



Attachment Styles and the Quality of Adult Romantic Relationships in Ubungo District, Dar Es Salaam, Tanzania

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ABSTRACT: This study examined attachment styles and their influence on the quality of adult romantic relationships among adults in Ubungo District, Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, addressing three objectives: identifying the attachment styles prevalent among adults in the district, examining how childhood caregiving experiences shaped these styles and examining how attachment styles influenced romantic relationship quality. A qualitative case study design was employed, using semistructured interviews and focus group discussion to collect data from 30 adult participants, 26 individually interviewed and 4 in a focus group discussion, selected through purposive sampling. Data were analysed thematically, with findings presented through verbatim participant quotations. The findings revealed three attachment-related response patterns: calm, contextualised patience; anxious protest and reassurance-seeking; and low reactivity or detachment, with a substantial share of participants displaying security earned over the course of a relationship rather than present from the outset. Childhood experiences linked to these patterns included the visibility of resolved parental conflict, an inherited belief that love is demonstrated primarily through material provision and a distinction between discontinuous-but-reliable and genuinely inconsistent caregiving. Relationship quality was shaped most strongly by whether communication-pacing differences between partners were made explicit, by a cultural norm of masculine emotional suppression and by a tendency to equate financial provision with love. The study concludes that attachment theory is meaningfully applicable in this Tanzanian setting, but that its expression is locally inflected by economic, gendered and communal dynamics, and recommends attachment-informed, culturally adapted approaches to counselling and relationship education in comparable urban settings.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Attachment theory posits that the emotional bonds formed between children and their primary caregivers shape internal working models that guide expectations about closeness, trust and conflict across the lifespan (Bowlby, 1969; Ainsworth et al., 1978). In adulthood, these patterns are commonly organised into secure, anxious, avoidant and disorganised (fearful-avoidant) styles, each associated with characteristic ways of experiencing intimacy and responding to relational threat (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). A substantial body of research links secure attachment to more satisfying and enduring partnerships, while insecure styles are associated with jealousy, mistrust and heightened relational dissatisfaction (Ein-Dor & Doron, 2016; Zilcha-Mano et al., 2020). This literature, however, remains concentrated in a narrow range of cultural settings, raising the question of how well its conclusions travel to societies organised around different caregiving arrangements. In many African contexts, attachment is distributed across

extended networks of grandparents, aunts, uncles and older siblings rather than concentrated in a single parental dyad and is shaped by communal caregiving norms, kinship obligation and increasingly, the pressures of urbanisation (Wamoto et al., 2021). Although attachment theory was developed from research conducted in western countries, it is not full yet understood whether the same attachment styles are expressed the same way in Tanzania and non-western cultures.

In Tanzania specifically, adolescents in urban settings have been shown to experience high rates of psychological maltreatment linked to lower self-esteem and psychological distress, itself compounded by poverty and parental workload (Mwakanyamale & Yizhen, 2019). Separately, rising marital conflict and divorce have been linked to shifting gender roles and economic transition (Masuruli et al., 2025; Kazungu & Byaro, 2023). Yet these two bodies of Tanzanian evidence, one concerned with childhood adversity and adjustment, the other with structural pressure on marriage, have rarely been brought together through the lens of attachment. Little is known about which attachment-related patterns are actually present among Tanzanian adults, how those patterns trace back to childhood caregiving, or how they interact with the specific economic and cultural pressures of a rapidly growing urban district.

Ubungu District, one of the fastest-growing parts of Dar es Salaam, brings these pressures together in a single setting: rural-to-urban migration, financial insecurity and rapidly changing norms around gender and marriage, alongside more traditional expectations of caregiving and kinship. This combination makes it a particularly instructive, and currently under-researched, context in which to examine how attachment styles formed under such mixed conditions come to shape adult romantic relationships. Counselling psychologists, religious leaders and community organisations working with couples in this setting currently do so with very little locally grounded evidence, relying instead on frameworks developed and validated elsewhere.

