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Influence of Attachment Style on Empathy and Seeking Social Support

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Abstract: This study explores the influence of attachment styles on individuals' capacity for empathy and their tendencies to seek social support. Drawing from attachment theory, it examines how early relational patterns shape interpersonal behaviour in emotionally charged or distressing situations. The research aims to understand whether secure, preoccupied, fearful, and dismissing attachment orientations affect the way people experience and express empathy, as well as how they navigate support-seeking in close relationships. Using quantitative methods, data was collected through standardized psychological assessments and analysed to identify significant patterns. The findings suggest that individuals with secure attachment are more likely to exhibit higher empathy and healthier support-seeking behaviour, whereas those with insecure attachment styles show varied responses. This thesis highlights the importance of recognizing attachment-related dynamics in fostering emotional well-being and enhancing social connection, particularly in therapeutic and interpersonal contexts.

Keywords: *Attachment styles, Empathy, Social Support*

1. Introduction

Attachment styles are developed in childhood and serve as foundational frameworks that determines how an individual acts and responds in emotional relationships (Bowlby, 1969; DiTommaso et al., 2002). There are multiple attachment styles that are rooted in Bowlby's (1969) attachment theory, that are secure, preoccupied/anxious, dismissing/avoidant, and fearful/disorganised. These four styles guide how an individual forms connections, regulates their emotions, responds to interpersonal challenges, and how they view themselves and others around them (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; De Sanctis & Mesurado, 2022). An individual's

attachment style is established early in their childhood with their primary caregiver, which they then emulate in most of their adult relationships (DiTommaso et al., 2002). Attachment theory states that the formation of an emotional bond between a child and their primary caregiver has an evolutionary basis and it is a means of survival (Bowlby, 1969). The infant seeks support and care from their caregiver in the face of threat which in turn activates their attachment behavioural system (Bowlby, 1969).

When children grow in a loving and supportive environment, they tend to form secure attachments in relationships compared to individuals who grew up in lesser positive environments (DiTommaso et al., 2002). Secure individuals usually have high self-esteem, are trusting of others, can communicate easily, and have a positive view of self and others (De Sanctis & Mesurado, 2022). Ainsworth (1989) supported this by stating that this results from the safe space given to children to explore their environment by their parents, as this eventually leads to children trusting and openly sharing their feelings as they enter adolescence. On the other hand, preoccupied individuals have insecurities in relationships, have a fear of abandonment, are sensitive, highly dependent on others, and generally view themselves in a negative light and others in a positive light (DiTommaso et al., 2002). This attachment style roots from inconsistent caregiving provided throughout an individual's childhood and adolescence (Ainsworth & Bell, 1970). People with avoidant attachment styles are distant, withdrawn, are emotionally distant, are independent, and fear intimacy (Duggan & Brennan, 1994), which results from caregivers being insensitive to the individual's needs in their childhood and adolescence. Lastly, fearful individuals generally find it difficult to self-regulate, lack empathy, have a tendency to disassociate, have a difficult time trusting others, and seek closeness but are fearful of (Duggan & Brennan, 1994).

Furthermore, attachment styles also help determine how individuals display empathy, the understanding and supporting responding to another individual's emotions (Wei et al., 2024). Empathy is a multifaceted psychological construct that enables individuals to understand and respond to the emotional experiences of others. It generally encompasses two distinct but related components: cognitive empathy, which involves understanding another person's perspective, and affective empathy, which refers to the capacity to emotionally resonate with others' feelings (Decety & Jackson, 2004; Davis, 1983). Empathy plays a crucial role in facilitating prosocial behaviour, moral development, and healthy interpersonal relationships. Individual differences in empathy have been linked to attachment styles, which are formed through early caregiver interactions and shape patterns of emotional regulation and relational behaviour (Bowlby, 1969; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2005).

Securely attached individuals generally show high levels of both cognitive and affective empathy, as their positive relational experiences foster trust, emotional regulation, and responsiveness to others (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2005). In contrast, individuals with a preoccupied (anxious) attachment often exhibit heightened emotional sensitivity and concern for others but may struggle with perspective-taking due to self-focused distress (Wei et al., 2010). Those with a dismissing (avoidant) attachment style tend to downplay emotional needs—both their own and others'—resulting in lower levels of empathy, particularly affective empathy (Kim & Kochanska, 2017). Fearful or disorganized attachment, often rooted in unresolved trauma or inconsistent caregiving, is associated with both low empathy and difficulty managing emotional responses to others, leading to interpersonal avoidance or confusion (Lyons-Ruth et al., 2012). These distinct patterns underscore the role of attachment styles in shaping empathic capacities and the quality of interpersonal relationships throughout life.

