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# **The Science of Human Attachment and Rumi's Insights into Spiritual Attachment**

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## **Abstract**

Attachment theory, first proposed by John Bowlby in the 1950s, explores the emotional bonds between individuals, particularly focusing on the parent-child relationship. This article delves into the foundations of attachment theory, outlining its significance in understanding how early experiences with caregivers' shape individuals' emotional and social development. It reviews the central concepts of attachment behaviours, the formation of attachment styles, and the impact of these styles on adult relationships. The article identifies the primary attachment styles—secure, dismissive, fearful, and preoccupied—and examines the intergenerational transmission of attachment patterns, stability of attachment styles throughout life, and their implications for psychological adjustment. Additionally, this work seeks to highlight existing gaps in the literature regarding attachment theory and offers a unique perspective by integrating insights from Rumi's poetry. Through this examination, the article aims to contribute to the ongoing discourse on attachment theory and its relevance in contemporary psychological research.

In this article, one of the psychological tales from the first book of the Mathnawi is analysed using a hermeneutic and holistic

approach. The focal point of the third discourse is the dialogue between the child and the mother, followed by the dialogue between the King and the fire, as well as the King's subsequent actions and reactions. The child is the primary hero of the tale, while the King serves as the antagonist. Composed in verse and using symbolic language, the discourse is filled with ups and downs, mirroring the true journey of human life.

The central question of the article is about the mystical psychological dimensions of humanity, especially those of the mother, child, and power, as represented in this discourse. Metaphorically, in the current article, mother is representing all caregivers. The findings of the article indicate that Rumi illustrates a variety of conflicts within human nature and also depicts a mystical psychological perspective. In the chosen discourse for the present article, the child and mother play a constructive and nurturing interactive role. Verses 783–811 from the first chapter of Mathnawi convey the primary content of the child-mother relationship. This article thus bridges attachment theory with mystical perspectives, exploring the resonance between Bowlby's psychological insights and the rich symbolic framework of Rumi's insights and poetry, suggesting Spiritual Attachment to be complete map of human attachment process.

Key words: Attachment Theory, Attachment Styles, Rumi's Poetry, Spirituality .

## **Introduction**

Attachment theory has been a prominent topic in psychology for decades, providing a framework for understanding emotional bonds between humans. First proposed by John Bowlby in the 1950s, it explains the nature of these bonds, particularly the relationship between a child and their carer. Bowlby suggested that attachment functions as a behavioural control system of biological origin, where the child uses the attachment figure as a 'secure base' from which to explore their environment (Thompson et al., 2022). This concept is

crucial in understanding how attachment influences social and emotional development throughout a person's life.

Attachment is central to the study of parenting and parent-child relationships. It describes the tendency of young children to seek comfort and safety from consistent carers when they feel frightened, worried, or vulnerable (Guo and Ash, 2020; Juffer, et al., 2014; Sroufe et al., 1999; Bowlby, 1979). The emotional support provided by caregivers, nurture a child's sense of security, enabling them to explore their surroundings with confidence. This foundational relationship significantly shapes their future interpersonal relationships and emotional well-being (Guo and Ash, 2020; Bowlby, 1979).

Attachment behaviours are crucial in forming and investing in significant relationships. An infant's behaviour is directed towards gaining proximity to their carer, which manifests in actions such as crying, smiling, calling, and clinging (Bowlby, 1979). These behaviours not only serve to maintain closeness but also communicate the child's needs for emotional support.

Attachment styles in infant-mother relationships were first described by Mary D. Salter Ainsworth (1978), who identified two main styles: secure attachment and insecure attachment. Insecure attachment is further characterised by ambivalent and anxious-avoidant patterns. According to Bowlby's theory, the form of attachment a child develops is based on actual interactive experiences with attachment figures, rather than the fantasies these figures might evoke. According to Bowlby (1979) in adulthood, four distinct categories of attachment styles are typically identified: dismissive attachment, fearful attachment, preoccupied attachment, and secure attachment. Each style reflects how individuals relate to others in intimate relationships, influenced by their childhood experiences.

