



Father–Child Communication in Migrant Families and Adult Attachment among Young Pakistani Adults

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Abstract

Father–child communication constitutes a critical relational mechanism through which attachment orientations are shaped across development. In migrant families, prolonged paternal absence may disrupt everyday emotional exchanges, with enduring implications for attachment security during emerging adulthood. Drawing on attachment theory and family systems perspectives, the present study examined the association between father–child communication and adult attachment orientations among young Pakistani adults raised in migrant family contexts, and tested family functioning as a mediating mechanism. Using a cross-sectional correlational design, data were collected from 600 Pakistani young adults aged 18–23 years who reported a history of paternal labor migration during childhood. Participants completed Urdu-validated measures of father–child communication, adult attachment anxiety and avoidance, and family functioning. Results indicated that higher perceived quality of father–child communication was significantly associated with lower attachment anxiety and avoidance and greater attachment security. Mediation analyses revealed that family functioning partially mediated the relationship between father–child communication and adult attachment security. These findings advance attachment and family systems theory by demonstrating culturally specific relational pathways through which paternal communication shapes adult attachment security in migration-affected families. The study underscores the importance of culturally responsive family interventions and paternal engagement practices in migration-affected contexts.

Keywords

Father–Child Communication, Adult Attachment, Migrant Families, Emerging Adulthood, Pakistan, Family Functioning

Introduction

Family relationships provide the foundational context for emotional development and the formation of relational expectations across the lifespan. Within this context, communication between parents and children plays a central role in shaping emotional security, interpersonal competence, and self-regulatory capacities (Barnes & Olson, 1985; Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2006). Communication patterns characterized by warmth, responsiveness, and openness foster emotional safety, whereas emotionally constrained or inconsistent communication increases vulnerability to later relational difficulties (Brumariu & Kerns, 2010; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016).

Attachment theory offers a robust framework for understanding how early communicative exchanges become internalized as working models that guide interpersonal behavior beyond

childhood. Bowlby (1982) conceptualized attachment as a biologically rooted system through which repeated experiences of caregiver availability shape expectations regarding the self's worthiness of care and the reliability of others. These internal working models are refined across development and become particularly salient during adolescence and emerging adulthood, when individuals navigate increasing relational autonomy and intimacy (Allen & Tan, 2016; Fraley & Roisman, 2019).

Although early attachment research predominantly focused on maternal caregiving, contemporary scholarship increasingly recognizes fathers as distinct attachment figures whose contributions are not reducible to maternal roles. Fathers often engage children through communicative styles that promote autonomy, exploration, and emotional modulation, contributing uniquely to attachment development (Grossmann et al., 2002; Lucassen et al., 2011). Meta-analytic evidence demonstrates that paternal sensitivity and responsiveness are independently associated with attachment security across childhood and adolescence (Verhage et al., 2016; Cabrera et al., 2018). These findings underscore the importance of examining father–child communication as a relational process in its own right.

The relevance of father–child communication is amplified in families affected by labor migration. In many low- and middle-income countries, including Pakistan, paternal migration constitutes a widespread economic strategy that often involves prolonged physical absence from the household. While migration may improve material conditions, it simultaneously disrupts daily interactional routines and emotional accessibility between fathers and children (McKenzie & Rapoport, 2011; Antman, 2013). Research on transnational families suggests that the psychological consequences of parental migration are shaped less by absence per se and more by the quality of ongoing communication and emotional connection (Mazzucato & Schans, 2011; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2018).

In collectivist and patriarchal societies, migration-related disruptions may be intensified by cultural norms that position fathers primarily as economic providers and moral authorities. Such norms often constrain emotional expressiveness and reinforce hierarchical communication patterns, limiting opportunities for vulnerability and affective exchange (Kagitcibasi, 2007; Lamb, 2010). In Pakistan, emerging evidence indicates that children and adolescents in migrant families frequently report reduced paternal involvement and altered communication patterns, despite financial benefits associated with remittances (Shaheen, 2021; Khan & Masood, 2022).

