence and adulthood to see if these changes occur among children of parental divorce.

The results of the current study also showed that when parents never remarried or when one parent remarried, participants mostly showed a dismissive attachment style whereas, when both parents got married, most participants showed a preoccupied attachment style. This indicates that the fear of abandonment and rejection increases in children of divorce when they perceive the unavailability of both parents than a single parent. According to Wallerstein (1991), as divorced parents develop relationships and remarry, this may remind children of what they previously had with their mother and father. This forces them to confront reality and let go of the hope that their parents will reconcile and that they will never get to have the original family back. Hence, the remarriage of a parent can become the source of sadness in a child and can be doubled with the remarriage of both parents to their newfound partners (Wallerstein, 1991).

After a divorce, a child mostly lives with a single parent, a family member, or another caretaker. The cultural norm of the Maldives in cases of parental conflict or parental divorce results in mothers or the maternal grandmother bearing the responsibility of childbearing (UNFPA, 2004). Even the results of this study show that most of the participants lived with their mother during childhood while only

14.2% lived with their father. While living with a single parent, children already feel a loss due to the absence of the mother or the father (Vareschi & Bursik, 2005). And when the parent they live with gets married, children are involuntarily forced to share the parent with the new stepparent or stepsiblings (Vareschi & Bursik, 2005). This may cause them to experience a second loss and therefore it can lead to an anxious preoccupied attachment style. They fear that they have been abandoned and rejected by both the parents and thus the unavailability of both parents can elevate these negative thoughts of themselves (Van-Buren & Cooley, 2002).

Second Hypothesis

The second hypothesis states that children of parental divorce will have a more negative outlook on themselves and others. The results show that 63.7% of participants believe that parental divorce had a negative outlook on how they view themselves and 64.6% of participants believe that parental divorce had a negative impact on their views of relationships. However, the results for most of the participants (69%) show an anxious-preoccupied attachment style which is associated with a positive outlook on others followed by a negative outlook on themselves. Therefore, the results only support the second hypothesis partly and the participants in this study only have a negative outlook on themselves and not on others.

According to Van-Buren and Cooley (2002), when individuals have a negative outlook on themselves, they feel insecure, have low self-esteem and fear rejection and abandonment. Their need to immerse in the relationship exhibits a clingy nature that scares the partner away and this may lead to a broken relationship or a broken marriage. Preoccupied individuals also ruminate on unresolved past issues especially from family-of-origin which interferes with the current relationship and adds more problems with the partner (Van-Buren & Cooley, 2002). Their inconsistent harmony with their partner and children can thus lead to a divorce and thereby create a cycle of divorce. Therefore, for a marriage or a relationship to work, the preoccupied individuals need to attend to their issues and start viewing themselves in a more positive perspective (Van-Buren & Cooley, 2002). For these changes to occur, involvement of a third party is usually necessary and so it is vital to bring policy changes that incorporate effective support mechanisms to the already existing guidelines related to marriage and divorce (Grych & Fincham, 1992). Furthermore, these changes should not only be focused on the parents involved in a divorce but to the children who experience a parental divorce too.

Policy Interventions

The findings show that none of the participants received help from the authorities during their experiences of parental divorce. These findings resonate with the literature review which shows the single parent allowance program is the only form of direct welfare support to help children of parental divorce in the Maldives and yet, it does not involve the rest of the aspects of a social protection platform such as counselling programs, life skills programs and so on. The participants indicated the type of support mechanism that they would have liked to have received which highlighted a resounding need for both parents to work together and less pressure on the children. These findings support prior research such as Grych and Fincham

(1992) and Rhodes et al.'s (2021) findings in which they have stated that mediation, educational programs, and counselling and therapy are some of the most effective interventions for divorced families.

These results show that currently the Maldivian society does not receive proper support mechanisms after experiencing parental divorce even though the country has the highest divorce rate globally. It also shows that children do need support from various groups of people for them to cope with the loss of parent/parents to divorce. However, the Family Law (2000) mostly emphasises on the financial support that should be given to the wife and children by the husband/father after divorce (UNFPA, 2004). In case the father suffers financial instability, the court appoints a relative to be responsible for the upbringing of those children and to bear the costs associated with the child maintenance (UNFPA, 2004).

According to the Family Law review report published by the UNFPA (2004), the Law would require the incorporation of strong counselling services, rather than just advising the couple as a formality during cases, as a practical method to strengthen families. To do this effectively, UNFPA (2004) further recommended that the existing reconciliatory practices need to be reviewed and evaluated by professionals trained in counselling families and marital issues. However, there is no literature that shows concrete measures were taken on this suggested reconciliatory process. The results of the current study through the viewpoints of the adults who have experienced parental divorce add strength to the UNFPA directive. If the support mechanisms identified by the participants are taken into consideration and the intervention programs are added to the Family Law (2000) along with revisions to the regulations of the Family Court in the context of mediation process, these can help divorcing parents and their children manage their relationships better and may eventually decrease the rate of divorce in the Maldives.

Recommendations

The overall results show significant findings with relation to the experience of parental divorce to the adult attachment styles in their intimate relationships. Most of the participants reported an anxious-preoccupied attachment style and this infers that they view themselves with negative attributions and develop fear of rejection and abandonment. The participants did not receive an adequate and effective support system during their childhood, and highlighted the need for proper support mechanisms for children who experience parental divorce to best address the negative impacts of a divorce in their lives.

