

The Relationship between Adult Attachment Styles, Coping Behaviours, Affective States and the Adherence to Covid-19 Pandemic Guidelines

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Abstract

Adult attachment styles are formed out of early childhood which has implications on affective regulation and coping strategies of individuals. It is hypothesized that attachment styles would be related to certain affective states and specific coping strategies. The aim of the research is to study behavioural implications in the interplay of these three variables, especially with respect to the pandemic induced situation. A sample of 240 Indian adolescents completed self-report measures of attachment styles, affective states, coping strategies and difficulty to adhere to Covid-19 guidelines. Descriptive analysis, MANOVA and Multiple regression analyses were performed. Secure and Dismissive Styles were associated with more positive affect, adaptive coping strategies and higher adherence to Covid-19 guidelines. Preoccupied and Fearful styles indicated higher negative affect, preference for maladaptive coping strategies viz., avoidance-focused coping strategies which were found to be a significant predictor of difficulty in adherence of Covid-19 guidelines.

Keywords: *Attachment styles, Coping strategies, Affective states, Temperament, Covid-19*

Introduction

John Bowlby, psychiatrist and psychoanalyst formulated the theory of attachment. He states, "the propensity to make strong emotional bonds to particular individuals (is) a basic component of human nature". (Bowlby, 1977) This attachment aids individuals to use these 'strong emotional bonds' to develop a secure base from which they explore from and return to. Mary Ainsworth based on her work, reinforced this; past

parental responses with the infant form the basis of patterns of attachment styles, which lead to internal working models to guide internal feelings, thoughts and expectations in later relationships. This was especially established by Hazen and Shaver, who found out that the attachment styles developed between the mother and infant, played a vital role in shaping future adult romantic relationships. (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Subsequent work has

discovered that each style experienced certain affect predominantly (Fuendeling, 1998), and chose very specific coping strategies in stressful situations. (Mikulincer & Florian, 1998)

This paper aims to explore the impact of attachment styles on the affective states of individuals and their coping strategies in one such stressful event that universally affected all individuals i.e., the covid-19 pandemic. Specifically, we look at the relationship between attachment styles, affective states, coping strategies and how it impacts one's adherence to the pandemic guidelines.

Literature Review

The model of adult attachment was conceptualised by Bowlby as the interaction between the model of self and the model of the other. Bartholomew and Horowitz conceptualised these two dimensions as 'attachment anxiety' and 'attachment avoidance' (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). The resulting four attachment patterns derived from a combination of the two dimensions are called, 'secure', 'preoccupied', 'dismissive-avoidant' and 'fearful-avoidant'. Secure attachment indicates positive view of self and others i.e., they have a sense of worthiness and a belief that others are supportive and accepting. Preoccupied attachment indicates a negative sense of self but a positive sense of others i.e.,

a sense of unworthiness (unlovability) and a belief that others are supportive and accepting. They strive for self-acceptance by gaining the acceptance of valued others. (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). Dismissive-Avoidance attachment on the flip side indicates a positive model of self but a negative model of others i.e., they have a sense of worthiness (lovability) with a belief that others are unreliable (untrustworthy) and non-accepting (rejecting). Such individuals protect themselves against disappointment by avoiding close relationships and maintaining a sense of independence and invulnerability. (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991) (Cassidy & Kobak, 2015). Lastly fearful-avoidant attachment indicates negative sense of self and others i.e., they have sense of unworthiness and a belief that others can't be trusted or relied on. The dismissing and fearful styles are similar in terms that they avoid intimacy or close relationships with others, but they differ from each other in terms of how much they rely on others to maintain a positive self-image (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991)

