



The Role of Early Childhood Attachment Styles in Predicting Emotional Regulation and Coping mechanisms among Young Adults

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Abstract: This study explores the predictive role of early childhood attachment styles in shaping emotional regulation and coping mechanisms among young adults aged 19 to 25. Rooted in Bowlby's Attachment Theory, the research investigates how dimensions of attachment, specifically anxiety and avoidance, relate to strategies of emotion regulation (cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression) and coping (problem-focused, emotion-focused, and avoidant). Using a quantitative, correlational design, data were collected from 150 participants through validated tools: the Experiences in Close Relationships–Revised (ECR-R), the Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (ERQ), and the Brief COPE inventory. Statistical analyses revealed that attachment anxiety significantly predicts greater use of both cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression, while attachment avoidance positively predicts expressive suppression but negatively predicts cognitive reappraisal. Moreover, attachment anxiety was associated with increased reliance on emotion-focused and avoidant coping strategies, whereas neither attachment dimension significantly predicted problem-focused coping. The findings underscore that insecure attachment styles, particularly anxious attachment, are linked to less adaptive emotional regulation and coping patterns in emerging adulthood. This highlights the lasting impact of early relational experiences on psychological functioning and stress management. The study contributes to a growing body of literature emphasizing the role of attachment in emotional development and has important implications for early interventions and mental health support programs.

Keywords: *Attachment styles, Emotional regulation, Coping styles*

1. Introduction

Attachment theory, which was first formulated by John Bowlby, stipulates that infants form emotional bonds with their main caregivers as a survival strategy. The quality of these bonds creates an internal working model, a mental template for understanding oneself, others, and the world (Bowlby, 1969). These working models shape not only the child's sense of security but also their expectations in future relationships and their strategies for handling distress (Ainsworth et al., 1978). Ainsworth (1978), through her Strange Situation procedure, expanded upon Bowlby's work by categorizing attachment patterns into secure, anxious-ambivalent, and avoidant styles. Later research by Main and Solomon (1990) introduced a fourth category, disorganized attachment, to describe children who displayed contradictory or fearful behaviors, often in the context of trauma, neglect, or unresolved caregiver distress.

2. Review of Literature

Oshri et al. (2015) examined how different types of child maltreatment such as emotional abuse, neglect, physical and sexual abuse, are linked to insecure attachment styles and poor emotion regulation, which further lead to risky behaviors in young adulthood. The study involved 361 college students and found that emotional abuse and neglect were strongly related to anxious attachment, while physical abuse was more associated with avoidant attachment. These insecure attachment styles predicted emotion regulation difficulties, such as lack of emotional clarity and poor impulse control. These difficulties, in turn, led to increased risky behaviors like substance use and unsafe sexual activity. The results highlight the mediating role of attachment and emotion regulation in the pathway from maltreatment to later behavioral problems.

Vadehi et al. (2016) explored how cognitive emotion regulation strategies mediate the link between attachment styles and emotional problems like anxiety and depression. The research involved 285 undergraduate students from Tabriz University and found that individuals with anxious and avoidant attachment used more maladaptive strategies such as rumination and catastrophizing, which led to greater emotional distress. In contrast, those with secure attachment used adaptive strategies like positive reappraisal, which reduced emotional problems. The findings highlight the key mediating role of emotion regulation in how attachment styles influence emotional well-being.

2.1 *Research Objectives*

1. To examine the relationship between attachment anxiety and emotion regulation strategies, specifically cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression.
2. To investigate the relationship between attachment avoidance and emotion regulation strategies, specifically cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression.
3. To assess the role of attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance in predicting the use of problem-focused coping strategies.
4. To explore the predictive role of attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance on the use of emotion-focused coping strategies.
5. To examine the impact of attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance on the use of avoidant coping strategies.

2.2 *Hypothesis*

H1: There will be a significant relationship between attachment anxiety and the use of cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression.

H2: There will be a significant relationship between attachment avoidance and the use of cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression.

H3: Attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance will significantly predict the use of problem-focused coping.

H4: Attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance will significantly predict the use of emotion-focused coping.

H5: Attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance will significantly predict the use of avoidant coping.

3. **Methodology**

3.1 **Research Design**

The aim of the study was to examine the relationship between early childhood attachment styles, emotion regulation, and coping mechanisms among young adults aged 19–25. This study adopts a quantitative, correlational research design. A cross-sectional survey method will be used to collect data, allowing for the identification of patterns and associations among the variables.

