

Attachment and Abusive Relationships: State of the art and future perspectives in health promotion. A bibliometric review

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Abstract

Relationships serve as a protective factor for health. Psychological literature suggests that the degree of relationship satisfaction at age 50 is a more accurate predictor of health outcomes at age 80 than cortisol levels. The quality of relationships built over a lifetime is influenced by attachment patterns developed in childhood. Dysfunctional attachment may be associated with problematic relationship dynamics. This research examines the intersection of attachment and abusive relationships by identifying major trends, emerging themes, and existing gaps within the literature. A bibliometric and visual analysis was conducted using R/bibliometrix and R/biblioshiny to provide an overview of the current academic landscape. A total of 291 articles published from 1993 to 2025 were retrieved from the Web of Science database. The analysis considered publication trends, authors, contributing countries, institutions, journals, and key research topics. Results suggest that the number of studies examining the link between attachment and abusive relationships has increased over time, while topics such as emotions and adolescents have become more prominent in recent years. Keywords related to resources and health promotion have remained peripheral compared to those associated with risk factors and critical issues. Future research should focus more on health promotion and prevention strategies to develop more effective interventions. Future research should not only deepen the understanding of these dynamics but also promote preventive approaches aimed at fostering secure attachment early on. This may play a crucial role in reducing dysfunctional relational dynamics and promoting healthier couple relationships across the lifespan.

Keywords: Attachment theory, abusive relationships, intimate partner violence, health promotion, bibliometric analysis

Introduction

Healthy interpersonal interactions are acknowledged in scientific literature as a protective factor for both mental and physical health throughout life (Camilo et al., 2024; Forcadell-Díez et al., 2023). According to Smith (2010), there is evidence that fostering strong social bonds is associated with a lower risk of morbidity and mortality, as well as increased psychological resilience and overall life satisfaction. For instance, studies in psychology have shown that relationship satisfaction at midlife can more accurately predict positive health outcomes later in life than conventional biological indicators such as cortisol levels (Robles et al., 2014; Seeman et al., 2011).

It should be noted, however, that despite the large number of studies already published, the literature on attachment and relationship outcomes remains fragmented across disciplines, partly due to the use of methodologies and theoretical approaches that lack internal consistency, which ultimately hinder an integrated understanding. Ultimately, such fragmentation complicates efforts to identify universal models or design comprehensive intervention strategies.

The origin of relational dynamics lies in the fundamental role played by early attachment patterns, which shape the quality of interper-

sonal relationships throughout life. Attachment models are key to the development of Internal Working Models (IWMs), which are the mental representations of the self and others that shape relational expectations and behaviors (Bowlby, 1969, 1988; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). Mary Ainsworth identified three attachment patterns: secure, anxious-avoidant, and anxious/ambivalent. Main and Solomon (1986, 1990) added a fourth pattern, disorganized/disoriented attachment, characterized by contradictory behaviors, reflecting unresolved fear or confusion (Ainsworth et al., 2015). Attachment patterns are not static: they emerge during infancy and tend to stabilize toward the end of the first year of life; however, early attachment experiences are those that exert the greatest and most lasting influence on emotional development and functioning in adult relationships (McConnell & Moss, 2011; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). Insecure attachment patterns can manifest in romantic relationships through an excessive need for reassurance, fear of abandonment, or an inability to tolerate closeness; these are behaviors that can undermine relationships and eventually lead to relationship instability.