The role of affect regulation is central to attachment styles. Back in childhood, the mother's responsiveness, availability, and expression of negative affect becomes important to the attachment. When an infant is hungry or wet, an affect is activated and the

infant will express that need to the mother. When the mother feeds the child/ cleans up the child the affect is de-activated. That's the beginning of affect regulation for the child. If the need is not met, the affect would intensify, and the child may express its needs more expressly e.g., crying even louder, until the mother comes and attends to the child. The repetition of such experiences builds in the infant's ability to modulate negative affect in accordance with realistic appraisal of its immediate functional value. This ability is typically seen in secure individuals. However, infants whose signals of distress are not met, can develop either of two strategies. The expression of negative affect can either become chronically hyper activated or be deactivated. Infants learn to hyperventilate when their cries for help are not answered and not responded too. Thus, hyper activating of negative emotions leads to preoccupied style being overwhelmed by anxiety and panic. On the other hand, if the cries of the infant are met with physical abuse or harsh treatment, the infant learns to deactivate or numb its negative affect which is typical of the dismissive style. (Mikulincer & Orbach, 1995) Cassidy & Kobak, 2015) (Fuendeling, 1998) (Myers & Wells, 2015)

Attachment styles as stated previously becomes a secure base from which individuals explore from and return to

in face of stressful life events. In 1998, a study on adolescents found out that secure attachment is related to positive coping behaviours such as problem focused coping and support - seeking strategies when faced with psychological distress as compared to other styles (Mikulincer & Florian, 1998). Another study was done to understand the relationship between attachment styles, emotional regulation and adjustment in adolescence. It was found that securely attached adolescents developed adaptive coping strategies in dealing with negative emotions, and had a sense of self-esteem. (Cooper, Shaver, & Collins, 1998) (Monaco, Schoeps, & Montoya-Castilla, 2019). They reported superior functioning across various developmentally relevant domains such as education and work, and reported lesser cases of delinquency, substance abuse and sexual risk behaviours. The preoccupied adolescents reported the highest maladaptive coping behaviours, highest negative emotions, lowest self-esteem and highest level of risky behaviours. The dismissive adolescents reported similar negative emotions as the preoccupied, but were less hostile and depressed, academically more stable. They were socially less competent, less likely to have had a sexual relationship, less involved in both delinquency and substance abuse. (Cooper, Shaver, & Collins,

1998). (Fuendeling, 1998). They also repressed their negative affect much easier than preoccupied individuals (Mikulincer & Orbach, 1995). Individuals with fearful style did not report more symptoms of depression and anxiety than those with preoccupied style. In general, individuals with negative 'view of self' significantly predict general negative affectivity, such as long-term vulnerability to depression, social anxiety and anger. (Van Buren & Cooley, 2002).

The attachment styles thus relate to different coping strategies that can theoretically then be linked to the different ways in which they experience, express and regulate their negative emotions. Mediation analysis provides empirical evidence for this, the preoccupied style adolescents are more prone to risky behaviours in part because of the high levels of negative affect they experienced, although hostility plays an important explanatory factor. As compared to dismissive style adolescents, only the preoccupied have sufficient social skills to engage with peers. Hence, preoccupied adolescents are more prone to delinquency, substance abuse and other problematic behaviours because of their particularly high negative affect and social traits. (Cooper, Shaver, & Collins, 1998) The dismissive adolescents experience

lesser distress than the preoccupied individuals but more than their secure counterparts. However, they function from a distorted frame of self-reliance. In distress, these individuals are less likely to engage in problematic behaviours because of their lack of trust towards others as well as the prerequisite social skills to do so. (Cooper, Shaver, & Collins, 1998).

The Covid-19 pandemic can be said to be a universally stressful event for all of us. It was found that securely and dismissive attached individuals appeared to have lesser psychological distress as compared to preoccupied individuals. The authors suggest that preoccupied style overreport distress to ensure care will be provided, while dismissive style may under report their distress, since they may perceive self-isolation and social distancing preventive measures as less stressful as compared to preoccupied style (Moccia, et al., 2020) (Myers & Wells, 2015). Dismissive individuals also have a negative sense of others, and can only trust themselves. As a result, when facing stressful events, they reduce their emotional responsiveness and show maladaptive behaviours. As a result, they show lesser fear of Covid-19 and lower adherence to guidelines. Whereas preoccupied style displayed unregulated fear of Covid-19 and reduced adherence to guidelines.