Understanding these dynamics requires a theoretical framework capable of connecting individual relational behaviour to the wider social and economic conditions in which it is embedded. This study was guided by attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969; Ainsworth et al., 1978) to examine individual relational patterns, paired with Bronfenbrenner's Ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000), which situates development within nested layers of family, community, economic and cultural influences. This pairing reflects that attachment related patterns in this study could not be adequately understood through an individual, dyadic lens alone but needed to be examined alongside the specific economic, gendered and communal conditions under which they were formed and expressed. This study addressed this gap by examining attachment styles among adults in Ubungu District, Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, through three specific objectives:

- (1) To identify the attachment styles prevalent among adults in Ubungu District, Dar es Salaam, Tanzania
- (2) To examine how childhood and early caregiving experiences related to these attachment patterns in Ubungu District, Dar es Salaam, Tanzania
- (3) To examine how attachment styles influenced the quality of adult romantic relationships in Ubungu District, Dar es Salaam, Tanzania

II. MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research Approach

This study adopted a qualitative research approach to examine the impact of attachment styles on the quality of romantic relationships among adults in Ubungu district, Dar es Salaam. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because it facilitates an in-depth exploration of participant's lived experiences, perceptions and interpretations of their romantic relationships within their social and cultural contexts (Cresswell & Poth, 2018).

Through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, the study captured rich detailed narratives that provided insight into how experiences that have formed attachment styles shape trust, emotional intimacy, communication and conflict resolution. This approach enabled the researcher to gain a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon from the perspectives of the participants themselves ultimately supporting a thorough, contextually grounded account of how attachment-related experiences shaped adult romantic relationships within Tanzanian context.

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative case study design, grounded in attachment theory and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000). The design was chosen for its capacity to capture the subjective, contextualised meaning participants attached to their own relational histories and to situate individual attachment patterns within the wider socio-cultural environment in which they were formed and expressed.

Area of the Study

The study was conducted in Ubungu District, Dar es Salaam, an area whose indigenous population is the Zaramo. Migration has since brought members of many of Tanzania's other ethnic groups into the city, whose population of over 4.5 million is now made up of 120 distinct ethnic groups (Lutta, Schoonjans, & Lupala, 2021). This level of interethnic interaction contributes to a socially diverse and rapidly changing environment, in which traditional expectations around courtship, marriage and family life exist

alongside more contemporary, individually negotiated relationship norms, making Ubungo District a particularly instructive setting for examining how attachment styles are expressed under mixed and changing conditions.

Population and Sample Size

A total of 30 adult participants took part in the study. Of these, 26 participants took part in individual, in-depth interviews and a further 4 participants took part in one focus group discussion. Participants were adults who were currently or had previously been, in a romantic relationship and were selected using purposive sampling based on their willingness to reflect on their childhood caregiving experiences and their adult romantic relationship history. Participants ranged from 20 to 40 years of age and included individuals across a range of relational stages, from early dating relationships to marriages of over a decade, as well as divorced and separated participants.

Data Collection

Data were collected using a semi-structured interview guide and a focus group discussion guide, each developed to bring out concrete, behavioural accounts of participants' responses to relational situations, such as a partner's silence or unavailability, rather than inviting participants to self-label using clinical terminology. Both instruments included questions addressing participants' current or most significant relationship, their childhood caregiving background and their perceptions of cultural and community expectations surrounding romantic relationships. All sessions were conducted in Kiswahili and English, according to participant preference and were audio-recorded with participants' consent and supplemented by field notes.

