

## ASSOCIATION BETWEEN ATTACHMENT STYLES AND EMOTIONAL REGULATION STRATEGIES: A STUDY ON NON-CLINICAL ADOLESCENTS SAMPLE

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### **ABSTRACT**

**Objective:** To investigate the predictive association of different attachment styles with emotional regulation strategies i.e., cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression among adolescents.

**Design:** Correlational Research Design

**Place and Duration of Study:** Different Public and Private sector educational institutes of Karachi- Pakistan, from 2016 to 2018.

**Subject and Method:** 411 adolescents (Males=214, Females=197) age ranges between 13-19 years ( $M= 16$  years,  $SD= 1.7$ ) were recruited using purposive sampling technique. Self-developed Socio-Demographic Form, Attachment Style Questionnaire and Emotional Regulation Questionnaire were administered in group settings. The technique of counter balancing was also applied

**Results and Conclusion:** The finding indicates that Secure Attachment Style significantly predicts Cognitive Reappraisal as an Emotional Regulation Strategy in adolescents causing 13.5 % variation. Whereas insecure Attachment Styles I.E., Fearful, Preoccupied And Dismissing Attachment Styles significantly predict the use of Expressive Suppression Explaining 4 %, 14.7 % and 10 % changes in Expressive Suppression scores, respectively. It is concluded that Secure Attachment Style has a role in promoting healthy Emotion Regulation Strategies in adolescents and preoccupied, Fearful and Dismissing Attachment Styles have a role in increasing Maladaptive Emotional Regulation Strategies in adolescents.

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**Keywords:** Attachment Styles; Emotional Regulation; Cognitive Reappraisal; Expressive Suppression; Adolescents.

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## INTRODUCTION

According to Attachment theory childhood experiences have a greater impact on shaping of behaviour and thinking style of an individual (Bowlby, 1980). Attachment relationships are mainly important and have far reaching effects on developing social, emotional and cognitive skills. Bowlby conceptualized it as attachment behavioural system as it is very important and impacts attachment related individual differences to coping with stressful circumstances, managing psychological distress, and enhancing resilience (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Similarly, if in early childhood there are experiences of fulfilment of needs, it provides children to organize their self-image and coping skills.

The attachment relationship between the child and his caregiver is highly important with reference to the formation of two key mechanisms in children; empathy and self-regulation. Many researchers have examined that there is a strong association between parental responsiveness to a child's emotions and child's use of self-regulatory behavior (Kim & Holloway, 2018). Acceptance by parents, support and empathy has also been found to be linked with the development of better emotional regulation strategies later in life. Current literature has found a strong meditational link of emotional regulation with empathy and stress (Helen & Jennifer, 2019). In addition, secure attachment is linked with positive outcome that includes higher self-esteem, enhanced resilience and better emotional regulation strategies. On the other hand, insecure attachment is a predictor of later emotional difficulties (Sroufe, 2006).

A child having an insecure attachment patterns with caregiver learns that the caregiver's empathy is unavailable or the caregiver has an inconsistent patterns in the expression of empathy. As a consequence, the importance of empathy is not fully understood by the child within their internal working model (Khodabakhsh, 2012). These essential mechanisms of empathy and self-regulation are helpful in predicting future outcomes with regard to close attachments. Children who are securely attached are found to show more empathetic approach towards others (Murphy & Laible, 2012). They are more capable of regulating intense emotions directed at others than children who are insecurely attached (Kobak et al., 1993).

Parents who have secure attachment may enhance emotion regulation in children in many ways. Parents with secure attachment may understand child's

feelings and their causes in an accurate way and will be able to provide effective guidance in handling these emotions. (Fonagy, 2001). They may discuss with child about distressing emotions more sensitively and can offer helpful strategies to overcome these feelings consequently teaching them effective coping skills. (Brumariu, 2015). A growing number of literature depicts that children have secure attachment patterns are more progressive in their understanding and ability to regulate overwhelming emotion (Zimmer-Gembek et al., 2015).

Individuals use different strategies to alter their emotions. These strategies affect their emotions as well as their cognitive reasoning and interpersonal skills (Thompson, 2014). The two main strategies for emotion regulation are cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression (Gross & John, 1998). Cognitive reappraisal is defined as the effort to re-interpret an emotion provoking situation in a way that changes its meaning and its emotional effect (Gross & John, 2003). Expressive suppression is explained as an effort to suppress, inhibit or reduce the expressive behaviour of emotion (Gross & John, 2003).

Above mentioned researches are indicative of positive outcomes that are associated with secure attachment style and its predictive influence on emotional well-being later in life. Therefore it is valuable to investigate the predictive relationship of different attachment styles specifically on two major emotional regulation strategies i.e. cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression in adolescents.

Findings from this research would lead towards a better understanding regarding the nature and significance of attachment styles and bonding with parents. Consequently, it would be facilitative in developing preventive strategies as well as effective treatment planning for the vulnerable groups. In addition, by working with families who are vulnerable in terms of insecure attachment patterns, there is a need to promote the development of secure attachment styles; sensitive, responsible parenting and reducing insecure attachment behaviours; there is likelihood to reduce the development of maladaptive coping strategies within the initial years and in the longer period. Findings of the study will also provide guidance regarding planning awareness and prevention programs to improve the mental health of individuals specifically adolescents. Furthermore, findings would be helpful to improve psychological wellbeing and combat with the prevailing emotional disturbances that ultimately lead to mental health issues in adolescents.

It was hypothesized that that 1) there would be a predictive association between secure attachment style and cognitive reappraisal in adolescents. 2) There would be a predictive association between fearful attachment style, preoccupied attachment style and dismissing attachment style with expressive suppression in adolescents.