Securely attached individuals were related to higher adherence to Covid-19 guidelines. (Monaco, Schoeps, & Montoya-Castilla, 2019) (Segal, Sharabany, & Maaravi, 2021).

Stress and coping have generated numerous theoretical models, each attempting to explain the complex interaction. For the scope of this research, the 'Transactional theory of stress and coping' by Lazarus and Folkman is followed, which states that individuals are continuously appraising various stimuli in their environment. These stimuli could be appraised as 'threatening', 'challenging', 'harmful', etc and generate appropriate affect within the individual. The distress generated from this appraisal process would initiate appropriate coping strategies to manage emotions or attempt to address the environmental stressor. The result of the coping process would create reappraisals as 'favourable', 'unfavourable', or 'resolved'. A positive appraisal would elicit positive emotions and negative appraisal would elicit negative emotions, further provoking the individual to engage in coping behaviours. (Biggs, Brough, & Drummond, 2017)

Lazarus and Folkman proposed that individual prominently engage into two coping strategies i.e., problem-focused coping and emotion-focused

coping. However, subsequent research found out that this dichotomy was insufficient and did not cover all sub-dimensions that emerged in coping research. (Biggs, Brough, & Drummond, 2017) It was in 1990, that Endler and Parker suggested adding a third set of strategy called as avoidant strategies. (Endler & Parker, 1990). In 1997, Susan Folkman, provided a revision to the theory. She stated that the earlier assumption that unresolved stressors would elicit distress and initiate further appraisal and coping attempts, could also have another outcome. She suggested that unsuccessful coping would result in meaning-focused coping i.e., the individuals would turn to one's values, beliefs and goals to reorder life priorities, ascribe positive meaning to ordinary events and to find and remind oneself of the benefits of stress. Thus, creating a loop towards eliciting positive affect. (Folkman S. , 1997) (Biggs, Brough, & Drummond, 2017)

Another dimension of coping that has considerable research is adaptive vs maladaptive coping. (Carver, Scheier, & Weintraub, 1989). One coping strategy that has generated much debate is religion. While some studies have found it to be a maladaptive strategy, some have found it to be of adaptive value. (Krageloh, 2011) Some theorists suggest that it could be because of the various ways in which

individuals approach religion, furthermore researchers need to interpret it in context of the samples. Certain gender differences have also been found across coping strategies. It is found that women experience more distress than men and predominantly use emotion-focused strategies as compared to men. (Matud, 2004) Another study shows that women tend to focus and vent their emotions, while men used alcohol or drugs as coping strategies. (Carver, Scheier, & Weintraub, 1989).

In this study, the aim to explore the relationship between the attachment styles, affect and coping strategies in context of the Covid-19 pandemic. Accordingly, it is hypothesized that secure style would indicate more positive affect vs negative affect, demonstrate more adaptive coping strategies and would be more likely adhere to Covid-19 guidelines. As literature suggests, Preoccupied, Avoidant and Fearful styles would demonstrate more maladaptive coping strategies and would be less likely to adhere to Covid-19 guidelines as compared to the secure style.

Method

Sample and Procedure

The sample consists of 240 Indian adolescents from ranging from the age

group of 18 to 23. The proportion of females' responses was larger (N=170, 70.8%) as compared to the males (N=70, 29.2%). The responses were collected with the help of google forms.

Measures

In order to measure attachment styles, the Experiences in Close Relationships – 12 (ECR-12) self-report measures by Lafontaine et. al. was used. It has 12 items that measure two dimensions i.e., attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance. It has a 7-point Likert scale, with higher scores indicating greater attachment avoidance/anxiety. The Cronbach's alpha varied from 0.78 to 0.87 for the anxiety subscale and from 0.74 to 0.83 for the avoidance subscale. There also is strong evidence of convergent and predictive validity of the ECR-12. (Lofontaine, et al., 2016)

The Brief-COPE developed by Carver (1977) was used to measure coping strategies. The instrument has 28 items that measure 14 factors of 2 items each. It has a 4-point Likert scale (0= I have not been doing this at all, 3= I have been doing this a lot). Carver suggests that these 14 factors can be clubbed into 3 higher-order factors, viz., problem-focused coping, emotional-focused coping and dysfunctional coping strategies (avoidance-focused coping). (Carver

C. S., 1997). The Cronbach's alpha varied from 0.53 to 0.82 amongst the 14 subscales. Factor analysis show that it also has strong construct validity.