A substantial body of research relates insecure attachment styles to the perpetration and victimization of intimate partner violence (IPV; see Condino et al., 2022; Molero et al.,

2017; Velotti et al., 2022). Disorganized attachment is commonly associated with perceived confusion about love and safety, sometimes resulting in a simultaneous desire and fear of intimacy. In addition to this, dysfunctional attachment patterns can predispose individuals to problematic relationship dynamics, including abusive relationships (Dutton, 1998; Simpson & Rholes, 1994; Bartholomew & Allison, 2006; Dumas et al., 2008; Shaver & Mikulincer, 2011; Wilson et al., 2013). Individuals with attachment-related-vulnerabilities may be at risk of perpetuating cycles of abuse. Walker's Cycle of abuse (2009) describes three phases in intimate partner abuse: tension building, acute battering incident and honeymoon phase. Relational dynamics between partners, often referred to as matching, should also be considered. For example, the combination of an anxious attachment style in women and a fearful attachment style in men is more frequently associated with abusive and mutually harmful behaviors. Violence in these dynamics often serves as an attempt to draw the partner closer, thereby restoring a sense of security threatened by fears of separation and abandonment (Figure 1). Despite the clinical relevance of these findings, research explicitly addressing preventive interventions remains surprisingly limited. Although some programs grounded in attachment theory have shown

promise in reducing relational distress and intimate partner violence, such studies are relatively few and often lack longitudinal validation. The scarcity of integrated, attachment-based prevention models highlights a gap between theoretical insights and practical applications, underscoring the need for more systematic research in this area. Available data on the number of research studies on the intersection of attachment and abusive relationships indicate a growing interest, despite a research landscape that appears fragmented. The heterogeneity of methodological approaches and theoretical frameworks employed has, to some extent, limited the integration of findings and complicated the identification of general trends and critical gaps in knowledge. Recent work regarding attachment, relationships and intimate partner violence (IPV, defined by the World Health Organization – WHO- as “any behavior within an intimate relationship that causes physical, psychological or sexual harm to the persons involved in the relationship”) includes the systematic review by Velotti et al. (2018), a 2022 meta-analysis focused on perpetrators (Ibid.) and a meta-analysis by Stefania et al. (2023) focused on victims of abuse.

Such fragmentation makes it difficult to obtain, and subsequently analyze, a coherent and comprehensive overview of the field. Bibliometric analysis serves as a valuable tool for objectively and systematically mapping the

development of the literature. This method makes it possible to identify publication trends and thematic networks, thereby providing a structured overview. Given the above, the present study proposes an updated bibliometric and visual analysis of the literature on attachment and abusive relationships, covering the period up to February 2025. covering the period up to February 2025. The authors aim to pursue two main goals: first, to identify dominant trends, emerging themes, and gaps in knowledge; and second, to offer evidence-based insights to inform both theoretical refinement and relational health promotion strategies.

Materials and Methods

Data source and retrieval strategy

A comprehensive and systematic search was conducted on February 12, 2025, using the Web of Science (WoS) online database, one of the most frequently used databases for bibliometric analysis. WoS was selected as the sole database for this bibliometric analysis due to its high-quality indexing standards and comprehensive coverage of peer-reviewed journals across the social sciences and psychology. Compared to other databases, WoS provides robust citation data and facilitates consistent export formats required for bibliometric tools such as VOSviewer and Bibliometrix (Birkle et al., 2020; Šubelj, 2014). The database search was limited to a single

day to avoid potential bias from frequent database updates. The time span for the database search covered all available years in WoS up to the search date (i.e., from 1900 to 2025), without any restriction by publication year, to ensure a comprehensive retrieval of relevant literature.

Inclusion criteria

The search query included the following terms: ("adult attachment" OR "attachment theory" OR "secure attachment" OR "anxious attachment" OR "avoidant attachment" OR "disorganized attachment") AND ("abusive relationships" OR "domestic violence" OR "intimate partner violence" OR "psychological abuse"). These terms were applied to the titles, abstracts, and keywords of indexed publications.

The retrieved data were exported in BibTeX format, including key bibliographic information such as article titles, author names and affiliations, abstracts, keywords, journal names, and citation metrics.

Statistical methods

The bibliometric analysis was conducted using the open-source software RStudio (version 4.3.1), employing the R packages *bibliometrix* and its web interface *biblioshiny* (Aria & Cuccurullo, 2017), which are specifically developed for comprehensive science mapping and bibliometric analysis.

