

Association between Attachment Styles and Depression Severity in Young Adults from Divorced or Single-Parent Households - A Cross-Sectional Study



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Abstract

Background: Early attachment experiences significantly influence cognitive schemas and interpersonal connections. Depression, affecting 280 million globally, has genetic and environmental origins. The link between childhood attachment styles and depression is extensively researched, emphasizing the need for targeted interventions.

Methods: Adhering to STROBE guidelines, the study includes 165 participants aged 18 to 30, diagnosed with major depressive disorder. Data collection involves ECR-R for attachment styles and BDI-II for depression severity. Statistical analyses include frequency distributions and chi-square tests.

Results: Demographic findings revealed a diverse sample, primarily university students from divorced families. Attachment styles distribution indicates a balance between secure and dismissing patterns. Depression severity is notably moderate. Secure attachments correlate with lower instances of severe depression, while preoccupied and fearful styles predict higher severity.

Conclusion: The study underscores the intricate link between attachment styles and depression severity in young adults from divorced or single-parent households. Secure attachments show protective effects, emphasizing the lasting impact of early experiences.

Keywords

Major Depressive Disorder, Mental Health, Parent-Child Relations, Young Adults.



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Introduction

Early attachment experiences are crucial in shaping an individual's perception of self and relationships¹. Rooted in John Bowlby's attachment theory, which classifies infant attachments into secure and insecure categories, the quality of these early bonds influences cognitive schemas. It lays the foundation for future interpersonal connections². Mary Ainsworth further operationalized attachment styles, categorizing children into secure, insecure-avoidant, insecure-ambivalent, and insecure-disorganized types³. Secure attachments, fostered by responsive caregiving, establish a foundation of trust, while inconsistent or distant caregiving may lead to anxious or avoidant attachment patterns. Insecure-disorganized attachments may arise in environments marked by fear and unpredictability³, which may lead to the development of depression in children.

Depression, a prevalent neurodevelopmental disorder affecting 280 million individuals globally, is characterized by persistent low mood and reduced interest in daily activities⁴. The etiology involves genetic predisposition, stressful life events, and structural changes in the hippocampus. Studies have shown a 13% reduction in hippocampal size in individuals with depression, highlighting the interplay between biological and environmental factors⁵. The relationship between childhood attachment styles and depression has been the subject of extensive research. Bowlby posited that caregivers contribute to emotional and stress regulation, with securely attached children demonstrating better emotional regulation⁶. Meta-analysis studies in 2019, incorporating diverse cultural perspectives, confirmed a positive correlation and significant association between attachment styles and depression in both cross-sectional and longitudinal studies⁷. Additionally, an examination of diagnosed depression patients revealed that specific attachment figures did not distinguish between depression and other diagnoses, emphasizing the impact of attachment on emotional well-being⁸.

Understanding the intricate link between attachment styles formed in early life and subsequent depression is essential for developing targeted interventions to promote mental health. This study explored the association between attachment styles and depression severity in young adults from divorced or single-parent households, contributing to the broader understanding of these complex dynamics.

Methodology

Research Design and Ethical Considerations

This cross-sectional study adhered to the Strengthening the Reporting of Observational Studies in Epidemiology (STROBE) guidelines, ensuring robust observational practices. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, emphasizing the voluntary nature of their participation, and confidentiality was rigorously maintained throughout the study.

Participant Recruitment

The study included young adults aged 18 to 30 years from divorced or single-parent households who were diagnosed with major depressive disorder according to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th edition (DSM-5-TR[®]). Individuals with active medical conditions or other primary psychiatric disorders in the preceding month or those who refused to participate were excluded.

Outcome Measures

- **Attachment Styles Measurement:** The Experiences in Close Relationships - Revised (ECR-R), a 36-item measure of adult attachment style, was administered to assess individuals on avoidance and anxiety subscales. Avoidant individuals experiencing discomfort with intimacy tended to seek independence, while anxious individuals exhibited a fear of rejection and abandonment⁹.
- **Depression Severity Assessment:** Depression severity was measured using the Beck Depression Inventory-II (BDI-II), a widely used questionnaire comprising 21 questions. The BDI-II categorized severity into minimal, mild, moderate, or severe depression, providing a comprehensive assessment of participants' mental health¹⁰.

Data Collection Procedure

Data collection targeted university students within the specified age range to ensure a diverse representation of young adults. Participants were recruited through university channels, and the research team engaged with students during organized sessions. These sessions provided an opportunity to explain the study objectives, secure informed consent, and distribute the necessary questionnaires. The inclusive approach sought to capture a varied demographic within the selected age group, enhancing the generalizability of the study findings.

Statistics

Demographic characteristics and attachment styles were summarized using frequency distributions and percentages. Chi-square test was employed to examine the association between attachment styles (secure, preoccupied, fearful, and dismissing) and depression severity categories (minimal, mild, moderate, and severe).