Data Analysis

The collected data were thematically analysed following the six-step method of Braun and Clarke (2021), proceeding from initial familiarisation with the data through to coding, theme development and final interpretation. In Step 1, the researcher familiarised themselves with the data through repeated reading of transcripts and field notes. In Step 2, initial codes were systematically generated across the dataset. In Step 3, potential themes were identified by collating codes into candidate thematic groupings. In Step 4, themes were reviewed and refined against the coded extracts and the full dataset. In Step 5, themes were named and defined. In Step 6, the report was produced, with findings presented through direct participant quotations illustrating each theme to maintain proximity to participants' lived experiences.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was established using the criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985), using the criteria of credibility, dependability, confirmability and transferability. Credibility was supported through prolonged engagement, triangulation across the 26 individual interviews and the focus group discussion and the use of verbatim quotations together with member checking of preliminary interpretations with selected participants to confirm that the researcher's understanding aligned with their intended meanings. Dependability was strengthened through a documented audit trail of the research design, data collection tools, coding procedures and analytical decisions.

Confirmability was maintained through reflexive journaling and peer debriefing with academic supervisors to challenge interpretations and minimise researcher bias. Transferability was supported through detailed description of the study context and participant characteristics. Ultimately, these strategies ensured that the findings presented in this study are credible, well grounded in participants' accounts and dependable for informing attachment-related counselling and relationship support in Ubungo District and comparable Tanzanian communities.

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to institutional ethical procedures. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, who were informed of their right to withdraw at any point without consequence. Confidentiality was maintained throughout using participant codes rather than names and sensitive topics were approached with care, with counselling referral information made available to any participant who experienced discomfort during data collection (Cresswell & Poth, 2018).

III. RESULTS

This section presents findings in relation to the study's three specific objectives. Findings are illustrated through verbatim participant quotations, with participants identified by numbered pseudonyms to protect confidentiality.

Objective 1: Attachment Styles Prevalent Among Adults in Ubungo District

To answer this objective, rather than inviting participants to self-classify using clinical terminology, the interview and focus group guides drew out concrete behavioural responses to a partner's silence or unavailability. Analysis of these responses produced three broad patterns.

The most common pattern involved participants interpreting a partner's silence in light of known context and delaying concern until an unusual threshold of time had passed. Participant 8 described this directly:

At first, nothing. I assume he is busy but if it becomes unusual, I start thinking, maybe something happened, maybe he is upset. I don't usually jump to conclusion that he is cheating. I think my fear is more about emotional distance (Participant 8, 21st May 2026)

A second pattern involved rapid escalation from a partner's silence to fear of loss, accompanied by repeated direct questioning. Participant 22 offered a clear example:

I was creating a problem where there isn't one, which forced my partner to predict my reactions and withhold information to avoid triggering me (Participant 22, 26th May 2026)

A closely related account came from Participant 27, who described repeatedly seeking reassurance from a partner in a relationship that later ended in divorce, stating: "Do you still love me? Are you serious about me?" Both participants independently traced this fear of loss to earlier experiences of loss or inconsistency within their family of origin rather than to anything specific to the relationship in question.

A third pattern involved low reactivity and relative detachment from the prospect of a partner withdrawing. Participant 4 explained: If that person wanted to withdraw... it doesn't shock me, it doesn't impact me, because I know that person doesn't want to continue with the relationship (Participant 4, 20th May 2026)

This same participant described connecting with others as something that "hurts emotionally," and offered limited elaboration on repair after conflict, a comparatively self-reliant and lower-disclosure pattern also evident in two further participants who described a preference for space over frequent contact with a partner.

A recurring and analytically important finding was that identical behaviour, withdrawing into silence during conflict, was assigned very different meaning depending on the partner interpreting it. Several participants described their own withdrawal as self-regulation, while a partner had, at least initially, read the same behaviour as disinterest, reflected in one partner's remark, reported independently by two participants, that being present physically is not the same as being emotionally present. An additional pattern, evident when response type was considered alongside relationship duration, was that participants in longer relationships more often described a process of earned calm, in which an anxious pattern present earlier in the relationship gave way over time to a settled, contextualised response as trust accumulated.