The dataset, retrieved from the Web of Science in BibTeX format, was imported and converted into a bibliometric data frame.

Basic performance indicators, including total number of publications, annual scientific production, document average age, average citations per document, and authorship metrics (e.g., h-index, g-index, m-index), were computed. The most prolific journals and authors were identified through frequency and impact metrics. Country productivity was analyzed based on corresponding author affiliations. Author collaboration networks and keyword co-occurrence networks were constructed and visualized.

Results

Descriptive statistics

Table 1 presents data from the WoS database. The collection includes 291 documents published between 1993 and February 2025, with an annual growth rate of 4.43%. The earliest records date back to 1993, thus defining the 1993–2025 timespan. This overview provides baseline descriptive indicators of the analyzed literature.

Table 1

Annual output and growth trend of publications

The annual volume of literature is a crucial metric that reflects the current state of research within a given field. In this study, to

provide a general perspective on the level of interest and development in this area of study, we conducted an analysis of the entire body of papers indexed in WoS, covering the period from Jan. 1, 2013, to Feb. 12, 2025. The data were compiled and presented in the form of a bar graph (Figure 2), which effectively conveys an overview of the research landscape's status.

Figure 2

Most relevant authors

Table 2 and Figure 3 present the main authors who contributed to research papers relating abusive relationships to attachment; a total of 812 authors contributed across 291 papers.

In bibliometric research, various indicators are commonly employed to assess authors' scientific impact, combining measures of productivity and citation influence. Popular metrics include the h-index, g-index, and m-index, each offering a distinct perspective on academic performance. The h-index balances productivity and citation impact, favoring authors with a consistent publication record over time. The g-index emphasizes highly cited articles, giving greater prominence to researchers who have produced fewer papers of exceptional impact. Lastly, the m-index normalizes the h-index by the number of years since an author's first publication, enabling a fairer comparison between early-career and senior researchers (Gurnani & Kaur, 2021).

Table 2**Analysis of the sources: most relevant journals**

The Web of Science database identified 142 journals publishing a total of 291 papers. The top ten journals with the highest number of publications on abusive relationships related to attachment are as follows: Journal of Interpersonal Violence (37 articles); Journal of Family Violence (24 articles); Partner Abuse (10 articles); Violence and Victims (8 articles); Trauma, Violence, & Abuse (7 articles); Journal of Marital and Family Therapy (6 articles); Aggression and Violent Behavior (5 articles); Child Abuse & Neglect (5 articles); Development and Psychopathology (5 articles); and Frontiers in Psychology (5 articles).

Bibliometric analysis of countries

A total of 42 countries contributed to this scientific production. The most prolific countries are the United States with 118 articles, followed by Canada with 36, the United Kingdom with 19, Australia and Italy each with 17, Spain with 14, France with 6, and Belgium with 5. Generally, Australia, North America, and Western Europe have produced most publications on these issues, while there are considerably fewer studies from Asia and South America, and very few from Africa.

Thematic map

The thematic map revealed several semantic clusters positioned along two key axes. The

“centrality/relevance axis” measures the extent to which a cluster is connected to others, indicating the strategic importance of a theme within the overall structure of the literature. The “density/development axis” reflects the internal cohesion of a cluster, indicating its level of theoretical development.

Basic Themes (low density, high centrality) include concepts such as adult attachment, intimate partner violence, abuse, and mental health. These themes are central to the field but still require further theoretical refinement. In contrast, Motor Themes (high density, high centrality)—including infant attachment, children, substance use, and family of origin—are both well-established and highly interconnected, forming the theoretical and empirical core of research on attachment and family dynamics.

Niche Themes (high density, low centrality) highlight well-developed but more peripheral areas of inquiry, such as studies on fathers, interparental conflict, and African American families. Finally, Emerging or Declining Themes (low density, low centrality), including validation, attachment theory, and validity, suggest a relatively limited and possibly declining interest in methodological or foundational theoretical issues (Figure 3 and Table 3).