The Multidimensional Emotion Questionnaire (MEQ) was used to assess affect. The instrument measures 10 discrete emotions (5 positive: happy, excited, enthusiastic, proud, inspired and 5 negative: sad, afraid, angry, ashamed, anxious). The scale measures the frequency, intensity and persistence of each affect and provides a total score for each affect, and sum of all positive and negative emotions, provides an overall score respectively. It uses a 5-point Likert scale. The internal consistencies for all scales range from acceptable to excellent, and shows strong test-retest reliability. Confirmatory factor analysis provides evidence for its factor structure, and strong convergent and divergent validity is established with the PANAS-X and Difficulties to Emotion Regulation Scale (DERS). (Klonsky, Victor, Hibbert, & Hajcak, 2019)

The difficulty of adhering to social distancing measures was measured with 6 items (e.g., It is difficult for me to stick to social distancing guidelines, I need willpower to adhere to the social distancing guidelines, etc) on a 5 Likert scale (1= do not agree at all,

5= fully agree) and totalled the score into a single score. The scale has excellent internal consistency with Cronbach's alpha = 0.87. The scale also displays strong divergent validity with trait self-control (-0.31, $p=0.001$). This scale was made available open source by the authors. (Wolff, Martarelli, Schuler, & Bieleke, 2020)

Results

Based on the scores obtained on the ECR-12 dimensions of attachment anxiety and avoidance, four categories of secure, preoccupied, dismissive and fearful style were created. Median scores on both the dimensions were used as cut-off scores for this purpose. The distribution of attachment styles was as follows: 23.75% participants were classified as Secure, 27.08% were classified as Dismissive, 27.91% were classified as preoccupied, and 21.25% were classified as fearful. Since, the proportions of male and female responses were unbalanced, gender differences were not tested for.

The scores on the MEQ were combined to get an overall positive affect and overall negative affect score. A Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) was carried out to test the relationship between Attachment styles and affect. To test the underlying assumptions of ensuring the suitability of MANOVA,

Multivariate normality was tested using the Shapiro – Wilk Multivariate normality test ($p = 0.08$) which ensured normality of data. The Box's $M = 14.7$ ($p = 0.09$), indicated homogeneity of variance covariance matrix. The MANOVA yielded Wilk's $\Lambda = 0.88$, $F(3,236) = 4.99$, $p < 0.0001$. Since the Wilk's Λ is significant, the multivariate null hypothesis of equal mean of affect across the attachment styles was rejected. Univariate F-test were carried out for each DV. The four attachment styles showed significant difference on Positive affect ($F(3,236) = 2.71$, $p < 0.05$) and Negative affect ($F(3,236) = 6.68$, $p < 0.001$). Tukey's HSD was carried out to statistically test the differences between the conditions. There was statistically significant difference in the positive emotions between secure vs fearful styles. Within negative emotions, there were significant differences between, secure vs preoccupied, secure vs fearful, and between fearful vs dismissive attachment styles. Figure 1 presents the means and standard deviations pertinent to this analysis.