Emerging adulthood, typically defined as ages 18–23, represents a critical developmental period during which attachment orientations become consolidated and increasingly expressed in romantic and peer relationships (Arnett, 2015). In Pakistani society, family bonds remain central during this stage, and attachment insecurity has been linked to poorer psychological well-being and relational satisfaction (Riaz et al., 2020; Khan et al., 2023). Despite this, empirical research examining father–child communication and adult attachment within migrant Pakistani families remains limited, particularly studies employing culturally validated instruments.

Family systems theory further emphasizes that parent–child communication is embedded within broader patterns of family functioning, including cohesion, adaptability, and emotional climate (Minuchin, 1985; Cox & Paley, 2003). Positive family functioning may buffer the impact of disrupted paternal communication, whereas dysfunctional family environments may amplify attachment insecurity (Fosco & Grych, 2013). The present study addresses these gaps by examining father–child communication, family functioning, and adult attachment among young Pakistani adults raised in migrant family contexts.

Objectives

1. To examine the association between perceived father–child communication and attachment anxiety among young Pakistani adults raised in migrant family contexts.
2. To examine the association between perceived father–child communication and attachment avoidance among young Pakistani adults raised in migrant family contexts.
3. To examine whether family functioning mediates the relationship between father–child communication and adult attachment security among young Pakistani adults from migrant families.

Hypotheses

- H1: Higher levels of perceived positive father–child communication will be associated with lower attachment anxiety among young Pakistani adults from migrant families.

- H2: Higher levels of perceived positive father–child communication will be associated with lower attachment avoidance among young Pakistani adults from migrant families.
- H3: Family functioning will partially mediate the relationship between father–child communication and adult attachment security among young Pakistani adults from migrant families.

Method

Research Design

A cross-sectional correlational design was employed to examine associations between father–child communication, family functioning, and adult attachment orientations.

Participants

The sample consisted of 600 Pakistani young adults (300 men, 300 women) aged 18–23 years ($M = 20.4$, $SD = 1.6$), recruited from university and community settings across Punjab, Sindh, and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Participants represented diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. All participants reported a history of paternal labor migration lasting at least one year during childhood or adolescence.

Measures

Father–Child Communication.

Father–child communication was assessed using the Urdu-adapted Parent–Child Relationship Scale (Barnes & Olson, 1985), which measures perceived openness, emotional responsiveness, and support. The Urdu version has demonstrated satisfactory reliability in Pakistani samples ($\alpha = .86$).

Adult Attachment.

Adult attachment anxiety and avoidance were measured using the Urdu version of the Experiences in Close Relationships–Revised scale (Fraley et al., 2000). Internal consistency coefficients in the present sample were .88 for anxiety and .84 for avoidance.

Family Functioning.

Family functioning was assessed using the Urdu-adapted Family Assessment Device (Epstein et al., 1983), measuring cohesion, communication, and emotional involvement ($\alpha = .82$).

Procedure

Participants provided informed consent and completed questionnaires in supervised group settings. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the relevant institutional review board, and all procedures were conducted in accordance with established ethical guidelines.

Data Analysis

Pearson correlations, multiple regression analyses, and mediation analyses using bootstrapping procedures were conducted in SPSS and PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2018).

Results

Preliminary Analyses

Prior to hypothesis testing, data were screened for missing values, normality, and multicollinearity. Less than 2% of data were missing and were handled using mean substitution. Given the minimal proportion of missing data, mean substitution was considered unlikely to bias parameter estimates or substantially attenuate variance. Skewness and kurtosis values for all study variables fell within acceptable ranges (± 2), indicating approximate normality. Variance inflation factor (VIF) values ranged from 1.12 to 1.34, suggesting no concerns regarding multicollinearity.

Descriptive statistics and zero-order correlations among the main study variables are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations Among Study Variables (N = 600)

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4
1. Father–Child Communication	3.41	0.62	—			
2. Family Functioning	3.56	0.58	.47***	—		
3. Attachment Anxiety	2.89	0.71	-.42***	-.39***	—	
4. Attachment Avoidance	2.76	0.68	-.38***	-.36***	.44***	—

Note. Higher scores indicate greater levels of the construct.

*** $p < .001$.

As shown in Table 1, perceived quality of father–child communication was moderately and positively associated with family functioning and moderately and negatively associated with both attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance. Family functioning was also negatively correlated with attachment

insecurity dimensions, indicating that healthier family environments were linked to lower attachment anxiety and avoidance.