Prior research has identified potential processes that can be modified to address post-divorce adjustment problems associated with children and their families (Rhodes et al., 2021). This includes parent-child relationship quality, inter-parental conflict, children's coping strategies, and children's cognitive and behavioural problems. In theory, addressing these issues can change the negative impacts of divorce including the attachment styles they develop in relationships (Rhodes et al., 2021; Vélez et al., 2011). Social interventions such as practices, policies and programs can have meaningful impact on life outcomes including criminal activity, substance abuse, employment, health, depression, earnings, and educational achievement (Schaan & Vögele, 2016). How evidence-based interventions are implemented can bring a major difference to the intervention

effects even with minor changes in the implementation (Schaan & Vögele, 2016). However, the results of the present study construe the lack of and need for support systems within the country, and therefore, it is recommended to identify effective evidence-based interventions developed in other countries and to implement them in the Maldives too.

As discussed in the literature review, studies conducted by Grych and Fincham (1992), and Vélez et al. (2011) show positive effects from both child-focused and parent-focused programs. The findings of these studies showed a significant decrease in mental health problems, increase in coping efficacy, improved divorce-related perceptions, and reduction in a variety of adjustment problems. It also showed that these positive effects were maintained for a few years. Therefore, based on these programs and their effectiveness, it is recommended to conduct similar programs in the Maldives focused on both the parents and children rather than on just one party. Developing such programs in the Maldives can help change the negative feelings and coping strategies of children who have faced parental divorce. These intervention programs can be conducted in schools, in the family courts and even by the general society. Laws and guidelines can be formed and implemented by different ministries, courts, and other related organisations.

Moreover, identifying the appropriate implementation sites is also a big part of producing positive effects from the interventions (Vélez et al., 2011). The results of the current study show that children want the support to be available from home, schools and from other community groups (Vélez et al., 2011). A school can be a good district to educate children if the elected administrators and program delivery staff are enthusiastic to provide this support (Nair & Murray, 2005). Regardless of the implementation site, the cooperation of everyone is essential for a successful intervention. However, interventions are almost never executed perfectly and to strive for the best results, identifying the key features of the interventions is significant. And most importantly, a monitoring body needs to be developed to ensure adherence to key features and to correct deviations when they may arise (Nair & Murray, 2005). In the case of the Maldives, a few such monitoring bodies can be developed within some organisations such as the National Social Protection Agency, Family Protection Authority, Ministry of Gender Family and Social Services, and Family court.

According to Wallerstein (1991), the lack of baseline measurements of how families were doing with the pre-or non-divorce related issues is one of the key difficulties in measuring the effectiveness of these programs for divorced families. Therefore, future research in the Maldives can address these aspects and conduct baseline studies to identify the current issues prior to and after divorce. Research focused on effective connections during adjustment problems and types of interventions are necessary to conclude this for the Maldivian society. To activate the above-discussed recommendations as well as to further validate findings from this exploratory research, there is a need for further research into parental divorce and child well-being aspects.

The relationship between the participants and their stepsiblings from the father's side is shown to be quite negative in comparison to those from the mother's side. Given the high number of estimated step-siblings that would result from the high rate of divorce in the country, investigating the dynamics between stepfamilies could bring further useful information to create awareness about the importance

of ensuring marriages are not taken too lightly. Additionally, the data available from the Family Court can be used to identify the families that have experienced divorce and, research can be conducted on this target population to see if parental divorce is a predictor of divorce in their children's lives too. This could be able to conclusively say whether there is a cycle of divorce or not across generations in the Maldives.

Limitations

The research findings are based on 113 participants from the target population of an estimate of 30,000 adults who could have experienced parental divorce in their childhood. This sample size is not large enough to make strong generalisations, and this was anticipated in the research design stage. Due to COVID-19 restrictive measures and given the scope of the research project, it was impossible to conduct door-to-door surveys or to physically travel to islands to seek additional eligible participants from the Maldives. Therefore, Viber groups and other social media applications were used to recruit participants. This decreases the chances to recruit a representative sample. Participants may also have the fear of judgement or may not trust the researcher due to the already existing trust issues, even though it was ensured in the information sheet that personal details that can be connected to the participants will not be collected or recorded at any point of the survey. Moreover, the gender representation among the participants was quite skewed towards more female participants and this could have affected the results too.

Based on these two observations, it is recommended that future research that builds on this topic adopts a stratified representative sample. Also, as the current study concentrated only on adults who had experienced parental divorce and did not collect comparative data from those who were in intact families, it cannot be ascertained confidently that the observed attachment style is associated with the experience of divorce. Therefore, future research can target to have a control group and an experimental group to understand whether childhood experience of parental divorce shows a stronger correlation to the attachment style.

Conclusion

The aftermath of divorce affects each child differently and to various extents. Children who remember their parental divorce can carry the negative emotions with them to adulthood and into the families of their own. Given the high divorce rate in the Maldives, it is important to conduct further in-depth research to understand various aspects of the divorce phenomenon in the country. Accordingly, the purpose of this research was to determine whether parental divorce is a predictor of children's attachment styles in their adult intimate relationships. It was also aimed to evaluate existing policy interventions that can mitigate adverse effects on children because of parental divorce.

The findings show that adults who have experienced parental divorce mostly developed an anxious-preoccupied attachment style in their intimate relationships and had a negative outlook on themselves and a positive outlook on others. The results also show that the children from divorced families in the Maldives do not receive proper support mechanisms after experiencing parental divorce. To

effectively provide the support they need, social interventions such as evidence-based practices, policies and programs can be developed for meaningful impact. Irrespective of the limitations of the research project, the responses that were received are shown to be highly reliable based on the Cronbach alpha's reliability score of 0.93. The findings on the attachment style of those who have experienced parental divorce show the adverse effect of divorce on children and has implications on leading to a cycle of divorce for generations. The findings are significant for policymakers especially working towards children and family wellbeing.

Declaration

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