The coping strategies subscales were combined to provide three scores corresponding to 'emotion-focused coping (EFC)', 'problem-focused coping (PFC)', and 'avoidant - focused coping (AFC)'. A Multivariate

Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) was performed to determine the effect of Attachment Styles on the Coping Strategies. The underlying assumptions of normality and homogeneity were violated as a result of which the Pillai statistic for MANOVA was considered, since it's considered to be more robust. A statistically significant MANOVA effect was obtained, Pillai's Trace = 0.19, $F(3, 236) = 5.39$, $p < 0.001$. The multivariate null hypothesis of equal means of coping strategies across the attachment styles was rejected. Univariate F-test were carried out for each of the DVs. The four attachment styles groups showed significant difference on Problem-focused coping (PFA, $F(3,236) = 3.68$, $p < 0.05$), Emotion-focused coping (EFA, $F(3,236) = 2.75$, $p < 0.05$), and Avoidance-focused coping (AFC, $F(3,236) = 13.48$, $p < 0.001$). The mean differences in attachment styles were further evaluated by using Tukey's HSD multiple comparison method. The results are as follows: Within Emotion-focused coping, there was only a statistically significant difference between Preoccupied style and Dismissive Style. Within the Avoidance-focused coping, there was a statistically significant difference between Fearful vs Dismissive, Preoccupied vs Dismissive, Secure vs Fearful, and Secure vs Preoccupied styles. In the Problem-focused coping,

there was a statistically significant difference between Preoccupied vs Dismissive and Secure vs Dismissive. The figure below presents the means and standard deviations pertinent to this analysis.

Figure 1. Descriptive Statistics of MANOVA results

Measures	Secure n=57		Dismissive n=65		Preoccupied n=67		Fearful n=51	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Affects								
Positive Affect	46.75 _a	7.93	44.35	10.91	43.03	8.37	42.04 _a	9.46
Negative Affect	38.16 _{ab}	8.92 _c	40.08	10.61	44.03 _a	10.97	46.12 _{bc}	11.44
Coping Styles*								
PFC	51.52 _a	10.94	46.55 _{ab}	10.75	51.31 _b	9.00	50.95	8.21
EFC	50.38	11.33	47.39 _a	10.77	52.31 _a	8.97	49.86	7.93
AFC	46.90 _{cd}	9.12	45.86 _{ab}	8.81	52.75 _{bd}	9.63	55.11 _{ac}	9.64

Note: *raw scores were linearly transformed into T-scores, since total scores were not equivalent

a,b,c,d: subscripts indicate significant mean differences as observed in Tukey's HSD at $p < 0.05$. look for interactions horizontally.

To predict the difficulty in adherence of Covid-19 guidelines based on the coping strategies, a multiple regression was conducted. Regression coefficients are shown in Figure 2. Avoidance-focused coping was a statistically significant predictor of difficulty in adherence to Covid-19 guidelines. The prediction model was able to account for 6.7% of the variance in difficulty to adhere to Covid-19 guidelines, $F(3, 236) = 6.735, p < 0.001, \text{Adjusted } R^2 = 0.067$.

Figure 2. Regression coefficients

	Estimate	Std. error	t value	Pr(> t)
Intercept	12.15	2.81	4.322	<0.001
PFC	0.02	0.05	0.35	0.727
EFC	-0.09	0.05	-1.54	0.124
AFC	0.20	0.04	4.393	<0.001

Discussion

The present study examined attachment differences across the affective states of individuals. The results were in line with the literature. Secure and Dismissive styles reported higher levels of positive affect than preoccupied and fearful styles. They also reported lower levels of negative affect than preoccupied and fearful styles. Preoccupied and Fearful styles high negative affect predominantly originates from their negative 'view of self' (Van Buren & Cooley, 2002) and are predisposed to hyperactivate their negative affect in stressful situations. (Fuendeling, 1998) (Myers & Wells, 2015). On the other hand, dismissive styles, engage in deactivating or repress their negative affect, which is also described as a repressive defensiveness (Cassidy & Kobab, 2015) (Mikulincer & Orbach, 1995). In line with the notion that secure style would regulate their affect in more adaptive ways, we notice a significant difference between their negative and positive affect. Secure styles also operate from a sense of self-efficacy and are better able to regulate their negative affect in stressful situations. (Cooper, Shaver, & Collins, 1998)