Figure 3**Table 3**

Centrality is based on the sum of co-occurrences (links) between the keywords of a cluster and those of other clusters. It measures external connection. If a cluster contains keywords that frequently co-occur with keywords from other clusters, it has high centrality.

Density is based on the sum of co-occurrences among keywords within the same cluster. It measures internal connection. If the keywords in a cluster frequently co-occur with each other, the cluster has high density. Frequency refers to the total number of occurrences of the keywords within a given cluster in the analyzed literature. It indicates the overall prominence or attention that the theme represented by the cluster receives in the research field. Higher frequency suggests that the topic is widely discussed or studied across the body of literature.

Co-occurrence network

The keyword co-occurrence network reveals two main thematic clusters. The first cluster focuses on concepts such as adult attachment, intimate partner violence, abuse, domestic violence, and behavior. These keywords exhibit high values of betweenness, indicating the frequency with which a keyword serves as a bridge between different subject areas, and PageRank, a measure reflecting the overall importance of a keyword within the co-occurrence network, thereby highlighting their central role in linking diverse strands of

literature. Adult attachment shows the highest betweenness value (218.20), confirming its function as a primary semantic "node" within the field.

The second cluster (Cluster 2) is characterized by keywords including mental health, trauma, depression, symptoms, and post-traumatic stress disorder. These terms represent a preeminent clinical and diagnostic orientation focused on the psychopathological consequences of abuse.

Overall, the co-word network reveals a literature structured around two main axes: First, the relational dynamics involving attachment and violence; second, the impact of such experiences on victims' mental health (Figure 4 and Table 4).

Figure 4

Table 4

Discussion

The bibliometric analysis showed a steady growth in scientific production on the topic of attachment and abusive relationships from 1993 to 2025, with an average annual growth rate of 4.43%. This increase confirms the growing interest of the scientific community in understanding the relational mechanisms underlying abusive dynamics, consistent with the consolidation of theoretical models that position adult attachment as a predisposing factor in dysfunctional intimate relationships (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). The thematic

clusters identified through word analysis suggest a field structured around two main axes. The first axis focuses on relational constructs, particularly adult attachment, intimate partner violence, and abuse, highlighting the significant relevance of attachment theory in explaining risk factors for relational dysfunction. In contrast, the second axis centers on clinical consequences, focusing on mental health outcomes such as depression, PTSD, and dissociative symptoms. Notably, terms related to health promotion and preventive frameworks occupy a relatively peripheral position in both the thematic map and the keyword network. This imbalance may indicate that the field is predominantly reactive, emphasizing risk identification and post-trauma intervention. At the same time, proactive approaches aimed at fostering safe relational environments before violence occurs are largely neglected.

This gap is particularly critical in light of interdisciplinary research showing that early relational adversity—such as inconsistent caregiving, attachment breakdown, or exposure to domestic violence—affects biological stress systems and mental health, causing long-term effects (Berens et al., 2017). Although this evidence is well known, attachment-based preventive interventions remain underrepresented in the field.

Among the most promising intervention models are the Nurse-Family Partnership (Olds,

1997) and relational interventions for high-risk families (Narayan et al., 2019), which have demonstrated how providing early support to caregivers can interrupt intergenerational cycles of neglect and abuse. Similarly, attachment-based therapeutic approaches such as mentalization-based treatment (Bateman & Fonagy, 2004; Malda-Castillo et al., 2019) offer valuable tools useful both for clinical populations and for adaptation in community-based preventive settings.

While interventions aimed at early childhood have been emphasized, more attention should also be devoted to attachment-based approaches for adult couples, particularly in the contexts of relationship education, couples therapy, and violence prevention programs. Interventions focusing on strengthening emotional attunement, communication, and secure bonding in adult romantic relationships have shown encouraging results in reducing conflict escalation and improving relational resilience (Johnson, 2019; Simpson & Rholes, 2012). Embedding such interventions within broader health promotion contexts could help couples avoid entering patterns of abuse, especially when exposed to high-stress environments or life transitions.

