



e-ISSN: 2319-8753 | p-ISSN: 2347-6710

IJRSET

International Journal of Innovative Research in
SCIENCE | ENGINEERING | TECHNOLOGY



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF INNOVATIVE RESEARCH

IN SCIENCE | ENGINEERING | TECHNOLOGY

Volume 12, Issue 5, May 2023

ISSN INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

Impact Factor: 8.423

9940 572 462

6381 907 438

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The Role of Attachment Styles in Mental Distress: An Investigation of Gender Differences in a sample of adults.

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ABSTRACT:The current study aimed to examine gender differences in the role of attachment styles in mental distress. A cross-sectional research design was employed, using a sample of 80 adults aged between 18 and 35 years, including 40 males and 40 females. Participants completed two standardized questionnaires: the Collins Adult Attachment Scale (CAAS) and the General Mental Health Questionnaire-12 (GHQ-12). The CAAS was utilized to assess attachment styles, including secure and insecure attachment styles such as anxious and avoidant. The GHQ-12 was used to measure mental distress, with higher scores indicating higher levels of mental distress. Multiple regression analysis was conducted to explore the relationship between attachment styles and mental distress while controlling for gender. The current study highlights the significance of considering attachment styles in the assessment and treatment of mental distress, particularly in females with insecure attachment styles. Additionally, it emphasizes the need for further research to investigate the potential role of other variables contributing to mental distress, such as personality traits and life events.

KEYWORDS: Attachment Styles, Gender, Mental Distress

I. INTRODUCTION

In today's society, mental health is a crucial aspect of overall health and wellbeing, affecting an individual's physical health and daily functioning. Today, psychologists and other mental health professionals have successfully figured out various major factors that influence one's mental health and thus, ways to cure or prevent poor mental health. Various factors, including attachment styles in interpersonal relationships, have been identified as important contributors to mental health outcomes (Chopik, Edelstein, & Fraley, 2013).

Right from the moment we are born, there exists an innate ability with each of us to seek attachment to others. All through our lives, relationships which involve attachment, serve to us as roots of emotional security, immense pleasure and intimacy, also, agony and anguish, at some point of time. As we grow – from infancy to adolescence to adulthood to loss – attachment plays a wide role in our lives, shifting to shelter our ever-changing necessities.

ATTACHMENT

Attachment in simple terms, is an ability of an individual to form relationships by establishing emotional bonds. It has been defined as a “lasting psychological connectedness between human beings” by the British Psychologist, John Bowlby (1969). and may be considered synonymous to the terms such as “affectional bond” and “emotional bond.” It is necessary for the survival of us humans. Attachment develops with an individual's initial interaction and bond with his primary caregiver, which in usual cases, is a mother, during the years of his infancy. This connection leaves a tremendous effect on an individual's style of getting attached with others in his future relationships and continues throughout his entire life. In an attempt to understand the distress and anxiety that children undergo when kept apart from their primary caregivers and also, to elaborate the dynamics of an individual's short-term and long-term relationships, John Bowlby designed a model which is famously referred to as the ‘Attachment Theory’. In this theory, he suggested that attachment is a consequence of the evolutionary processes in that the primary caregiver provides safety and security to the infant. He propounded that every child is born with an inherent need to form attachments with his caregivers and it is adaptive as it enhances his chances of survival. Attachment is a natural ability in humans,

starting from infancy, to form emotional bonds and seek emotional security in relationships (Bowlby, 1969). The attachment style an individual develops with their primary caregiver in infancy can significantly influence their future relationships and overall mental health (Sroufe, Egeland, Carlson, & Collins, 2005).

ATTACHMENT STYLES

Psychologist Mary Ainsworth's innovative "strange situation" study disclosed the intense effects of attachment on behaviour. In this, children between the ages of 12 and 18 months were observed as to how they responded to a situation where they were left alone for a short duration and then reunified with their mothers. The study identified three major styles of attachment: secure attachment and insecure attachment including ambivalent-insecure attachment (also synonymously called as anxious-insecure attachment), and avoidant-insecure attachment (Ainsworth et al., 1978). Attachment styles refer to the specific way in which an individual establishes connectivity with other people. This style of attachment is shaped at the very beginning of life, and once formed, it lingers with him for life and manifests itself in intimate relationships and in how he parents his children (Feeney, Cassidy, & Ramos-Marcuse, 2008). Thus, understanding an individual's attachment style can provide valuable insights into their mental health and relationships. The different attachment styles are discussed as below:

- a. Secure attachment: Secure attachment style is where an individual is capable of establishing healthy, enduring and secure relationships. It is the consequence of having reliable primary caregivers right from infancy and having their reassurance or affirmation without being punished for asking for it. Eventually, such individuals develop a sense of safety, comfort and appreciation during their initial interactions. Their caregivers were likely emotionally present and aware about their own emotions and actions. They do not require external need for validation and reassurance from their partners as they are self-confident, trust the intentions of their partner's actions and do not feel jealous and insecure for or from their partners. They are optimistic in approach and trust their partners and love their partners dearly. Consequently, such individuals tend to perform well in relationships.
- b. Insecure attachment: there are two types - avoidant and anxious. People with avoidant attachment style tend to avoid close emotional relationships, often due to fears of rejection or abandonment. They often value independence and self-sufficiency, and may view emotional closeness as a threat to their autonomy. Children who experience neglect, inconsistency, or rejection from their caregivers may develop avoidant attachment style as a way to protect themselves from further emotional harm. On the other hand, People with an anxious attachment style tend to worry about the status of their relationships and may feel insecure and fearful of abandonment. They often seek constant contact and approval from their partners and may become emotionally dependent on them. In some cases, this attachment style can lead to clingy behaviour, jealousy, and difficulties with trust. Individuals with an anxious attachment style may have experienced inconsistent or unpredictable care from their primary caregivers during childhood, which may have contributed to their attachment style.

EFFECT OF ATTACHMENT STYLES ON MENTAL HEALTH

Attachment styles are patterns of behaviour and emotional responses that develop in childhood and continue throughout adulthood. There are four main attachment styles, which are secure, anxious, avoidant, and disorganized. These attachment styles can have a significant effect on mental health outcomes in adulthood. The World Health Organization (WHO) describes mental health as "the state of being in good health where individuals recognize their own abilities, cope with everyday stressors, remain productive, and contribute to their community" (WHO, 2021). Research has shown that individuals with different attachment styles may respond differently to stress and may have different coping mechanisms. Individuals with secure attachment styles tend to have positive self-esteem and trusting relationships with others, which can lead to better mental health outcomes. On the other hand, individuals with anxious attachment styles may experience high levels of anxiety and fear of rejection, which can lead to poor mental health outcomes such as depression and anxiety disorders. Individuals with avoidant attachment styles may have difficulty forming close relationships with others and may struggle with emotional regulation, leading to poor mental health outcomes such as loneliness, depression, and anxiety.

Thus, the impact of attachment styles on mental health outcomes is significant, and it is important to consider attachment styles in the assessment and treatment of mental health disorders. Understanding how attachment styles affect mental health outcomes can help clinicians provide targeted interventions to improve mental health outcomes in individuals with different attachment styles.

ROLE OF GENDER IN ATTACHMENT STYLE AND MENTAL DISTRESS

Attachment style has been found to be a key predictor of mental health outcomes, with individuals who have insecure attachment styles reporting higher levels of mental distress compared to those with secure attachment styles. However,



it is also important to consider the potential moderating effect of gender on this relationship, as research has suggested that males and females may experience attachment and mental health differently. For example, females may be more likely to report higher levels of emotional distress and have a stronger need for intimacy and emotional support than males, which could influence the relationship between attachment style and mental health outcomes.

Despite the importance of understanding gender differences in attachment and mental health, research in this area is still limited, and there is a need for further investigation to clarify the relationship between attachment style, mental distress, and gender. This study aims to address this gap by exploring the relationship between attachment style and mental distress in a sample of female and male participants, with a focus on examining potential gender differences in this relationship.

II. RELATED WORK

Research on attachment style and mental health outcomes has predominantly focused on general population samples without much attention given to gender differences. However, recent studies suggest that gender may be an important moderator of the relationship between attachment style and mental health outcomes. For example, a study by Wang and colleagues (2017) found that the association between attachment anxiety and depressive symptoms was stronger for females than for males. Similarly, a study by Schimmenti and colleagues (2017) found that attachment anxiety and avoidance were differently related to depression symptoms for males and females. Moreover, research has suggested that gender-related factors such as societal expectations, gender roles, and gender identity may influence the relationship between attachment style and mental health outcomes. For example, gender norms may shape the ways in which individuals with insecure attachment styles express emotional distress and seek social support, which could impact their mental health outcomes differently depending on their gender. Research has also suggested that gender differences in attachment style and mental health outcomes may be linked to differences in coping strategies. For example, a study by Hankin and colleagues (2010) found that females with insecure attachment styles were more likely to use maladaptive coping strategies such as rumination and avoidance, while males with insecure attachment styles were more likely to use adaptive coping strategies such as distraction and problem-solving. These coping strategies may impact the association between attachment style and mental health outcomes differently depending on gender.