3.2 *Sample*

The target population consists of individuals aged 19 to 25 years, as this age group represents emerging adulthood, a critical phase for the development of emotion regulation and coping strategies. A target sample of 150 university participants from Delhi NCR is established.

A total of 50 physical forms were distributed and 100 were administered online. All responses were completed by the participants. The sample is non-clinical, purposive, and cross-sectional in nature. The study uses a structured questionnaire administered via Google Forms and physical copies to collect data.

In this study the IV is attachment styles and DV are emotion regulation and coping mechanisms.

3.3 Measures

The following measures are used for this study:

Experiences in close relationships – revised (ECR-R): Fraley, Waller, and Brennan came up with the Experiences in close relationships – revised (ECR-R) questionnaire in the year 2000. This self-report instrument, which has 36 items with ratings on a 7-point Likert scale, assesses attachment in intimate relationships. It can be used to evaluate attachment styles in friendships, romantic relationships, and parent-child interactions, among other relationships. In both the anxiety and avoidance subscales, the ECR-R shows high internal consistency, typically 0.90 or above.

Emotion Regulation Questionnaire: The Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (ERQ) was developed by James J. Gross and Oliver P. John in the year 2003. It is a self-report tool used to assess how people regulate their emotions, consisting of 10 items each rated on a 7-point Likert scale. The ERQ demonstrates excellent internal consistency which tends to be 0.79 for cognitive reappraisal and 0.73 for expressive suppression.

Brief-COPE: The Brief-COPE was developed by Charles S. Carver in 1997. It is a questionnaire that measures how people cope with stressful situations, consisting of 28 items each rated on a 4-point Likert scale. The overall internal consistency was reported as 0.86.

3.4 Questionnaire Administration

Participants will complete the questionnaire online and on physical copies, ensuring accessibility and convenience. Responses will be collected over a 5–6-week period.

3.5 Procedure

The present study explored the role of early childhood attachment styles in predicting emotional regulation and coping mechanisms. After finalizing the research objectives and hypothesis, standardized tools were selected for data collection. These include the Experiences in close relationships – revised (ECR-R) to assess attachment in close relationships, the Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (ERQ) to assess how individuals control their emotions, and Brief-COPE to measure how people cope with stressful situations.

All selected measures were reviewed for clarity, reliability, and relevance to the research topic. The questionnaires were distributed to participants within the target age group. After data collection, scoring was performed as per the scoring guidelines provided for each scale. The data was then entered into Jamovi software for statistical analysis.

3.6 Statistical Techniques

To analyze the relationship between variables, the study will employ a combination of statistical methods:

Correlation: This will be used to assess how strongly and in which direction of the interaction of attachment types and emotion regulation, and coping methods are related. Correlation will help identify if and how these variables are related.

Regression: This method will allow the study to examine how early childhood attachment styles predict emotion regulation and coping mechanisms. Regression will help quantify the extent to which changes in the independent variable (attachment styles) affect emotion regulation and coping mechanisms.

4. Results

Attachment anxiety is found to be significantly positively correlated with:

1. Cognitive reappraisal ($r = .177$, $p = 0.30$)
2. Expressive suppression ($r = .279$, $p < .001$)
3. Emotion-focused coping ($r = .163$, $p = .046$)
4. Avoidant coping ($r = .372$, $p < .001$)

Attachment avoidance shows a significant positive correlation with:

1. Expressive suppression ($r = .325$, $p < .001$)
2. Avoidant coping ($r = .155$, $p = .059$), which was marginally significant

No significant associations are observed between attachment avoidance and cognitive reappraisal or other forms of coping. Cognitive reappraisal is positively related to expressive suppression ($r = .326$, $p < .001$), implying that people who practice one type of emotion regulation are probably also practicing the other. Problem-focused coping did not exhibit any significant correlations with either attachment dimensions or emotion regulation strategies. Emotion-focused coping demonstrated strong positive correlations with both problem-focused coping ($r = .550$, $p < .001$) and avoidant coping ($r = .520$, $p < .001$), indicating possible overlap in coping approaches.