Another factor that may contribute to the paucity of health promotion literature is disciplinary silos, where attachment theory is primarily studied within clinical psychology, while violence prevention and early intervention are

predominantly investigated in social work and public health. Bridging these fields could lead to multisystem interventions targeting both risk reduction and relational resilience.

Future research should prioritize integrative approaches that go beyond post-abuse treatment by exploring the preventive potential of attachment theory. Programs that focus on early caregiving, parental sensitivity, and emotional regulation could serve not only clinical purposes but also broader public health goals, thus aligning with calls for upstream strategies to mitigate relational violence and promote mental well-being.

Limitations and Future perspectives

The present analysis has several limitations. First, it was restricted to a single database, Web of Science, thus excluding potentially relevant sources indexed in databases such as Scopus, PubMed, or PsycINFO. Second, no co-citation or bibliographic coupling analyses were performed, which would have enabled a more nuanced reconstruction of schools of thought and author networks. Moreover, limiting the dataset to English-language publications may have excluded significant contributions from non-English sources.

Another limitation lies in the exclusive reliance on quantitative bibliometric methods. While these techniques are effective in mapping the structural and thematic organization of the literature, they do not account for the

interpretive depth that qualitative approaches can provide. The absence of methodological triangulation might limit the richness of the thematic interpretations.

This bibliometric review aimed to map the evolving research landscape at the intersection of attachment theory and abusive relationships, highlighting key trends, central concepts, and thematic gaps.

The data indicate that the literature has grown steadily and consolidated the centrality of adult attachment as a risk factor in dysfunctional relationships. However, the focus remains predominantly on clinical outcomes and posttraumatic responses. Concepts related to prevention, resilience, and health promotion remain marginal, revealing a gap in the proactive application of attachment theory.

Beyond highlighting this imbalance, this paper advocates for a paradigm shift from reactive approaches to preventive strategies, and from an emphasis on pathology to one on protection.

Author Contribution: M.G.M. conceived the article and cured the methodology; M.G.M. and F.S. cured Validation and Writing; F.S. supervised the final draft.

Funding: The article did not receive funding for publication.

Data Availability Statement: There are no data to share.

Conflicts of Interest: There are no conflicts of interest to declare.

Citation: Massari, M.G., Sasso, F. (2025). Attachment and Abusive Relationships: State of the art and future perspectives in health promotion. A bibliometric review. *Synapsis Journal*, 1(2). 29-39.
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Figure. 1 Relationship between attachment and intimate partner violence (IPV)