Attachment styles also provide the foundation of social skills, social competence (Goldberg, 2000), social adjustment and social support seeking of an individual (Francois-Walcott et al., 2024). Seeking social support is a vital component of adaptive coping and psychological resilience, particularly during stressful life events. It involves turning to others for emotional assistance and is linked to better mental and physical health outcomes (Taylor, 2011). However, individuals differ in their tendencies to seek and utilize support, and these differences can be largely explained by attachment theory. According to Bowlby (1969), attachment styles formed in early childhood shape internal working models of self and others, influencing how individuals regulate distress and engage in relationships throughout life.

Individuals with a secure attachment style generally have positive views of themselves and others, making them more likely to seek out and effectively utilize social support during times of stress (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). In contrast, those with a preoccupied or anxious attachment style often crave closeness and reassurance, leading them to seek support frequently. However, their heightened emotional reactivity and fear of rejection may make their support-seeking behaviour appear intense or dysregulated (Wei et al., 2005). Individuals with a dismissing or avoidant attachment style tend to downplay their need for support and prefer self-reliance, often avoiding close emotional exchanges and minimizing their distress (Lopez et al., 2001). As a result, they are less likely to seek support even when it could be beneficial. Finally, those with a fearful or disorganized attachment style, characterized by conflicting desires for closeness and fear of being hurt, may show inconsistent or ambivalent patterns of support-seeking. They may desire support but struggle to trust others or manage the

vulnerability it requires, often resulting in withdrawal or distress (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Simpson & Rholes, 2012). These distinct patterns demonstrate how attachment styles guide not only emotional regulation but also interpersonal coping strategies such as seeking social support.

2. Review of Literature

Research consistently demonstrates that attachment styles play a crucial role in shaping empathy, with secure attachment fostering both cognitive and affective empathy, while insecure attachment—whether avoidant or anxious—can hinder empathic responsiveness. Several studies have examined this relationship, using diverse methodologies to establish key findings. Özsoy (2021) conducted a case-control study on depressive patients, revealing that insecure attachment was associated with lower social functioning and impaired empathy, particularly in avoidantly attached individuals. A large-scale meta-analysis by De Sanctis and Mesurado (2022) confirmed that secure attachment was positively correlated with empathy across various cultural contexts, while avoidant attachment showed a consistent negative association with both cognitive and emotional empathy. Similarly, Wei et al. (2024) explored empathy in medical professionals through a cross-sectional survey, demonstrating that secure attachment predicted higher empathy scores, while anxious attachment was linked to emotional instability.

Other studies have investigated the mechanisms through which attachment influences empathy. Ricon and Katz (2024) examined moral judgment and attachment quality, showing that insecure attachment was associated with lower empathic concern and impaired ethical decision-making. Lo Cricchio et al. (2022) identified a significant link between low empathy and aggression in individuals with insecure attachment, particularly in those with anxious attachment who struggled with emotional regulation. Trusty et al. (2005) found that while anxious attachment heightened emotional empathy, it also increased susceptibility to emotional distress, making empathic engagement less stable over time. Expanding on these findings, DeWall et al. (2011) used fMRI imaging to examine neural correlates of empathy, revealing that securely attached individuals exhibited greater activation in brain regions associated with emotional processing and perspective-taking. Fuchshuber et al. (2025) supported this by demonstrating that avoidantly attached individuals showed weaker neural responses to others' emotions, indicating reduced affective empathy. Additionally, Li et al. (2023) found that secure attachment predicted better perspective-taking abilities in social interactions, facilitating interpersonal understanding. Finally, Heinke and Louis (2009) explored the cultural dimensions of attachment and empathy, finding that collectivist societies with strong relational

norms mitigated some of the negative effects of insecure attachment, suggesting that social environments can moderate attachment-related deficits.

2.1 *Attachment Styles and Empathy*

Research consistently demonstrates that attachment styles play a crucial role in shaping empathy, with secure attachment fostering both cognitive and affective empathy, while insecure attachment—whether avoidant or anxious—can hinder empathic responsiveness. Several studies have examined this relationship, using diverse methodologies to establish key findings. Özsoy (2021) conducted a case-control study on depressive patients, revealing that insecure attachment was associated with lower social functioning and impaired empathy, particularly in avoidantly attached individuals. A large-scale meta-analysis by De Sanctis and Mesurado (2022) confirmed that secure attachment was positively correlated with empathy across various cultural contexts, while avoidant attachment showed a consistent negative association with both cognitive and emotional empathy. Similarly, Wei et al. (2024) explored empathy in medical professionals through a cross-sectional survey, demonstrating that secure attachment predicted higher empathy scores, while anxious attachment was linked to emotional instability.