Objective 2: Childhood Experiences and the Development of Attachment Styles

A striking pattern concerned the visibility, rather than the mere presence or absence, of parental conflict. Participants who described their parents as having never visibly argued more often associated this with distress when conflict later arose in their own relationships, whereas participants who witnessed conflict paired with reliable resolution offered more secure-sounding accounts. Participant 3 explained:

Real love is not rainbows and sprinkles, my parents argue but they love each other more than they argue (Participant 3, 20th May 2026).

A second theme concerned the inheritance of a schema in which love was demonstrated primarily through material provision rather than verbal or emotional openness. Several participants who had inherited this schema identified it, in hindsight, as incomplete. Participant 19, reflecting on a marriage that ended in divorce, stated: "If someone provides, they care... I didn't realise my partner needed me emotionally too" (Participant 19, 25th May 2026).

A third theme distinguished caregiving that was structurally discontinuous, such as being raised by grandparents, but consistently reliable, from caregiving marked by genuine unpredictability. Participants raised in the former arrangement generally reported no sense of abandonment, whereas one participant whose mother died in his childhood and who was subsequently raised by an aunt providing material but not emotional care offered a contrasting selfdiagnosis:

My father still cared, he just was not around that much at the same time...I think part of me always worries that people eventually (Participant 15, 22nd May 2026).

Inconsistent, rather than absent, parental contact produced the clearest link to adult fear of loss. Participant 14 traced her fear of abandonment directly to unpredictable visits from her father: "People can love you and still leave...

Disappear for a while" (Participant 14, 22nd May 2026).

Objective 3: Attachment Styles and the Quality of Adult Romantic Relationships

The most frequently replicated pattern shaping relationship quality was a demand-withdraw communication dynamic, in which one partner sought immediate resolution of conflict while the other required time. Where this mismatch was named explicitly and negotiated, it appeared compatible with a stable relationship. Participant 13 described this directly:

I want to talk immediately, she needs time first... we agreed, early in our marriage, not to bring outsiders into every disagreement (Participant 13, 22nd May 2026).

Where the same mismatch remained unspoken, it was instead associated with lasting relational strain.

A second theme concerned a cultural norm of masculine emotional suppression, which discouraged several male participants from disclosing insecurity regardless of their internal emotional state, captured in one participant's account of the injunction:

Many men do not talk in my society, it is what we were raised to believe, that problems are for you alone. You do not have to complain, you often hear the words, “be a man” (Participant 23, 26th May 2026).

A third theme, raised independently across individual interviews and the focus group discussion, concerned the transactionalisation of love: the framing of romantic commitment in financial terms. One participant had this say: Young women these days expect us to provide for everything in every sector of their life (used the term “kitega uchumi”), an economic investment. This perception undermines trust and puts pressure on men (Participant 5, 20th May 2026)

The focus group discussion separately raised the image of a “shift squeeze”, in which one partner was seen to contribute financially without reciprocation from the other.

Relationships should act as a unit in which there is a defined role, I’m frustrated by the fact that there is a shift in this role that there should be reciprocation when providing financially (Participant 27, 27th May 2026)

A fourth theme concerned the distinction between trust and surveillance, with several participants explicitly framing constant monitoring of a partner as evidence of insecurity rather than love. One focus group contributor stated plainly, when asked whether participants checked partners' phones: “I myself would not do that” (Participant 29, 27th May 2026). Participant 16 offered a similar critique: “Constant location-sharing... that is fear, not love” (Participant 16, 25th May 2026) This anti-surveillance stance was paired, in several accounts, with an emphasis on trust as requiring the deliberate maintenance of individual friendships and space within the relationship, rather than its absence.

A fifth theme concerned family- and elder-mediated conflict resolution, whereby unresolved disputes were, for several participants, escalated to family elders rather than resolved solely between the couple, consistent with a more collectivist model of relational regulation than is typically assumed in dyadic accounts of attachment.

Participant 18 described: “When I had disputes with my partner, my mom used to tell me when it gets too big you should consult your elders” (Participant 18, 25th May, 2026) These accounts highlight an important dimension consistent with the mesosystem level of Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory, which emphasizes the interactions between different microsystems surrounding an individual.