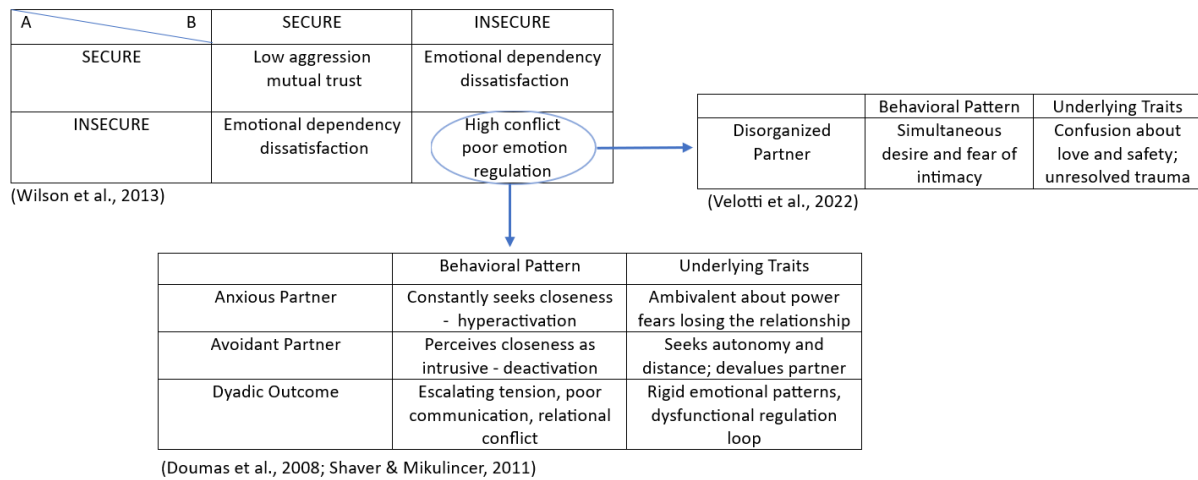


Table. 1 Descriptive statistic

Main Information About Data	Value
Timespan	1993 - 2025
Sources (Journals, Books, etc)	142
Documents	291
Annual Growth Rate %	4.43
Document Average Age	7.8
Average Citations per Document	23.68
Average Citations per Year per Doc	2.283

Figure. 2 Annual volume of literature

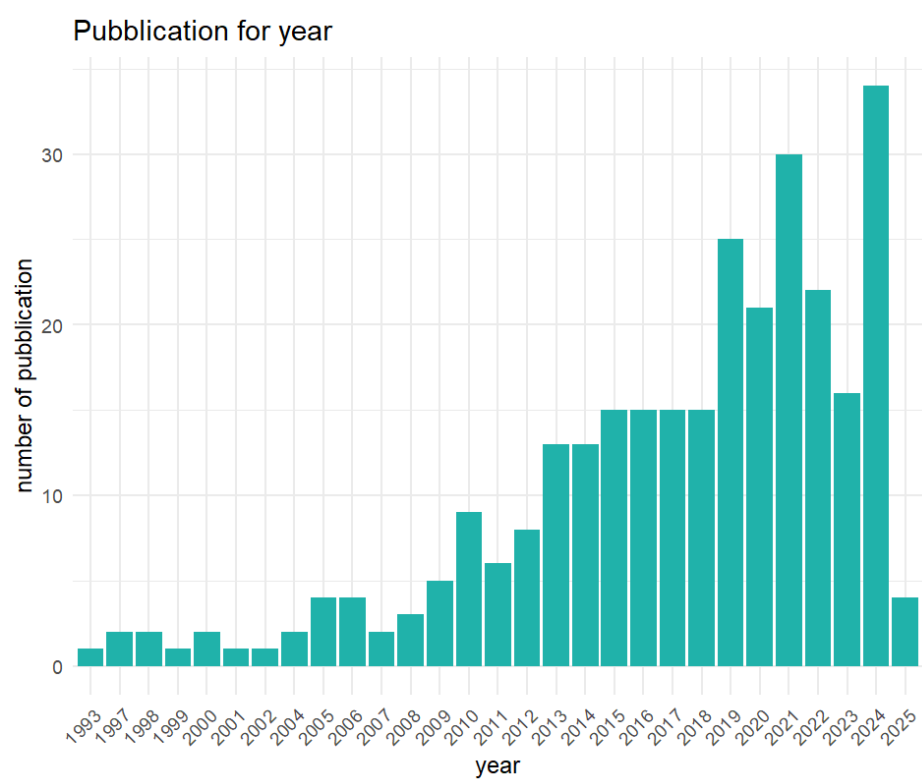


Table. 2 Most relevant authors

Author	h_index	g_index	m_index	Total Citations	Number Publications	Publication Year start
Brassard A.	5	8	0.333	162	8	2011
Godbout N.	5	7	0.294	216	7	2009
Lafontaine M.F.	5	6	0.5	61	6	2016
Bogat G.A.	4	4	0.182	238	4	2004
Dugal C.	4	5	0.364	58	5	2015
Levendosky A.A.	4	5	0.182	268	5	2004
Lopez F.G.	4	4	0.235	146	4	2009
Peloquin K.	4	6	0.333	63	6	2014
Sandberg D.A.	4	4	0.25	87	4	2010
Dayton C.J.	3	3	0.188	163	3	2010