Major topics central to attachment theory include the role of the environment in the development of attachment styles, the intergenerational transmission of patterns of attachment, the stability

and change of attachment patterns, and the impact of attachment on adjustment and maladjustment. Attachment styles significantly affect psychological adjustment, with secure attachment generally leading to positive mental health outcomes and insecure attachment contributing to issues such as anxiety and depression (Flaherty and Sadler, 2011, Cowan and Cowan, 2007).

Adult attachment styles are characterised by how individuals relate to others, particularly in intimate relationships. These styles are heavily influenced by self-worth and interpersonal trust. The degree of attachment security in adults is theoretically related to the quality of their early bonding experiences. Feelings of security or insecurity are organised during the first year of life in the form of an internal working model, which shapes stable reactions in the face of distress and novelty (Guo and Ash, 2020; Juffer, et al., 2014; Flaherty and Sadler, 2011; Cowan and Cowan, 2007). According to Holmes (1997) attachment experiences are internalised as self-narratives around the ages of 3 to 5, and that these self-narratives form the foundation of reflexive self-function and autobiographical competence later in life.

It is worth mentioning attachment implies to both parents, i.e., it does not refer to one parent. It includes both parents and contrary to general community belief, fathers play crucial roles in the attachment as well. Bretherton (2014) emphasised on fathers' role and suggested a family approach to attachment.

In this article, the four distinct categories of adult attachment styles—dismissive attachment, fearful attachment, preoccupied attachment, and secure attachment—are accepted as core components of Bowlby's attachment theory. According to Bowlby (1979), four primary attachment styles are identified with the following explanation:

**Dismissive Attachment:** Individuals with this style tend to value independence and self-reliance over close relationships. They may minimise the importance of emotional connections and often appear

distant or aloof. This stems from a childhood where emotional needs were frequently unmet, leading them to avoid intimacy and dependence on others.

**Fearful Attachment:** Those with a fearful attachment style experience a deep desire for close relationships but also harbour significant fears of being hurt or rejected. This push-pull dynamic makes them both drawn to and wary of intimacy. It often develops from inconsistent caregiving, where love and affection were unpredictable.

**Preoccupied Attachment:** Preoccupied individuals tend to be overly focused on their relationships, often feeling anxious and insecure about their partner's availability. They may appear clingy or dependent, as they seek constant reassurance. This style emerges when caregivers were inconsistent, causing the child to become hyper-vigilant about connection and approval.

**Secure Attachment:** Those with a secure attachment style feel confident in their relationships. They trust that their emotional needs will be met and are comfortable with intimacy while maintaining independence. This typically results from a responsive and attuned caregiving environment during childhood, fostering a sense of safety and stability in relationships.

In the following sections, a brief literature review of attachment theory will be presented, exploring the current research status, identifying potential gaps in existing knowledge, and evaluating whether this article can contribute new insights through the lens of Rumi's poetry.

## **Literature Review**

Bowlby (1979) attachment theory stands as one of the most successful psychological theories over the last fifty years. This theory has sparked numerous published studies and numerous books,

garnering widespread interest across various domains of psychology. Its appeal extends to developmentalists, clinicians, personality and social psychologists, as well as researchers focusing on groups and organisations (Shaver and Mikulincer, 2009). Due to the widespread studies on attachment theory, the current literature review aims to categorise previous research into different groups and provide examples in each category.

The literature review, citing studies such as Fearon and Roisman (2017), revealed key questions within attachment theory that researchers aim to address. The first question pertains to the impact of genetics, specifically exploring how one can differentiate whether attachment results from environmental factors rather than genetics. The second question addresses the transferability of attachment styles, investigating whether the attachment style moves from parent to child. The third question focuses on the persistence of attachment styles throughout life, examining their continuity from childhood to adulthood. Finally, the fourth question delves into the extent of the correlation between attachment styles and variations in children's socio-emotional development and adjustment abilities. In essence, studies on attachment theory aim to either support or challenge the assertive statement that attachment styles are significantly, if not solely, influenced by the sensitivity of parents and caregivers. Subsequent inquiries arise after establishing the context of the study around this bold claim.