Table 1: Correlation table for attachment styles, emotion regulation, and coping mechanisms

		Anxiety	Avoidance	Cognitive Reappraisal	Expressive Supression	Problem-Focused Coping	Emotion-Focused Coping	Avoidant-Coping
Anxiety	Pearson's r	—						
	df	—						
	p-value	—						
Avoidance	Pearson's r	0.405***	—					
	df	148	—					
	p-value	< .001	—					
Cognitive Reappraisal	Pearson's r	0.177*	-0.096	—				
	df	148	148	—				
	p-value	0.03	0.245	—				
Expressive Supression	Pearson's r	0.279***	0.325***	0.326***	—			
	df	148	148	148	—			
	p-value	< .001	< .001	< .001	—			
Problem-Focused Coping	Pearson's r	-0.082	-0.069	0.076	0.009	—		
	df	148	148	148	148	—		
	p-value	0.317	0.4	0.355	0.908	—		
Emotion-Focused Coping	Pearson's r	0.163*	0.018	-0.052	-0.042	0.55***	—	
	df	148	148	148	148	148	—	
	p-value	0.046	0.824	0.525	0.606	< .001	—	
Avoidant-Coping	Pearson's r	0.372***	0.155	-0.083	0.153	0.152	0.52***	—
	df	148	148	148	148	148	148	—
	p-value	< .001	0.059	0.311	0.062	0.063	< .001	—

Predicting Cognitive Reappraisal

The overall model is statistically significant, $F(2, 147)$, $p < .05$, and it provided an explanation for roughly 6.5% of the variation in cognitive reappraisal scores ($R^2 = .065$, $R = .254$). Cognitive reappraisal is significantly positively predicted by attachment anxiety ($\beta =$

0.212, $p = .004$), indicating that people who experience higher levels of attachment anxiety are more likely to employ cognitive reappraisal.

Those with higher levels of avoidance were less likely to apply cognitive reappraisal, however, as who are subjected to more attachment anxiety tend to attachment avoidance is a major negative predictor ($\beta = -0.169$, $p = .023$).

Table 2: *Model fit measures for cognitive reappraisal*

<i>Model Fit Measures</i>		
Model	R	R ²
1	0.254	0.0647

Table 3: *Regression table for predicting cognitive reappraisal*

<i>Model Coefficients - cognitive reappraisal</i>				
Predictor	Estimate	SE	t	p
Intercept	4.469	0.2919	15.31	< .001
anxiety	0.212	0.0718	2.95	0.004
avoidance	-0.169	0.0738	-2.29	0.023

Predicting Expressive Suppression

A moderate model fit was shown by the statistical significance of the model, which explained 13.2% of the variation in expressive suppression scores ($R^2 = .132$, $R = .363$).

The results show that expressive suppression is significantly positively predicted by attachment anxiety ($\beta = 0.190$, $p = .038$), indicating that people with higher levels of nervous attachment are more prone to utilise suppression. Additionally, attachment avoidance was found to be a significant positive predictor ($\beta = 0.283$, $p = .003$), suggesting that people who have avoidant tendencies also use suppression more frequently.

Table 4: *Model fit measures for expressive suppression*

<i>Model Fit Measures</i>		
Model	R	R ²
1	0.363	0.132

Table 5: *Regression table for predicting expressive suppression*

Model Coefficients - expressive suppression				
Predictor	Estimate	SE	t	p
Intercept	2.574	0.3693	6.97	< .001
anxiety	0.19	0.0908	2.09	0.038
avoidance	0.283	0.0934	3.03	0.003

Predicting problem-focused coping

With $R^2 = .008$, $R = .091$, the model is not statistically significant, meaning that the predictors only accounted for 0.8% of the variance in problem-focused coping scores. Problem-focused coping was not substantially predicted by attachment anxiety ($\beta = -0.218$, $p = .471$). Likewise, there was no significant correlation between attachment avoidance and outcomes ($\beta = -0.148$, $p = .633$).

Table 6: *Model fit measures for problem-focused coping*

Model Fit Measures		
Model	R	R²
1	0.0912	0.00832

Table 7: *Regression table for predicting problem-focused coping*

Model Coefficients - problem-focused coping				
Predictor	Estimate	SE	t	p
Intercept	23.267	1.225	18.987	< .001
anxiety	-0.218	0.301	-0.723	0.471
avoidance	-0.148	0.31	-0.479	0.633

Predicting emotion-focused coping

At the model level, the model is statistically significant and explained almost 2.9% of the variation in emotion-focused coping scores ($R^2 = .029$, $R = .171$). Emotion-focused coping is significantly positively predicted by attachment anxiety ($\beta = 0.831$, $p = .038$), suggesting that those who have higher levels of attachment anxiety will tend to employ emotion-focused coping techniques.