III. METHODOLOGY

The objective of this study is to investigate the relationship between attachment style and mental distress, with a focus on gender differences. The hypothesis to be proven through this study is that females with insecure attachment styles will experience higher levels of mental distress compared to females with secure attachment styles and no significant relationship will be found between attachment style and mental health outcomes in males. The research design that will be used for the current research will be Cross-sectional in nature. Cross-sectional research design is a type of observational study that involves collecting data at a single point in time from a sample of individuals. In the context of the topic "The Role of Attachment Styles in Mental Distress: An Investigation of Gender Differences in a Sample of Adults", a cross-sectional research design would involve collecting data on attachment styles and mental distress levels at a specific point in time from a sample of adults aged between 18 to 35 years old using two questionnaires: the Adult Attachment Scale (AAS) to measure attachment styles, and the General Health Questionnaire-12 (GHQ-12) to measure mental distress levels. The independent variables for the research work are Attachment Styles and Gender while dependent variable is Mental Distress. The total sample size comprised 80 participants out of which 40 were males and 40 females. Each group of 40 was further sub-divided into two different categories – 20 individuals representing secure attachment and 20 insecure attachments.

Since the objective of this study was to investigate the association between attachment style and mental distress in both females and males, Correlation analysis was conducted to assess the presence and magnitude of the relationship between these two variables. Subsequently, Regression analysis was used to gain deeper insights into the relationship and to generate predictions based on the data.



IV. EXPERIMENTAL RESULTS

Correlation Analyses:

Table 1 - Showing Correlation Analysis of Mental Distress Scores and Attachment Styles:

	Mental Distress Score	Secure	Insecure
Mental Distress Score	1		
Secure	0.17456	1	
Insecure	0.17456	-1	1

Table 2 - Showing Correlation Analysis of Mental Distress Scores and Gender

	Mental Distress Score	Male	Female
Mental Distress Score	1		
Male	-0.10777	1	
Female	0.107772	-1	1

Regression Analysis:

Table 4 - Showing Regression Statistics

REGRESSION STATISTIC	
Multiple R	0.205149
R Square	0.042086
Adjusted R Square	0.017205
Standard Error	8.215334
Observation	80

Table no. 5: Showing coefficients, standard error, t-stat and p-value of the two independent variables.

	Coefficients	Standard Error	t Stat	P value	Lower 95%	Upper 95%	Lower 95.0%	Upper 95.0%
Intercept	11.3375	4.003659	2.831785	0.005904	3.365197	19.3098	3.365197	19.3098
Gender Code	1.775	1.837005	0.966247	0.336946	-1.88294	5.432944	-1.88294	5.432944
Attachment Style Code	2.875	1.837005	1.565048	0.121672	-0.78294	6.532944	-0.78294	6.532944



IV. CONCLUSION

This study utilized correlation analysis to investigate the relationship between attachment style and mental distress among both females and males. The results, presented in Table 2, indicate two significant findings. Firstly, a negative correlation was found between secure attachment style and mental distress, suggesting that individuals with a more secure attachment style tend to experience lower levels of mental distress, indicating greater resilience to mental health issues. Conversely, a positive correlation was observed between insecure attachment style and mental distress, implying that individuals with higher levels of insecure attachment style may be more prone to experiencing mental distress or developing mental health problems.

Additionally, Table 3 displays the correlation analysis between mental distress scores and gender. The findings reveal a negative correlation between mental distress and male gender, indicating that individuals leaning more towards male tend to experience lower levels of mental distress. Conversely, a positive correlation was found between mental distress and female gender, suggesting that females in the sample tend to have higher levels of mental distress compared to males.

The interpretation of the regression analysis revealed that the coefficient values associated with the independent variables (attachment style and gender) represent the expected change in the dependent variable (mental distress score) for every one-unit increase in the independent variable, while holding other variables constant. The statistical significance of the coefficients was assessed through t-statistics and p-values. The analysis found a statistically significant relationship between the intercept term and mental distress score, but did not find statistically significant relationships for the coefficients of attachment style and gender. The low R-squared value suggests that the combination of attachment style and gender explains only a small portion of the variability in mental distress score, indicating the presence of other influential factors not included in the model.

In summary, the findings partially support the hypothesis that females with insecure attachment styles would exhibit higher levels of mental distress compared to females with secure attachment styles. However, the analysis did not find sufficient evidence to support or reject the hypothesis regarding the relationship between attachment style and mental distress in males. It is important to note that non-significant results do not provide definitive conclusions and further research is needed to explore the relationship between attachment style and mental distress in males.

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Impact Factor: 8.423



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