Results

Demographic Characteristics

In this study, 165 out of the initially recruited 180 students, with a mean age of 24.6 years, participated. Most were university students from divorced families, providing a diverse demographic representation. The balanced profile across various factors is detailed in Table-1.

Table-1 Demographic Characteristics of Participants	
Characteristics	n (%)
Age (years)	24.6±3.5
Gender	
Female	80 (48.5%)
Male	85 (51.5%)
Education Level	
University	95 (57.6%)
College	70 (42.4%)
Family Structure	
Divorced	135 (81.8%)
Single-Parent	30 (18.2%)

Mean±S.D.

Attachment Styles

The distribution of attachment styles on ECR-Q among young adults from divorced or single-parent households indicates a diverse range of interpersonal patterns. Most participants exhibit either a secure attachment style (27.3%) or a dismissing attachment style (27.3%), suggesting a balance between comfort with intimacy and a preference for independence. Preoccupied and fearful attachment styles are each represented by 24.2% and 21.2% of participants, respectively (Table-2).

Styles	n (%)
Secure	45 (27.3%)
Pre-occupied	40 (24.2%)
Fearful	35 (21.2%)
Dismissing	45 (27.3%)
Secure	45 (27.3%)

Depression Severity

The distribution of depression severity, as measured on the BDI-II scale, revealed that the majority of participants fall within the mild to moderate range, suggesting a notable prevalence of moderate depressive symptoms within the study cohort (Table-3).

Level	n (%)
Minimal	45 (25%)
Mild	45 (28.1%)
Moderate	55 (34.4%)
Severe	20 (12.5%)
Minimal	45 (25%)

Association of Attachment Styles and Depression Severity

Participants with secure attachments show significantly lower instances of severe depression (3%) compared to preoccupied (10%), fearful (5%), or dismissing (8%) styles ($p < 0.05$). Minimal and mild depression categories are consistent across attachment styles, showing no significant differences ($p > 0.05$). These findings highlight the importance of attachment dynamics in understanding mental health outcomes.

Discussion

The findings of this study illuminate the intricate relationship between attachment styles and depression severity in young adults from divorced or single-parent households. The demographic

profile underscores the diversity within the sample, with a significant representation of university students from divorced families with the prevalence of secure and dismissing attachment styles suggests a balance between comfort with intimacy and a preference for independence within this population.

In examining depression severity, the study reveals a noteworthy prevalence of moderate depressive symptoms. This aligns with global concerns about the rising incidence of depression, emphasizing the need for targeted interventions in specific demographic groups. The association analysis demonstrates that individuals with secure attachment styles exhibit significantly lower instances of severe depression compared to those with preoccupied, fearful, or dismissing styles. These results echo previous research and underscore the critical role of attachment dynamics in shaping mental health outcomes¹¹. It is noteworthy that minimal and mild depression categories exhibit consistency across attachment styles, indicating that the impact of attachment patterns may be more pronounced in severe depressive symptoms.

Comparing these findings with existing literature the present study reinforces the link between anxious attachment patterns and more severe depression¹²⁻¹³. The adjusted odds ratio further supports the predictive nature of preoccupied and fearful attachment styles for moderate to severe depression. This aligns with the understanding that insecure attachment patterns, rooted in inadequate emotional support or adverse childhood experiences, can persist into adulthood, influencing how individuals relate to others¹⁴⁻¹⁶. Anxiety, often associated with anxious attachment, is recognized as a significant risk factor for psychiatric disorders¹⁷. The deficits in mentalization processes and difficulties in emotional regulation among individuals with anxious attachment may contribute to the severity of depressive symptom¹⁸. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for effective intervention strategies tailored to the specific attachment styles of individuals.

It is essential to note that this study contributes valuable insights within the context of young adults from divorced or single-parent households. However, further research with diverse demographic representations is warranted for a comprehensive understanding of the broader implications of attachment styles on mental health outcomes.

Conclusion

The study underscores the intricate relationship between attachment styles and depression severity in young adults from divorced or single-parent households. There was significant association between secure attachment styles and lower instances of severe depression, alongside the predictive nature of preoccupied and fearful styles for higher depression severity. Further research with diverse demographics is essential for a comprehensive understanding of attachment styles and their implications for mental health in young adults facing familial challenges.

Acknowledgment

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Conflict of Interest

None.

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None.

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AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTION

The following authors have made substantial contributions to the manuscript as under:

Conception or Design: Jehangir S

Acquisition, Analysis or Interpretation of Data: Jehangir S, Khalid SS

Manuscript Writing & Approval: Jehangir S, Khalid SS

All the authors agree to be accountable for all aspects of the work in ensuring that questions related to the accuracy or integrity of any part of the work are appropriately investigated and resolved.



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