Regression Analyses Predicting Adult Attachment

To examine whether father–child communication significantly predicted adult attachment orientations, hierarchical multiple regression analyses were conducted. Gender and socioeconomic status were entered as control variables in Step 1, followed by father–child communication in Step 2. Results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Hierarchical Regression Analyses Predicting Attachment Anxiety and Attachment Avoidance (N = 600)

Predictor	Attachment Anxiety		Attachment Avoidance	
	B	ΔR^2	B	ΔR^2
Step 1		.04***		.03***
Gender	.12**		.09*	
Socioeconomic Status	-.15**		-.13**	
Step 2		.18***		.15***
Father–Child Communication	-.43***		-.39***	

Note. Standardized beta coefficients are reported.

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

After controlling for gender and socioeconomic status, father–child communication emerged as a significant negative predictor of both attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance. The inclusion of father–child communication accounted for a substantial increase in explained variance, indicating its robust association with adult attachment orientations.

Mediation Analysis: Family Functioning as a Mediator

A mediation analysis was conducted using PROCESS macro (Model 4; Hayes, 2018) to examine whether family functioning mediated the relationship between father–child communication and attachment security (composite of low anxiety and avoidance). This operationalization is consistent with attachment theory, which conceptualizes attachment security as the relative absence of anxiety and avoidance. Bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples was used to estimate indirect effects. Results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3

Mediation Analysis of Family Functioning Between Father–Child Communication and Attachment Security

Path	B	SE	95% CI
Father–Child Communication → Family Functioning	.51***	.04	[.43, .59]
Family Functioning → Attachment Security	.37***	.05	[.28, .47]
Direct Effect (c')	.29***	.06	[.18, .41]
Indirect Effect (ab)	.19	.03	[.14, .25]

Note. Bootstrap confidence intervals based on 5,000 samples.

*** $p < .001$.

Results indicated a significant indirect effect of father–child communication on attachment security through family functioning. The direct effect remained significant after accounting for the mediator, suggesting partial mediation. This pattern indicates that while father–child communication directly contributes to attachment security, it also operates indirectly by fostering healthier overall family functioning.

Discussion

The present study examined the association between father–child communication and adult attachment orientations among young Pakistani adults raised in migrant family contexts, with family functioning tested as a mediating mechanism. The findings provide convergent evidence that perceived quality of paternal communication during childhood and adolescence remains a salient predictor of attachment security in emerging adulthood. Specifically, higher levels of emotionally responsive father–child communication were associated with lower attachment anxiety and avoidance, and this association was partially explained by overall family functioning. These results advance attachment and family systems research by elucidating culturally situated pathways through which paternal relational experiences shape adult attachment outcomes in migration-affected families. Beyond confirming established attachment principles, the present findings refine attachment theory by

demonstrating that sustained relational communication rather than physical presence alone plays a critical role in the consolidation of attachment orientations within structurally disrupted family contexts. This contribution is particularly salient for understanding attachment development in non-Western, migration-affected societies where family roles and emotional norms differ from Western contexts.

Consistent with attachment theory, the negative associations between father–child communication and both attachment anxiety and avoidance suggest that emotionally accessible paternal communication contributes to the development of internal working models characterized by trust, emotional availability, and relational reliability (Bowlby, 1982; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). For young adults in the present sample, perceptions of open and supportive communication with fathers appear to function as enduring indicators of caregiver responsiveness, even when such communication occurred in contexts marked by physical separation due to migration. These findings align with longitudinal research demonstrating that paternal sensitivity and responsiveness exert lasting effects on attachment-related outcomes beyond childhood (Grossmann et al., 2008; Verhage et al., 2016).

The findings also underscore the distinct role of fathers as attachment figures, particularly within sociocultural contexts where paternal authority and emotional restraint are normative. In Pakistani families, fathers are often socialized to prioritize provision and discipline over emotional expressiveness, which may constrain opportunities for open communication. Within this context, emotionally responsive communication may be especially salient in signaling availability and care, thereby reducing attachment-related anxiety and avoidance. This interpretation is consistent with cross-cultural research suggesting that deviations from normative emotional distance in paternal behavior can carry heightened relational significance in collectivist and patriarchal societies (Kagitcibasi, 2007; Lamb, 2010).