Researchers study attachment in terms of connections to various entities, such as attachment to specific brands. In the literature review of this article, the following fields were observed, attachment theory in families, attachment theory at work, and attachment to certain entities. However, it is important to note that the current article primarily focuses on the relationship between parents or caregivers and children. Later on, a noble kind of attachment is proposed that can be traced through the lens of Rumi.

Attachment constitutes a pivotal subfield within the realm of parenting and parent-child relationship research. Fearon, and Roisman, et al. (2017) in their overview, encapsulated what they perceive as the cutting-edge state of attachment research, with a primary emphasis on the essence and significance of attachment during infancy and early childhood. Their examination delves into four key topics that stand as central issues in the scientific discourse on attachment: 1. the influence of the environment on attachment development, 2. the intergenerational transmission of attachment patterns, 3. the enduring stability of attachment patterns into early adulthood, and 4. the role of attachment in both adjustment and maladjustment. They concluded several crucial unresolved matters still call for attention.

It is assumed that the attachment style can serve as a predictor for future turmoil and challenges, which could be beneficial for prognosis in health-related policies, e.g. Bucci, et al. (2015) found attachment theory offers a valuable framework for shaping the design and implementation of general mental health services. Palitsky, et al. (2013) emphasise attachment theory examines how an individual perceives and undergoes interpersonal relationships. Consequently, the attachment style can predict various physical and psychological phenomena, establishing an intricate connection to future outcomes.

Insecure attachment, as proposed by Herstell et al. (2021), emerges as a significant risk factor for mental health issues and a pivotal element in the development and trajectory of mental disorders. The objective of their meta-analysis was to assess whether insecure attachment acts as a broad transdiagnostic risk factor across bipolar disorder, depression, and schizophrenia spectrum disorders. The overall results revealed a substantial impact on the prevalence of insecure attachment across various mental disorders. The absence of discernible transdiagnostic differences between these disorders supports the concept of insecure attachment as a general vulnerability factor to psychopathology. These findings underscore the necessity for further investigations into the pathways from attachment



insecurity to psychopathology, with potential implications for the assessment, prediction, and treatment of mental disorders.

Another study conducted by Wiltgen et al. (2015) discovered that attachment style serves as a reliable determinant in the prevalence of Obsessive-Compulsive Personality Disorder (OCPD). The findings confirm substantial impairments in interpersonal functioning, highlighting attachment avoidance as a distinctive trait among individuals with Obsessive-Compulsive Personality Disorder (OCPD).

Holmes (1997) proposes that the core aims of psychotherapy can be understood as the pursuit of intimacy and autonomy, emerging from parental attunement and the containment of healthy protest—parallels of which are found in adult psychotherapy. Here is a mounting body of evidence supporting the role of attachment in psychosis. However, as of now, there has not been a quantitative review assessing the prevalence of insecure attachment in psychosis. Carr, et al. (2018) study sought to systematically appraise studies investigating the prevalence of insecure attachment and the association with psychosis-spectrum experiences using meta-analytic techniques. The prevalence of insecure attachment appears to be high in psychosis; however, the relationship between symptom severity and attachment is small. Their research proposed that attachment theory could offer a more profound insight into the development of positive symptoms than previously believed. Nonetheless, further investigations should encompass more at-risk samples and incorporate longitudinal research to thoroughly comprehend the dynamics of this relationship.

Rather than solely focusing on mental health disorders, other risk factors rooted in attachment styles can be considered. Studies (e.g., Shen and Soloski, 2022; Cantón-Cortés et al., 2015; Bacon and Richardson, 2001; Liem and Boudewyn, 1999; Alexander, 1992) indicate that discussions on sexual abuse often neglect to consider the family's role as a potential risk factor in the initiation of various forms

of sexual abuse and as a mediator of its enduring repercussions. Attachment theory provides a valuable conceptual framework for understanding the familial origins and lasting impacts of sexual abuse. Patterns linked to insecure parent-child attachments, and the presence of fear or unresolved trauma, are commonly observed in the dynamics of families marked by sexual abuse. Certain consequences are associated with likely attachment experiences.