The second part looked at the attachment differences in the coping strategies that individuals operated from. Relative to Secure styles, we see

dismissive styles reporting lesser use of problem-focused coping. In terms of literature, previous researches have reported that attachment styles do not differ significantly with regards to problem-focused coping. (Cooper, Shaver, & Collins, 1998). Theory suggests that dismissive styles have a negative view of others and tend to repress negative affect and stimuli, thus we could expect that they would show higher preference towards avoidance-focused strategies. (Cassidy & Kobab, 2015) However, we find contrary data with dismissive styles reporting a preference for emotion-focused and problem-focused as compared to avoidance-focused strategies. Something of interest, is that they report the lowest of mean scores in all three coping styles. One possible explanation of this could be linked to a research done during the pandemic times. They explain during the pandemic, dismissive styles are likely to under report negative affect, because they may perceive self-isolation and social distancing preventive measures are far less stressful, and secondly because of their poor social skills they less likely to even seek social or emotional support. (Moccia, et al., 2020) (Segal, Sharabany, & Maaravi, 2021). We could link this to the fact that they reported low negative affect and high positive affect.

As we would theoretically expect, the Preoccupied style display significant differences in their use of avoidance-focused coping, emotion-focused strategies and problem focused relative to the dismissive counterparts. Preoccupied style easily gets overwhelmed by negative affect, and past research shows that they also display higher levels of hostility. They show highest rates of maladaptive behaviours relative to secure and dismissive styles. (Cooper, Shaver, & Collins, 1998) (Fuendeling, 1998). Research done in pandemic times, show they experienced an unregulated fear of Covid-19 and experienced considerable distress because of the self-isolation and social distancing guidelines. (Moccia, et al., 2020). The Fearful styles displayed the highest rating for avoidance-focused strategies as compared to secure and dismissive styles. The results were in line with the theory, as we expected them to show the highest maladaptive coping behaviours with a low preference for adaptive coping behaviours. Also, to be noted is that the fearful style reported highest negative affect and the lowest positive affect. These results are in line with recent research during pandemic times. (Moccia, et al., 2020) (Segal, Sharabany, & Maaravi, 2021)

The last part of the study looks at the predictive model of adherence to

Covid-19 guidelines. Avoidance-focused coping significantly predicts an individual's difficulty to adhere to Covid-19 guidelines. Avoidance-focused coping was made of subscales that measured behavioural disengagement, denial, self-distraction, self-blaming and substance abuse. (Carver C. S., 1997). An important inference drawn, is that avoidance-focused coping is predominantly displayed by both preoccupied and fearful styles which lie on the higher end of attachment anxiety and have a negative view of self. Past research has shown such individuals have reported the highest maladaptive coping behaviours. (Cooper, Shaver, & Collins, 1998) (Fuendeling, 1998). They also display long-term vulnerability to depression, social anxiety and anger (Van Buren & Cooley, 2002). Recent research also shows that they are less likely to adhere to Covid-19 guidelines and display higher risk behaviours. (Moccia, et al., 2020) (Segal, Sharabany, & Maaravi, 2021)

Conclusion and Limitations

To conclude, attachment styles do show a significant effect on the affect regulation styles of individuals, their stress coping styles and particularly in this pandemic it also is linked to adherence of the Covid-19 pandemic guidelines. The results of the present study suggest that attachment

processes have important implications for adjustment across various affective, behavioural and cognitive domains during the adolescence.

However, there are certain limitations that need to be acknowledged. Although this was a good sample, there was imbalance in male-female ratio. This particularly is of concern as past researches have shown significant gender difference in affect regulation and coping strategies between males and females. A second limitation was around the representativeness of the sample in terms of age group as majority of the sample belonged to adolescent age

group. A third limitation, is that the data collection method, which was done through online google forms. Also, there is the issue of social desirability effect.

Recommendations

A recommendation for future research would be conduct a mediational analysis in SEM, wherein the indirect effect of attachment styles on the adherence of Covid-19 guidelines could be established. Another recommendation would be also to look at the mediating effect of culture and socio-political influence with regards to Covid-19 risk behaviours.

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