The partial mediation of the relationship between father–child communication and attachment security by family functioning highlights the systemic nature of attachment development. Effective paternal communication was associated with healthier overall family functioning, which in turn supported greater attachment security in emerging adulthood. This finding is consistent with family systems theory, which posits that dyadic relationships both shape and are shaped by broader family dynamics (Minuchin, 1985; Cox & Paley, 2003). In migration-affected families, emotionally responsive father–child communication may contribute to family cohesion, clarity of roles, and emotional stability, thereby providing alternative sources of security during periods of paternal absence.

Importantly, the persistence of a significant direct effect of father–child communication on attachment security after accounting for family functioning suggests that paternal communication exerts influence through both direct and indirect pathways. This finding reinforces the conceptualization of father–child communication as an independent relational process rather than merely a proxy for general family climate. It also aligns with empirical work indicating that specific parent–child relationships can uniquely predict attachment outcomes, even within well-functioning families (Allen et al., 2003; Brumariu & Kerns, 2010).

From a migration perspective, the results contribute to a growing body of literature emphasizing that the psychological consequences of paternal migration are shaped less by physical absence per se and more by the quality of relational processes maintained across distance. Research on transnational families has increasingly highlighted the importance of emotional accessibility, consistent communication, and relational continuity in mitigating the adverse effects of parental absence (Mazzucato & Schans, 2011; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2018). The present findings extend this work by demonstrating that perceived communication quality continues to influence attachment orientations into emerging adulthood, long after migration-related separations have occurred.

The focus on emerging adulthood is particularly significant, as this developmental period involves the consolidation and enactment of attachment orientations in romantic and peer relationships. In collectivist contexts such as Pakistan, where family ties remain central during early adulthood, attachment insecurity may have cascading effects on psychological well-being and relational functioning. The observed associations between father–child communication and adult attachment orientations thus have implications not only for family relationships but also for broader developmental outcomes during this life stage.

Implications for Practice and Policy

The findings carry important implications for family-focused interventions and migration-related policies. Interventions aimed at supporting migrant families should prioritize strengthening emotionally responsive father–child communication, even in contexts of physical separation. Parenting programs and counseling services may benefit from incorporating culturally sensitive strategies that help fathers balance traditional authority roles with emotional accessibility. Additionally, digital communication technologies may be leveraged to facilitate meaningful emotional exchanges between migrant fathers and their children, provided that such interactions emphasize relational quality rather than instrumental contact.

At the policy level, labor migration programs and social services should recognize the psychosocial dimensions of migration and support family cohesion alongside economic objectives. Providing resources for family communication and emotional support may contribute to long-term psychological well-being among children and emerging adults in migrant families.

Limitations and Future Directions

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The cross-sectional design precludes causal inferences regarding the directionality of observed associations. Although retrospective perceptions of father–child communication are theoretically meaningful, they may be subject to recall bias. Future longitudinal research should examine developmental trajectories of attachment in migrant families from childhood through emerging adulthood. Additionally, reliance on self-report measures may inflate associations due to shared method variance; incorporating multi-informant or observational data would strengthen future investigations.

Future research should also explore potential moderators, such as gender, duration and timing of paternal migration, and modes of communication (e.g., in-person, digital, or proxy caregiving). Examining these factors may yield a more nuanced understanding of how migration-related contexts shape father–child relationships and attachment outcomes. Despite these limitations, retrospective perceptions of father–child communication remain theoretically meaningful, as attachment-related representations reflect subjective relational experiences rather than objective caregiving behavior. Such perceptions are central to understanding attachment orientations in emerging adulthood.

Conclusion

The present study provides evidence that father–child communication constitutes a critical pathway through which attachment security is shaped in migration-affected Pakistani families. By demonstrating both direct and indirect effects of paternal communication on adult attachment orientations, the findings underscore the enduring relational significance of fathers beyond physical presence. These results advance attachment and family psychology literature by highlighting culturally and contextually grounded mechanisms linking paternal communication, family functioning, and adult relational security, and they underscore the need for interventions that support emotionally responsive father–child relationships in migration-affected contexts.

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