In this regard Stück, et al. (2022) found in adherence to the Risk-Need-Responsivity (RNR) model, the effectiveness of treatment to prevent reoffending sexual abuse, is enhanced when it addresses three core principles: risk, need, and responsivity. While significant attention has been devoted to the risk and need principles, there has been a lack of exploration into the area of responsivity. The findings suggest low perceived self-efficacy and inadequate adult attachment styles could be potential responsivity factors hindering the treatment of underlying risk factors of sexual abuse. Being responsive as a parent can play a vital role in the attachment style. Holmes (1997) suggested healthy protest can be nurtured by secure attachment style that can help in such issues in life.

Also, Schindler (2019) suggested attachment and substance use are correlated with each other, i.e. the correlation between insecure attachment and substance usage was found. Replacement assumption can be suggested here, i.e. attachment with parents and caregivers was disturbed and it can be replaced by proper intervention.

In some studies, like Cassidy, et al. (2013) special attention is given to the concept of cognitive working models and the neural and physiological mechanisms that link early attachment experiences to later functionality. The findings highlight clinical-translational and public policy applications derived from attachment research, aiming to mitigate the occurrence and persistence of insecure attachment during infancy and beyond.

Extensive research on attachment theory underscores its profound importance. Over the past half-century, this theory has consistently

captured the attention of researchers. As mentioned earlier, attachment theory revolves around the relationship between a child and their parents or caregivers, playing a crucial role in the development of affectionate bonds. Studies have diligently explored the enduring impact of attachment theory on later developmental stages, particularly through the examination of attachment styles and their effects on various types of relationships. Given that attachment styles have a lasting impact on adulthood; researchers find utility in applying attachment theory to various contexts rather than family, such as the workplace.

The impact of attachment theory in organisational studies is on the rise, evident in a surge of articles published in the past five years surpassing the total from the preceding 25 years. While previous research mainly concentrated on attachment styles and their correlation with organisational outcomes, recent years have witnessed a shift in focus within organisational studies (Yip, et al, 2018).

The last study the current article refers to is about the relationship between attachment styles with religion. Similar to human caregivers, believers may perceive God as a noncorporeal attachment figure. Many religious individuals experience God as a provider of safety and security. Differences in attachment styles contribute to variations in religious experiences and development. Attachment-related factors play a moderating role in the relationship between religion and mental health (Cherniak, et al., 2021).

It is vital to keep in mind that there are still unanswered questions related to attachment that can be topics of further studies. These questions extend beyond the scope of the attachment theory discussed so far (Thompson, et al., 2022).

The current article explores attachment to the transcendent entity, commonly referred to as God, serving as a figure surpassing parents and caregivers. The context of intergenerational transmission in attachment styles is also considered. Since the literature review

asserts the possibility of intergenerational transmission, the current article explores ways to promote and enhance it among adults and implement interventions for correcting their attachment styles. Such interventions can be designed externally, including environmental modifications.

To summarise the findings of the literature review, confirm the significance of human relationships and their implications for individual development. Attachment research has unequivocally demonstrated that infants are inherently predisposed from birth to form connections with others, and their relationships play a paramount role in shaping their psychological development. Furthermore, it emphasises that internal working models are likely to endure over time, and the history of relationships is transmitted from one generation to the next generation as per studies. Also, the attachment style can have a predictability of physical and mental health in adulthood.

Having reviewed the literature, the current article recognises a gap that it aims to address and concentrate on. The present article proposes the notion of spiritual connection, positioning it as a unique and significant bond akin to special and important relationships. It questions whether such connections hold an inherent importance for survival, seeking evidence and examples through a developmental perspective. Furthermore, the exploration extends to intergenerational transmission, examining the potential impact of spiritual connections on attachment styles. The argument is made that attachment styles, heavily influenced by self-worth and interpersonal trust, may be shaped by one's spiritual relationship with a higher power. Consideration is given to the possibility of attachment modifications and how therapeutic interventions might play a role in this multifaceted exploration. The ultimate goal of such interventions and modifications is the intergenerational transmission of secure attachment to enhance the mental health of the current generation as well as future generations. In this regard, Rumi poetry and insights is suggested as a tool to promote the above-mentioned assumptions.