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3. Methodology

3.1 *Aim*

To explore the influence of attachment styles on empathy and on seeking social support among young adults.

3.2 *Research Objectives*

1. To ascertain the relationship between attachment styles and empathy.
2. To assess the influence of attachment styles on individuals' tendency to seek social support.

3.3 *Hypotheses*

H1: It is predicted that there is a significant relationship between attachment styles and empathy.

H2: It is predicted that there is a significant relationship between attachment styles and individuals' tendency to seek social support.

3.4 *Participants*

A total of 160 participants completed the online questionnaire and answered personal questions about their attachment style, empathy, and how much social support they seek. The inclusion criteria were individuals who were between the ages of 18 to 25 and had not been previously diagnosed with a psychiatric illness. Total participants were 150 with 40 males and 110 females. The sample was comprised of 6 participants aged 18, 12 participants aged 19, 16 participants aged 20, 19 participants aged 21, 54 participants aged 22, 27 participants aged 23, 9 participants aged 24, and 7 participants aged 25. All demographic details are given in Table 1.

Table 1: *Summary of Participant Demographics (N = 150)*

Demographics	n (%) / M (SD)
Gender	
Female	110 (73.3%)
Male	40 (26.7%)
Age	
18	6 (4.0%)
19	12 (8.0%)
20	16 (10.7%)
21	19 (12.7%)
22	54 (36.0%)
23	27 (18.0%)
24	9 (6.0%)
25	7 (4.7%)

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Before commencing data collection, participant sample size was determined using G*Power analysis (Faul et al., 2007) for all analyses. For the chi-square test of independence sample size was calculated using a p-value of .05, power of 95%, and a large effect size (w=.5) (Cohen, 1988), which was determined to be 95. For the one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) sample size was calculated using a p-value of .05, power of 95%, and a large effect size (f=.4) (Cohen, 1988), which was determined to be 112. With a total of 160 participants, the present study exceeded this sample size.

3.5 *Materials*

3.5.1 Attachment Style

The 30-item Relationship Scales Questionnaire (RSQ) (Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994) was used to measure attachment style. There are four subscales in the questionnaire: Secure, Preoccupied, Fearful, and Dismissing. The secure style reflects comfort with closeness and trust in relationships, showing a healthy balance between intimacy and independence. Individuals with a preoccupied style often crave emotional closeness but worry about being rejected or not being valued by others. The fearful style is defined by a desire for connection, yet a strong fear of rejection leads to avoidance of intimacy. Lastly, the dismissing style describes those who prioritize self-reliance and often minimize the need for emotional closeness or dependence on others.

The RSQ has shown mixed reliability for its original four attachment styles, with low internal consistency reported (e.g., Cronbach's alpha as low as 0.22). However, when the scale is reorganized into dimensions like anxiety and avoidance, reliability improves, with alpha values ranging from 0.60 to 0.69 and test-retest reliability between 0.78 and 0.85 (Guédeney et al., 2009). The RSQ has demonstrated adequate construct validity through its alignment with widely accepted attachment dimensions and has shown convergent validity through significant correlations with other established attachment measures (Zortea et al., 2019). There are 17 scale items and 13 filler items to reduce response bias and improve data quality (Siegert et al., 1995). Items (e.g., "I find it difficult to depend on other people.") were rated on a 5-point Likert scale with scores ranging from 1 (*Not at all like me*) to 5 (*Very much like me*). Items 3, 9, 10, 15, and 28 constitute the Secure subscale. Items 6, 8, 16, and 25 comprise of the Preoccupied subscale. Items 1, 5, 12, and 24 make up the Fearful subscale. Items 2, 19, 22, and 26 constitute the Dismissing subscale. Items 6, 9, and 28 were reverse scored. The total score for each subscale was calculated by summing all the items. Scores can range from 5 to 25 for the Secure subscale, and 5 to 20 for the Preoccupied, Fearful, and Dismissing subscales.

3.5.2 Empathy

The 28-item Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI) (Davis, 1980) was used to measure empathy. There are four subscales in the questionnaire: Perspective Taking, Fantasy, Empathic Concern, and Personal Distress. The Perspective Taking subscale measures the ability to understand others' viewpoints, the Fantasy subscale reflects the tendency to imagine oneself in fictional situations, Empathic Concern assesses feelings of compassion and concern for others, and Personal Distress evaluates the emotional discomfort one experiences in response to others' suffering.