Figure. 3 Thematic maps

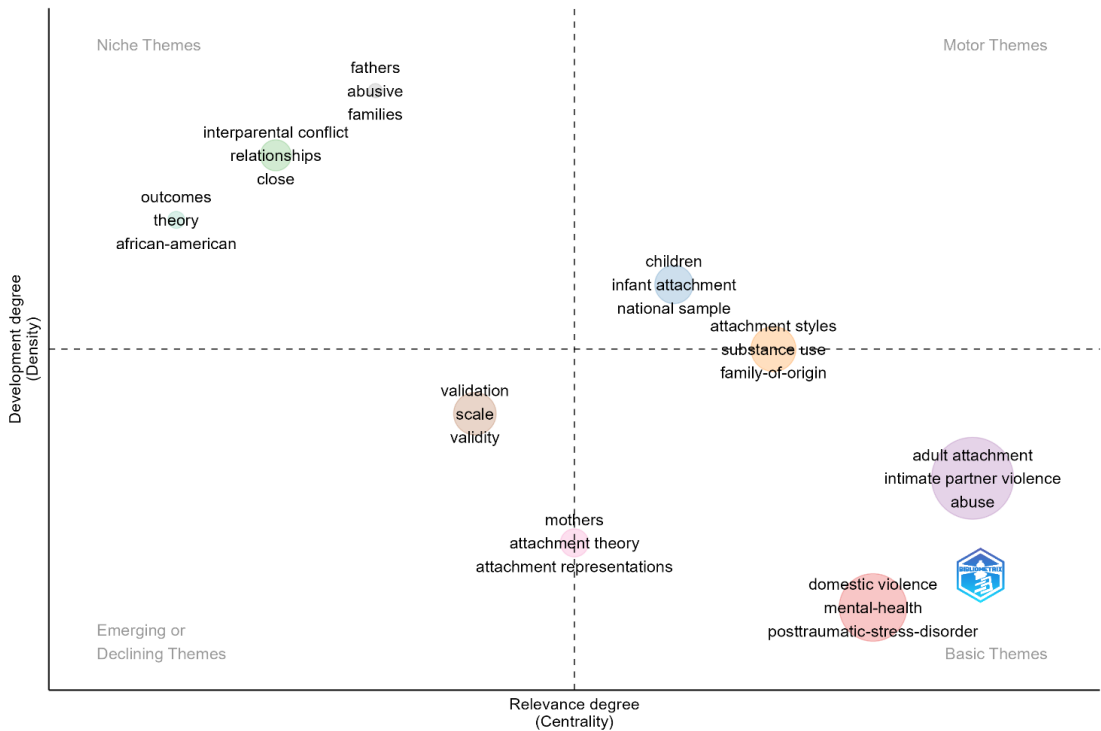


Table. 3 Bibliometric Indicators of the Thematic Map: Centrality, Density, and Frequency

Cluster	Callon Centrality	Callon Density	Rank Centrality	Rank Density	Cluster Frequency
domestic violence	15,16	42,07	8	1	454
children	3,32	58,63	6	6	53
interparental conflict	0,4	75	2	8	31
adult attachment	22,61	48,93	9	3	1296
attachment styles	3,42	57,98	7	5	86
validation	1,91	49,02	4	4	72
mothers	2,03	43,91	5	2	25
fathers	0,67	77,08	3	9	9
outcomes	0,33	62,5	1	7	11