A sixth theme concerned the register through which participants described feeling supported by a partner, ranging from an unrevised material register, in which financial provision was named as the clearest evidence of support, through a transitional register exemplified by Participant 23’s retrospective account above, to an explicitly emotional register in which support was defined as the ability to show weakness without performing composure.

I used to think if I provide then I’ve shown all the love I have to give to my partner but after my relationship ended I later realized my partner wanted more than my provision of material things, she needed me to be emotionally present too (Participant 23, 26th May, 2026)

Gender-role expectations governing relationships emerged as contested rather than uniformly agreed upon. While a traditional provider-caregiver framing was articulated within the focus group discussion as a widely shared expectation, this framing was directly contested by the women present in the discussion, a divergence consistent with individual interview accounts in which some participants described their own relationships in explicitly egalitarian for instance participant 7 described the relationship as: “building life together rather than a fixed 50-50 division of roles” (Participant 7, 21st May 2026). Finally, one participant, reflecting on a former partner, offered an unprompted lay theory closely resembling the study's own theoretical premise, stating that: My former partner's parents had divorced, he had not experienced love from his parents and so could not show love within his own relationships (Participant 10)

This was an observation that illustrates how directly participants themselves recognised the developmental logic under investigation.

IV. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study are discussed below in relation to the existing literature on attachment and adult romantic relationships, with particular attention to the socio-cultural context of Ubungo District.

Attachment Patterns and Their Behavioural Content

The three response patterns identified in this study, calm contextualised patience, anxious protest and low reactivity, correspond closely to the secure, anxious and avoidant categories described in the global attachment literature (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016; Ein-Dor & Doron, 2016). This convergence is notable given that participants were not prompted to use clinical terminology, and were instead coded from concrete behavioural description of how they responded to a partner's silence or unavailability. Wambua et al. (2018) similarly found a high proportion of insecureanxious attachment among Kenyan adolescents, although direct comparison should be made cautiously because their study used a standardized attachment measure, whereas the present study identified attachment related patterns from open-ended narratives.

Notably, a substantial share of the apparent security identified here was described by participants as earned across the course of a specific relationship rather than present from its outset, consistent with an emerging emphasis on earned security within the attachment literature. This raises the possibility that prevalence estimates derived from single timepoint, cross-sectional data, in this study and in comparable regional research, may understate the extent to which security is a developed relational outcome rather than

a fixed early trait. It also suggests that attachment-related behaviour, while stable within a given relationship at a given point in time, is not necessarily a fixed trait of the individual across the life course, a possibility that the present cross-sectional design could not directly test but that longitudinal research could usefully examine.

Childhood Caregiving and Adult Attachment

The finding that the visibility of resolved, rather than avoided, parental conflict was more closely associated with adult relational security than the mere absence of conflict extends Murphy et al.'s (2014) adversity-focused account of Adverse Childhood Experiences. Most participants in this study did not report adversity of the severity implied by standard ACE measures, yet a meaningful attachment-relevant distinction was nonetheless identifiable within this non-adverse range, suggesting that modelled conflict repair may be a more actionable target for parenting-support interventions than adversity reduction alone. The distinction between discontinuous-but-reliable caregiving, such as being raised by grandparents, and genuinely inconsistent caregiving is consistent with Keil et al.'s (2022) finding that the quality of caregiving following disruption, rather than disruption itself, protects against insecure attachment; the present study extends this principle from the formally structured institutional and adoptive contexts examined by Keil et al. (2022) to the informal kinship-care arrangements common in the Tanzanian setting. The clearer link observed here between inconsistent, rather than absent, parental contact and adult fear of loss offers a more specific explanation of how caregiving experiences may shape later attachment-related patterns. This finding is consistent with the broader attachment principle that unpredictable caregiver availability may undermine the development of reliable expectations about caregiver responsiveness (Bowlby 1969; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016)

Attachment, Culture and Relationship Quality

The demand-withdraw dynamic identified as the most replicated pattern shaping relationship quality is consistent with Zilcha-Mano et al.'s (2020) proposition that attachment style moderates how partners respond to stress. The present findings suggest, however, that relationship quality was shaped less by the presence of this dynamic than by whether it was named explicitly and jointly managed, a distinction with direct implications for premarital and couples counselling, where psychoeducation aimed at negotiating communication-pacing differences may hold more practical value than psychoeducation focused on identifying a partner's attachment style in the abstract.