Research has shown strong reliability and validity for the IRI. The IRI's subscales demonstrate good internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha values typically ranging from 0.70 to 0.80 (De Corte et al., 2007). Validity has been supported through correlations with other empathy measures and its ability to predict relevant outcomes like prosocial behaviour and relationship satisfaction (Péloquin & Lafontaine, 2010). Items (e.g. "I try to look at everybody's side of a disagreement before I make a decision.") were rated on a 5-point Likert scale with scores ranging from 0 (*Does not describe me well*) to 4 (*Describes me very well*). Items 3, 8, 11, 15, 21, 25, and 28 constitute the Perspective Taking subscale. Items 1, 5, 7, 12, 16, 23, and 26 comprise of the Fantasy subscale. Items 2, 4, 9, 14, 18, 20, and 22 make up the Empathic Concern subscale. Items 6, 10, 13, 17, 19, 24, and 27 constitute the Personal Distress subscale. Items 3, 4, 7, 12, 13, 14, 15, 18, and 19 were reverse scored. Items were summed to produce a total score for each subscale. Scores can range from 0 to 28 for each subscale.

3.5.3 Seeking Social Support

The 33-item Coping Strategy Indicator (Amirkhan, 1990) is designed to assess the coping strategies individuals use when dealing with stress. It includes three subscales: Problem Solving, Seeking Social Support, and Avoidance. The 11-item Seeking Social Support subscale was used to measure Seeking Social Support for the current study. The subscale measures the tendency to seek help or emotional support from others as a way of coping with stress or facing challenging situations.

The Seeking Social Support subscale has shown good reliability, with internal consistency reported at Cronbach's alpha values around 0.83, however, its validity in predicting general mental health outcomes is less clear, as it has shown weak correlations with measures like the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-12), indicating that context and population may affect its effectiveness. Items (e.g. "Let your feelings out to a friend?") were rated on a 3-point Likert scale with scores ranging from 1 (*Not at all*) to 3 (*A lot*). Items were summed to produce a total score. Scores can range from 11 to 33 with higher and lower scores indicating greater and lower seeking of social support, respectively.

3.6 *Procedure*

All participants were individually invited to take part in the research concerning attachment styles, empathy, and seeking social support. Data was collected from 17th January 2025 to 4th February 2025. Participants were recruited using snowball and convenience sampling. Social media sites such as WhatsApp and Instagram were used to circulate the participant recruitment poster. Furthermore, the researchers went around on campus at Amity University Noida to advertise the study and recruit participants. Participants completed the survey if they met the inclusion criteria of being between the ages of 18 to 25 and not have been diagnosed with a psychiatric disorder.

Participants filled in the questionnaire using Google Forms. The beginning of the survey provided information about the study, what participants were required to do, explained the clause of withdrawal from the study, and assured the participants that their responses would remain anonymous and confidential. There was no compensation provided for participation. Firstly, participants gave consent to participating in the study by checking a 'Yes' tick box in the start of the questionnaire. The participants then proceeded to provide responses for demographic variables such as name, age, gender, and whether they have ever been diagnosed with a psychiatric disorder. This was the followed by the Relationship Scales Questionnaire, then the Interpersonal Reactivity Index, and then lastly the Seeking Social Support subscale.

3.7 Data Analysis

A between-subjects and cross-sectional research design was used for the study. The independent variable was attachment style, and the dependent variables were empathy and seeking social support.

IBM SPSS Statistics version 29.0.1.0. was used to analyse data. Data was checked and properly formatted before beginning analyses. Firstly, listwise deletion method was used to remove participants who did not fit the inclusion criteria. Then outliers were identified by calculating the standardisation total of attachment style, empathy, and seeking social support, and were checked using a critical z-score cut off ± 3.29. Boxplots were further used to identify any remaining outliers. The Shapiro-Wilk statistic and visual inspection of the histogram was used to check for the normality assumption for all three variables, attachment style, empathy, and seeking social support. A chi-square test of independence was conducted to test for H1. The assumptions for chi-square were checked. A test of one-way ANOVA was conducted to test for H2. As attachment style was a categorical variable, it was dummy coded for easier and efficient analysis. The Levene's test of equality of error variances was used to check the homogeneity of variance assumption.

