

The Relationship Between Adult Attachment Style and
Depression, Anxiety, and Self-Esteem
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Abstract

This study examined the relationship between adult attachment style and psychological distress. One hundred ninety-eight undergraduate students completed questionnaires on adult attachment, depression, anxiety, and self-esteem. Results indicated that participants with a negative view of the self, those with a Preoccupied or Fearful style, had higher levels of depression and anxiety, and lower levels of self-esteem than those with a positive view of the self, individuals with a Secure or Dismissing style. The findings of the current study support the idea that specific manifestations of psychological disorders are more likely to occur in some attachment styles than in others. By assessing adult attachment styles, we can identify at risk individuals and determine the types of treatment interventions that may be most effective given an individual's particular vulnerabilities.

Adult attachment theory separates specific characteristics of interpersonal functioning into attachment styles. Based on the characteristics of interpersonal functioning unique to each style, we can determine which psychological disorders are more prevalent in each style and present treatment that corresponds with each style. The first step in this approach is to further identify the prevalence of specific disorders for each attachment style. Thus, the goal of the present study was to examine the relationships between specific styles of adult attachment and three manifestations of psychopathology: depression, anxiety, and self-esteem.

Research suggests that both depression and negative self-concept are related to anxious attachment. Specifically, those with Preoccupied or Fearful styles have higher ratings of depression than Secure individuals. Further, Preoccupied and Fearful individuals have lower levels of self-esteem than those with a Secure or Dismissing attachment style. Preoccupied individuals also score lower on measures of self-confidence than those with a Secure or Dismissing style.

The little data that exists regarding anxiety examines attachment and social anxiety and agoraphobia. Specifically, research indicates that individuals with anxious attachment (Preoccupied and Fearful) have higher levels of social anxiety than Secure individuals and that agoraphobia is correlated with preoccupation with relationships.

The current study aims to further the understanding of adult attachment as it relates to psychological distress in young adults. Specifically, this study examined the relationship between adult attachment style and depression, anxiety, and self-esteem. It was hypothesized that individuals with a negative view of the self, Preoccupied and Fearful, would have higher levels of depression and anxiety, and lower levels of self-esteem than those with a positive view of the self, Secure and Dismissing.

Methods

Participants

One hundred ninety-eight undergraduate students (65 male and 133 female) participated in this study. Ages ranged from 16 to 55 ($M = 24.49$, $SD = 8.84$). 83.8 % of the participants were Caucasian, 5.1 % Hispanic, 4.5 % Asian, 2.5 % Native-American, and 3.0 % indicated other. For marital status, 68.7 % were single, 21.7 % were married, and 8.6 % were divorced.

Procedures

Students were recruited through the General Psychology course at Boise State University. Participants were asked to complete a packet of self-administered questionnaires during a one-hour session.

Measures

Adult Attachment Style. The Relationship Questionnaire (RQ, Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991) was used to assess adult attachment style. The RQ contains four short paragraphs describing the four attachment patterns. Each respondent is asked to make ratings on a 7-point scale of the degree to which they resemble each of the four styles. The RQ shows convergent validity with the interview ratings (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994).

Depression. Depression was assessed using the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI, Beck, 1967). The 21 items in this questionnaire each consist of four statements or gradations of intensity of the symptom. Items are rated on a 4-point scale and the items are summed to obtain a total depression score. The BDI has good internal consistency, test-retest reliability, convergent and discriminant validity (Steer, Beck & Garrison, 1986).

Anxiety. Anxiety was assessed using the Beck Anxiety Inventory (BAI, Beck, Epstein,

Brown, & Steer, 1988). These 21 items are rated on a 4-point scale of graduating intensity of the symptom. Items are summed to obtain a total anxiety score. Test-retest reliability, internal consistency, criterion validity, and discriminant validity have been demonstrated for the BAI (Beck et al., 1988; Steer, Ranier, Beck, & Clark, 1993).

Self-Esteem. Self-esteem was assessed using the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (SES, Rosenberg, 1965). The SES is a 10-item scale that measures global self-esteem. The SES has adequate internal consistency and good test-retest reliability as well as good convergent validity (Flemming & Courtney, 1984).

Results

The distribution of attachment style was: 41.9 % Secure, 12.1 % Preoccupied, 28.8% Fearful, and 14.1 % Dismissing. Means and standard deviations on the outcome variables for the 4 attachment styles are shown in Table 1. Three 2 (positive vs. negative image of self) x 2 (positive vs. negative image of others) independent-groups analysis of variance were performed to assess main effects and interaction effects for each of the outcome variables.

It was predicted that anxiety, depression, and self-esteem are related to one's image of the self. ANOVA results are shown in Table 2. For all three variables, the main effect for image of self was significant, indicating differences between the attachment styles. As predicted, participants with a negative image of the self, the Preoccupied and Fearful, rated themselves significantly higher on anxiety and depression and significantly lower on self-esteem than those with a positive image of self, the Secure and Dismissing.

Discussion

The current investigation examined the relationship between adult attachment style and psychological functioning using a 4-category model of adult attachment (Bartholomew &

Horowitz, 1991). Results indicated that depression, anxiety, and self-esteem are related to model of self. That is, those with a negative model of self, Preoccupied and Fearful individuals, have higher levels of depression and anxiety and lower levels of self-esteem than those with a positive model of self, Secure and Dismissing individuals.

The identification of model of self as the construct related to psychological distress is consistent with literature demonstrating a relationship between adult attachment style and psychological functioning. The findings that the Preoccupied and Fearful groups have lower levels of self-esteem and higher levels of depression than the Secure and Dismissing groups are consistent with research with both college student and clinical samples. The identification of the relationship between anxiety and the Preoccupied and Fearful styles adds to the sparse data that suggests that socially anxious patients with a Fearful style have higher levels of anxiety than those with a Secure style.

The findings of the current study support the idea that specific manifestations of psychological disorders are more likely to occur in some attachment styles than in others. Specifically, those with a negative image of self, the Preoccupied and Fearful, are more vulnerable to psychological distress. With this information in consideration, we can begin to apply this information to prevention and intervention strategies. By assessing adult attachment styles, we can identify at risk individuals and determine the types of treatment interventions that may be most effective given an individual's particular vulnerabilities.

References

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Table 1.

Mean Scores and Standard Deviations for the Four Attachment Styles

	Secure		Preoccupied		Fearful		Dismissing	
	(N = 83)		(N = 24)		(N = 57)		(N = 28)	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Depression	5.29	4.61	10.58	7.52	11.02	6.79	6.79	4.75
Anxiety	8.54	8.09	12.54	8.96	17.05	8.98	8.32	7.00
Self-Esteem	16.63	4.64	22.46	6.67	21.97	5.03	17.93	4.69

Table 2.

Analysis of Variance for Depression, Anxiety and Self-Esteem.

	F (1, 197)		
	Self (S)	Other (O)	S x O
Depression	25.60*	1.05	0.32
Anxiety	21.82*	2.48	3.01
Self-Esteem	35.74*	0.25	1.17

*p < .001.