The masculine emotional-suppression norm identified here illustrates how avoidant-style suppression may be reinforced, or even mandated, at a macrosystem level (Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000), suggesting that an avoidant presentation in this context may in some cases reflect a socially sanctioned performance of masculinity rather than a stable internal orientation, a distinction with different implications for clinical intervention. The transactionalisation of love and the practice of family- and elder-mediated conflict resolution are broadly consistent with prior Tanzanian research linking socio-economic transition and shifting gender roles to marital conflict (Masuruli et al., 2025; Kazungu

& Byaro, 2023), while adding specificity to this structural account: participants converged independently on the belief that financial provision is treated as a proxy for commitment, and several explicitly criticised this equation as inadequate, a locally articulated psychological process not captured by reference to economic pressure alone. Similarly, the prominence of family-mediated conflict resolution illustrates a mesosystem-level influence largely absent from the predominantly dyadic focus of the global attachment literature, indicating that relationship quality in this setting cannot be fully understood at the level of the couple alone.

The contested nature of gender-role expectations, voiced as active disagreement within the focus group discussion rather than settled consensus, is consistent with a chronosystem perspective in which urbanisation produces tension between traditional expectations and contemporary aspirations (Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000). This finding cautions against treating Ubungu District, or comparable urbanising communities, as culturally homogeneous with respect to gender and relationships. Taken together, these findings indicate that attachment styles are behaviourally identifiable among adults in this setting, but that their expression, causes and consequences are shaped by locally specific economic, gendered and communal dynamics that a framework applied without local adaptation would risk overlooking.

V. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that attachment styles are present and behaviourally identifiable among adults in Ubungu District, Dar es Salaam, and that they are meaningfully linked to childhood caregiving experiences in ways consistent with and in some respects more specific than, existing global and regional literature. At the same time, the expression and consequences of these attachment patterns are locally inflected by economic precarity, culturally reinforced masculine emotional suppression, the transactionalisation of love and family-mediated conflict resolution, dynamics that a framework transferred without local adaptation would overlook. The pairing of attachment theory with an ecological perspective on development is therefore treated as a necessary, rather than optional, approach for understanding romantic relationship quality in this setting.

These findings carry practical implications for counselling psychologists, who may find more value in structured communication-pacing interventions than in psychoeducation about attachment categories alone; for relationship educators, who should address the

conflation of financial provision with emotional intimacy directly; and for policymakers and community organisations, who should engage with, rather than attempt to bypass, existing family- and elder-mediated structures for resolving relational conflict. Similarly, practitioners working with male clients presenting as emotionally avoidant should consider whether this presentation reflects a stable internal orientation or a socially performed stoicism maintained under cultural pressure, since the appropriate therapeutic response differs considerably between the two. Relationship education programmes operating in this and similar settings would also benefit from content that explicitly separates discussions of financial partnership from discussions of emotional intimacy, given how readily participants in this study described the two being conflated. Ultimately, attachment theory was found to hold at the level of general principle while assuming a distinctly local character in its expression, underscoring the necessity of contextual adaptation over uncritical application when extending established psychological frameworks to new socio-cultural settings. Future research should extend this work through longitudinal designs capable of directly testing the earned-security pattern identified here and through comparative studies across other Tanzanian districts to establish whether the cultural dynamics identified in Ubungu District reflect broader national or regional patterns.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest

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DISCLOSURE

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