4. Results

4.1 *Preliminary Analysis*

Before conducting the chi-square independence test and ANOVA, data was cleaned. Ten participants that answered 'Yes' to having a psychiatric disorder, of which two were out of the age range, were excluded from analysis. No missing values were revealed. Outliers for all three variables, attachment style, empathy, and seeking social support were identified by visually inspecting their Q-Q plots and boxplots and via the standardisation of raw scores to z-scores using threshold value of ±3.29. One outlier for attachment style was found, only in the boxplot, however, the outlier was not removed in order to represent the individual's true response and have a holistically represented sample.

The final sample for analysis comprised of 150 participants. Internal consistencies were used to conduct reliability analyses for all scales. Cronbach's alpha for attachment style was .650, empathy was .793, and seeking social support was .873. Table 2 showcases the descriptive statistics for all three variables.

Table 2: *Descriptive Statistics*

Variable	Mean	SD	Range	N
Attachment Style	54.42	5.82	37 – 68	150
Empathy	67.64	12.72	39 – 97	150
Seeking Social Support	25.29	5.05	13 – 33	150

4.2 *Primary Analysis*

A chi-square test of independence was carried out to test for H1. An ANOVA test was carried out to test for H2. Visual inspection of the histograms revealed that normality for attachment style, empathy, and seeking social support were met, however significance values of the Shapiro-Wilk test indicated that normality for all were violated. However, the central limit theorem can be used to justify this violation as the present sample size was greater than 30 participants.

A chi-square test of independence was conducted to examine the relationship between attachment style and the four dimensions of empathy: empathic concern, fantasy, personal distress, and perspective taking. The analysis revealed a statistically significant association between attachment style and empathy, $\chi^2(9, N = 150) = 114.60$, $p < .001$. The likelihood ratio also supported this finding, with a value of 96.25, $p < .001$, further reinforcing the presence of a significant interaction.

Observed frequencies varied considerably from expected counts across categories. For instance, individuals with a secure attachment style reported notably higher levels of perspective taking (observed = 53, expected = 41.4) and empathic concern (observed = 26, expected = 19.8), whereas fearful and preoccupied individuals demonstrated elevated scores in personal distress relative to their expected frequencies. The dismissing group showed higher-than-expected involvement in fantasy (observed = 17, expected = 8.8), suggesting a potentially unique empathetic profile.

In terms of effect size, Cramér's V was calculated at .505, indicating a moderate to strong association between the variables. Additionally, Phi was reported at .874, further suggesting a robust relationship between attachment style and empathy responses.

The results are represented in Table 3 below.

Table 3: *Results of the chi-square test of independence between attachment style and empathy*

Test Statistic	df	N	χ^2	p	Cramér's V	Phi
Pearson Chi-Square	9	150	114.60	<.001	.505	.874
Likelihood Ratio	9		96.25	<.001	-	-

To explore whether seeking social support varied across different attachment styles, a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted. The four attachment style groups did not differ significantly in their levels of seeking social support, $F(3, 146) = 0.412$, $p = .745$. This result suggests that attachment style does not have a statistically significant effect on the tendency to seek social support.

The assumption of homogeneity of variances was assessed using Levene's test and was found to be satisfied, Levene's Statistic = 0.907, $p = .439$. This indicates that the variances were not significantly different across the groups, supporting the validity of the ANOVA results.

Descriptive statistics showed slight variations in mean scores across attachment styles. Participants with a dismissing attachment style had the highest mean score on seeking social support ($M = 25.60$, $SD = 4.80$), while those with an anxious-preoccupied style had the lowest mean score ($M = 23.80$, $SD = 6.71$). However, these differences were not statistically meaningful.

The results are represented in Table 4 below.

Table 4: *Results of the one-way ANOVA between attachment style and seeking social support*

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Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p
Between Groups	31.95	3	10.65	0.41	.745
Within Groups	3774.72	146	25.85		
Total	3806.67	149			

5. Conclusion

This study aimed to explore how attachment styles influence empathy and the tendency to seek social support among young adults. The results partially supported the proposed hypotheses. A significant relationship was found between attachment styles and empathy, with securely attached individuals showing greater empathic concern and emotional regulation. This suggests that attachment security plays a role in how people connect with and respond to others emotionally. However, the relationship between attachment styles and support-seeking was not significant. This finding points to the possibility that external factors such as context, environment, or personal experiences may influence help-seeking behaviour beyond attachment alone. Although the research had limitations, such as a limited sample and reliance on self-reports, it opens up valuable opportunities for further investigation. Future studies could build on this work by using more diverse samples and longitudinal methods to better understand how attachment continues to shape behaviour over time. Overall, the study highlights the lasting impact of attachment on emotional and social development. It also offers practical value for educators and mental health professionals, suggesting that fostering secure attachment traits could improve young adults' interpersonal skills and emotional well-being.

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