## **Rumi**

Jalal al-Din Mohammad Balkhi, known as Rumi and Molana, was a 13th-century Persian poet, mystic, and Islamic scholar, whose works have transcended cultures and centuries, resonating deeply with audiences across the world. Born in 1207 in present-day Afghanistan, Rumi eventually settled in Konya, Turkey, where he became one of the most influential figures in Sufism, a spiritual path within Islam focused on direct connection with the Divine.

Rumi's poetry, most notably his magnum opus, the *Mathnawi*, is widely considered one of the greatest works of mystical literature. Composed of over 25,000 verses, the *Mathnawi* is rich with parables, allegories, and metaphors exploring themes of love, the inner self, spiritual growth, and humanity's connection with the Divine, or transcendental entity as referred to in the current article. His verses often reflect his belief in unity and the interconnectedness of all existence, frequently likening the Divine to a lover, and the human soul to a lover longing to be reunited.

Central to Rumi's philosophy is the notion of 'Divine Love' or 'Ishq,' which transcends earthly affection and binds the soul directly to God. Rumi's own life and teachings were profoundly influenced by his spiritual guide, Shams e Tabriz, whose companionship transformed Rumi from a respected scholar into a poet who expressed his deepest truths through ecstatic verses.

Rumi's influence has endured for over seven centuries, not only in Islamic and Persian cultures but across the world, where his teachings have inspired people of all faiths. His universal themes of love, tolerance, and self-discovery continue to offer profound insights into human nature, spirituality, and the search for meaning. Rumi's poetry remains a testament to the boundless possibilities of the human spirit and the transformative power of spiritual connection. (Safavi, 2018)

## **Applications of Rumi's Poetry**

As mentioned, interactions between caregivers and a child are central to attachment theory, which considers how a child responds to caregivers' actions and how caregivers adjust their behaviour based on the child's responses. Rumi emphasises that a child can also influence caregivers in their own growth and development. Furthermore, Rumi assumes the existence of a superpower who created human beings and other creatures, categorising behaviours to align either with or without this superpower.

The current article explores attachment to the transcendent entity, commonly referred to as God, serving as a figure surpassing parents and caregivers. The context of intergenerational transmission in attachment styles is also considered. Rumi, one of the most revered poets and mystic in Persian literature, provides profound insights into human emotions, love, and attachment. His poetry and insights frequently examine the bond between humans and a higher power, likening this relationship to the trust and security that attachment theory describes. Rumi's metaphorical language about love and connection may be viewed through the lens of attachment theory, particularly in terms of fostering secure attachment to the divine. For instance, themes in his work, such as "the beloved," may be perceived as representations of a secure, nurturing figure.

Rumi's teachings may also enhance spiritual connections that promote healing and trust. His emphasis on love as a transformative power can be incorporated into therapeutic practices that aim to strengthen attachment security through mindfulness, reflection, and emotional connection to a higher power. This spiritual bond may influence attachment styles by cultivating a sense of safety, security, and resilience that transcends earthly relationships.

Based on the verses and the position of the chosen part in relation to the preceding and following discourses, the primary issue in the third discourse is 'self-centeredness', another aspect of the commanding self, particularly from verse 772 onwards. 'Self-centeredness' is a

fundamental trait of the commanding self, rooted in arrogance, pride, and vanity, and is opposed to God-consciousness. Following his discussion of the temptations of the commanding self—such as anger, malice, and envy—Rumi further explores self-centredness in the third discourse, presenting it as a destructive force against the seeker’s spiritual faculties and a barrier toward God-consciousness.

Surah Al-Buruj in the Holy Qur’an addresses the conflict and confrontation of the commanding self in the struggle between the seeker’s spiritual faculties. This conflict manifests differently each time, as each attribute of the commanding self seeks to destroy the seeker’s spirituality according to the circumstances. (Safavi, 2010, pp. 105-107)

Truth and falsehood, praiseworthy and blameworthy attributes, virtuous and base ethics exist in opposition both within the world and within the human soul. Seekers of the path of Divine bonding and followers of Truth are drawn towards praiseworthy attributes, while followers of falsehood and those heedless of the path of Divine bonding are drawn towards false and misguided pursuits. (Safavi, 2005, pp. 111-112)

Having said that, the current article posits that, through Rumi’s insights, a child’s internal working model may be influenced if the concept of spiritual attachment is embraced. A child can feel settled if their relationship with caregivers is secure, stable, and filled with love. Similarly, in the context of spiritual attachment, the same principle applies to the bond with the transcendental entity. Furthermore, such an attachment style could be integrated within the framework of attachment theory; for instance, spiritual attachment might be transgenerational, passed down through successive generations, and may also persist into adulthood. It is important to note that these ideas are preliminary suggestions that require further investigation.