Attachment avoidance, however, is not a significant predictor ($\beta = -0.262$, $p = .522$).

Table 8: *Model fit measures for emotion-focused coping*

Model Fit Measures		
Model	R	R²
1	0.171	0.0293

Table 9: *Regression table for predicting emotion-focused coping*

Model Coefficients - emotion-focused coping				
Predictor	Estimate	SE	t	p
Intercept	27.624	1.614	17.119	< .001
anxiety	0.831	0.397	2.094	0.038
avoidance	-0.262	0.408	-0.641	0.522

Predicting avoidant-coping

A moderate association is suggested by the model, which is statistically significant and accounted for 13.8% of the variation in avoidant coping scores ($R^2 = .138$, $R = .372$).

Avoidant coping was found to be strongly and significantly positively predicted by attachment anxiety ($\beta = 1.40$, $p < .001$), suggesting that those who experience higher levels of anxiety are more likely to use avoidant coping mechanisms.

However, there is no discernible contribution of attachment avoidance to this coping strategy, as it is not a significant predictor ($\beta = 0.02$, $p = .951$).

Table 10: *Model fit measures for avoidant-coping*

Model Fit Measures		
Model	R	R²
1	0.372	0.138

Table 11: *Regression table for avoidant-coping*

Model Coefficients - avoidant-coping				
Predictor	Estimate	SE	t	p
Intercept	11.3652	1.289	8.8153	< .001
anxiety	1.4008	0.317	4.4167	< .001
avoidance	0.02	0.326	0.0613	0.951

5. Discussion

The current study examined how students' current levels of emotion regulation and coping strategies are influenced by their early childhood attachment types. Correlation analysis showed that insecure attachment styles (anxious and avoidant) correlated with maladaptive strategies ($r = .441$, $p < .01$), such as denial, rumination, and avoidance, while secure attachment has a positive connection with flexible coping strategies ($r = .496$, $p < .01$), such as solving problems, awareness of emotions, and social support-seeking.

These results are consistent with Karreman and Vingerhoets (2012), who found that secure attachment enhances resilience and emotional regulation. Furthermore, our regression analysis indicated that attachment style significantly predicted coping mechanisms ($\beta = .412$, $p < .01$), which aligns with Vadehi et al. (2016), where cognitive emotion regulation mediated the link between attachment and emotional problems. Our results also reflect the work of Pascuzzo et al. (2016), who emphasized that attachment insecurity in young adults predicts less efficient emotional regulation in adulthood. However, in contrast to Ciocca et al. (2020) and Prunas et al. (2019), who emphasized a strong path from attachment to psychological distress through defense mechanisms, our study did not directly assess distress outcomes, focusing instead on regulation and coping. These results reinforce the theoretical framework suggesting that early relational patterns shape emotional regulation capacities and stress responses in adulthood.

One noteworthy drawback is that, despite being a part of the regression analysis, self-efficacy did not seem to be a reliable indicator of coping strategies. Furthermore, the cross-sectional design limits the capacity to draw conclusions regarding causality, and the use of self-report questionnaires may have created bias.

The sample was also limited to students, reducing generalizability to broader populations. To study how attachment styles affect coping and regulation across time, future studies should use longitudinal designs.

Including clinical populations, observational methods, and multi-informant reports could strengthen the validity of findings. Additionally, exploring cultural influences, family dynamics, and intervention-based studies could offer deeper insights into strengthening adaptive coping through attachment-focused practices.

6. Conclusion

The development of emotional regulation and coping strategies is significantly impacted by early childhood attachment styles, according to the study's findings. It has been discovered that people with secure attachment styles employ healthier coping mechanisms, like problem-solving and emotional expression, and are better at controlling their emotions. On the other hand, those with insecure attachment styles frequently had trouble controlling their emotions and tended to use unhealthy coping mechanisms like denial or avoidance. These results highlight how important early interactions are in establishing the groundwork for mental health. A secure and responsive caregiving environment during childhood can promote stronger emotional resilience and more adaptive responses to stress in later life. All things considered, this study demonstrates the value of fostering early attachment bonds as a safeguard against emotional and psychological issues. Future studies could further explore how other factors, such as parenting styles or life experiences, interact with attachment in shaping emotional outcomes.

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