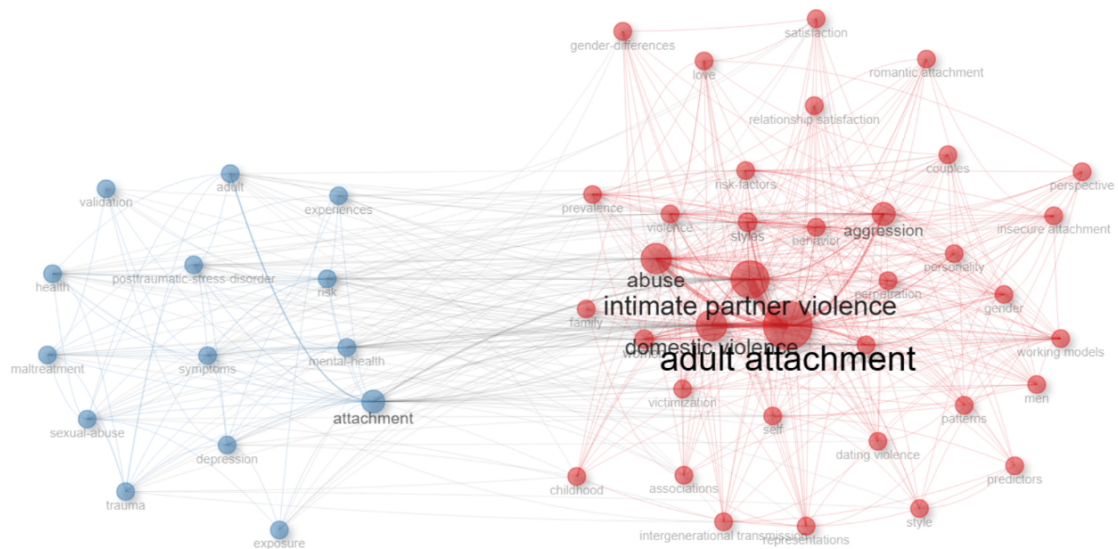
Figure. 4 Co-occurrence network of keywords

Table. 4 Bibliometric Indicators of the Thematic Map: Betweenness, Closeness, and PageRank

Node	Cluster	Betweenness	Closeness	PageRank
adult attachment	1	218,202	0,019	0,091
intimate partner violence	1	109,234	0,019	0,067
domestic violence	1	81,102	0,020	0,055
abuse	1	66,756	0,018	0,055
aggression	1	36,815	0,016	0,039
women	1	10,145	0,014	0,028
styles	1	11,963	0,015	0,030
violence	1	7,651	0,014	0,022
conflict	1	13,823	0,015	0,026
behavior	1	10,908	0,015	0,025
risk-factors	1	3,591	0,014	0,020
working models	1	6,697	0,014	0,022
prevalence	1	7,018	0,014	0,020
victimization	1	5,106	0,014	0,020
gender	1	2,192	0,014	0,017
self	1	2,716	0,013	0,013
insecure attachment	1	1,633	0,013	0,016
perpetration	1	6,071	0,014	0,019
personality	1	0,747	0,013	0,014
intergenerational transmission	1	1,643	0,012	0,012
representations	1	1,317	0,012	0,011
childhood	1	0,798	0,012	0,010
couples	1	0,962	0,013	0,014
men	1	0,641	0,013	0,013
dating violence	1	0,863	0,012	0,011
love	1	0,904	0,012	0,011
patterns	1	1,476	0,012	0,013
style	1	0,784	0,011	0,010

associations	1	0,946	0,012	0,011
predictors	1	0,421	0,011	0,008
romantic attachment	1	0,269	0,012	0,011
family	1	0,452	0,011	0,009
gender-differences	1	0,221	0,012	0,010
perspective	1	0,656	0,012	0,010
relationship satisfaction	1	0,167	0,012	0,010
satisfaction	1	0,539	0,012	0,010
attachment	2	30,496	0,016	0,037
mental-health	2	4,744	0,014	0,022
risk	2	7,155	0,014	0,022
posttraumatic-stress-disorder	2	2,419	0,013	0,017
adult	2	1,300	0,012	0,015
sexual-abuse	2	2,581	0,013	0,013
symptoms	2	2,190	0,013	0,014
experiences	2	1,332	0,012	0,013
maltreatment	2	2,432	0,012	0,013
depression	2	3,730	0,012	0,012
health	2	2,941	0,013	0,014
trauma	2	1,584	0,012	0,011
validation	2	0,289	0,011	0,008
exposure	2	0,380	0,011	0,008