The points above regarding spiritual attachment and Rumi are research suggestions at this stage and require academic

investigations. Moreover, the current article's investigation of the construct of spiritual attachment is limited, serving primarily as a suggestion that calls for further research. For example, in this regard, a suggested approach would be to employ qualitative methods, such as interviews and focus groups, to gather in-depth insights from adults who grew up with Rumi's poetry and stories, as well as from experts in Rumi who are knowledgeable about psychology and attachment theory. This initial study could utilise grounded theory to analyse the data, allowing for the emergence of themes and patterns related to attachment styles and spiritual connections inspired by Rumi's work.

In the next research stage, designing a questionnaire based on the qualitative data gathered, is advisable.

## **Limitations**

This article explores the intersection of Rumi's spiritual insights and attachment theory, providing a novel approach to understanding human relationships, emotional bonds, and suggesting spiritual attachment as a novel attachment style. In this regard, several limitations should be acknowledged.

Firstly, while Rumi's philosophy offers profound insights into love, connection, and self-awareness, its application to contemporary psychological theory may be subject to interpretive variance. Rumi's mystical language and metaphorical style can be challenging to translate into concrete psychological terms, which may lead to different interpretations across languages, cultures, and contexts.

Secondly, attachment theory, although widely accepted in psychological research, is not without its criticisms. Critics argue that it can be overly focused on early childhood experiences, potentially overlooking the complexities of adult relationships and the socio-cultural factors that influence attachment patterns. This limitation is



compounded by the fact that attachment theory has primarily been developed in Western contexts, raising concerns about its applicability across diverse cultural backgrounds.

Additionally, the integration of Rumi's insights with attachment theory in this context remains an emerging field of study, and as such, empirical evidence supporting this synthesis is still limited. Future research should aim to explore this intersection more rigorously, incorporating quantitative and qualitative methods to validate the proposed connections between spiritual insights and attachment patterns.

Lastly, the subjective nature of Rumi's poetic language and the personal interpretations of the researcher may influence the analysis and conclusions drawn from his work. The blending of poetic spirituality and scientific theory inevitably introduces an element of bias, which should be considered when applying these ideas to therapeutic or clinical practices.

## **Conclusion**

In summary, attachment theory offers a foundational framework for understanding human relationships and their impact on emotional and psychological development. The literature confirms that infants are inherently predisposed to form connections with others, with these relationships playing a crucial role in shaping developmental trajectories. Attachment patterns often persist over time, transmitted from one generation to the next.

According to Rumi's insights the child and mother play several roles based on symbolic language in the discourse chosen for the current article. 1. The child and mother have a mutually constructive and uplifting relationship. 2. The child and mother play a supportive role towards each other. 3. The child, based on the mother's teachings, can alleviate the mother's worries and anxieties. 4. Gender and

upbringing play an important role in the quality of the interaction between the child and mother. 5. The child can be an enlightener for the mother. 6. The mother demonstrates all kinds of self-sacrifice to save the child. 7. The mother is concerned about the child's health. 8. Having a divine worldview plays an important role in providing peace when facing life's challenges. Based on such insights, the spiritual attachment is proposed in the current article.

This article contributes to the expanding body of research by exploring spiritual attachment through Rumi's poetry and insights and insights, examining how such connections may influence attachment styles and promote intergenerational transmission of secure attachment. The recommended approach for investigating this connection is through qualitative research method collecting data from focused group and interviews. The ultimate goal of these considerations is to improve the mental health of current and future generations, creating a more resilient and emotionally secure society. These suggestions and assumptions require academic investigation to validate their impact.

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