## **METHOD**

### ***Participants***

A Sample of 411 adolescents (214 males & 197 female) with ages from 13-19 years ( $M = 16$  yrs  $SD = 1.7$ ) were approached at different educational institutes of Karachi, Pakistan. Educational level of the sample was from matriculation till intermediate. Participants were belonging to Upper, middle and Lower socioeconomic background.

The following inclusion and exclusion criteria were followed:

1. Those individuals who found to have emotional disturbance and seeking psychiatric treatment were excluded from the study.
2. Individuals having both parents alive and married were included in the study
3. Parental status as divorced and separated cases were excluded from the Study.

### ***Measures***

#### **Demographic Form**

A Demographic form was developed to tap all necessary information. Items in the form covered three areas i.e. personal information, academic related information, and parent related information.

#### **The Attachment Style Questionnaire (ASQ) (Oudenhoven et al., 2003)**

The ASQ is a 22-item questionnaire in English. The items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale with three items as reversely keyed. It measures four key dimensions of the attachment styles namely secure, fearful, dismissing and preoccupied. These four dimensions are based on the attachment model proposed

by Bartholomew and Horowitz in 1991. The ASQ also assess each dimension of attachment separately by generating multiple scores on the four dimensions, which allows the explanation of an individual on all four dimensions. The ASQ has demonstrated good external and internal validity (Mosterman & Hofstra, 2015).

### **Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (ERQ) (Gross, & John, 2003)**

ERQ is a 10-item scale in English language. It is intended to assess a respondents approach towards regulating their emotions. It has two subscales: (1) Cognitive Reappraisal and (2) Expressive Suppression. The internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha) of the questionnaire is found to be adequate for the two subscales i.e., .81 for cognitive reappraisal subscale and .73 for expressive suppression subscale.

### ***Procedure***

A prior permission was taken from Advanced Studies and Research Board, University of Karachi and from the authorities of the concerned educational institutions. The Concerned authorities were approached with a sample copy of all measures along with permission letter and consent form. After permission of respective authorities, participants were approached to take informed consent about their voluntary participation for present study. All the ethical guidelines were followed. Consent was taken and the participants were given the right to withdraw from the study at any time. Confidentiality was assured and the purpose of the study was explained. The scales were administered in group setting under the supervision of researcher, facilitated by trained volunteers to address any queries.

For statistical interpretation of the data, it was analyzed by using the statistical package for social sciences (SPSS, Version 24). Descriptive statistics including mean, frequency and standard deviation were computed for getting a better statistical view of the sample characteristics in a summarized way. Linear Regression Analysis was applied to assess the predictive relationship of attachment styles with emotional regulation strategies.

## RESULTS

*Table 1*

*Table showing descriptive statistics of demographic characteristics of the Sample (N=411)*

Variables	N	%		
<b>Gender</b>				
Male	214	52%		
Female	197	47%		
<b>Mean age</b>				
	16 years			
<b>Education</b>				
Matriculation	104	25%		
Intermediate	307	75%		
<b>Family System</b>				
Nuclear	246	59%		
Joint	126	30%		
Extended	33	8 %		
<b>Socioeconomic Status</b>				
Upper	35	8.5%		
Middle	364	88.5 %		
Lower	10	2.5%		
<b>Educational qualification of parents</b>				
	Mother's education	Father's Education		
Primary	25	6%	03	1%
Middle	15	4%	11	3%
Matric	56	13.5%	29	7%
Inter	103	25%	63	15.5%
Graduation	130	31%	150	36.5%
Master	62	15%	113	27.5%
MPhil	3	1%	11	2.5%
PhD	2	0.5%	15	3.5%
No formal education	15	4%	15	3.5%

**Table 2**

*Table showing descriptive statistics of scores of the participants on variables of attachment styles and emotional regulation strategies*

Variables	M	S D	min	max
Secure	25.32	5.47	8	39
Fearful	12.70	3.75	3	20
Preoccupied	18.21	4.39	7	30
Dismissing	13.15	3.76	2	24
Reappraisal	27.57	7.58	8	46
Suppression	17.37	5.78	4	36

**Table 3**

*Table showing summary of regression analysis for different attachment styles predicting emotional regulation strategy of cognitive reappraisal in adolescents.*

Predictor	R	R <sup>2</sup>	Adj.R <sup>2</sup>	df	F	P
Secure Attachment Style	.367	.135	.133	409	63.78	.000
Preoccupied attachment style	.009	.000	-.002	409	.03	.859
Fearful attachment style	.007	.000	-.002	409	.01	.894
Dismissing attachment style	0.33	.001	-.001	409	.434	.510

*n=411, P<.01\**

**Table 4**

*Summary of Coefficient of linear regression analysis of Attachment Styles as predictors of Cognitive Reappraisal in adolescents*

Model	<i>Unstand. Coeff.</i>	<i>Stand. Coeff.</i>	<i>T</i>	<i>P.</i>
(Constant)	<b><i>B</i></b> 13.223	<b><i>SE</i></b> 1.366	<b><i>β</i></b>	20.820 .000
Secure	.509	.064	.367	0.79 .000
Fearful	-.013	.100	-.007	-.133 .894
Preoccupied	-.015	.085	-.009	-.178 .859
Dismissing	-.066	.100	-.033	-.659 .510

a. Dependent Variable: cognitive reappraisal, P<.000  
\*  
*P*<.05 \*Linear regression analysis showed significant and positive predictive impact on cognitive reappraisal of adolescents, causing 13.5 % of variation.

**Table 5**

*Table showing summary of regression analysis for different Attachment styles predicting Emotional Regulation Strategy of Expressive Suppression in adolescents.*

<i>Predictor</i>	<i>R</i>	<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	<i>Adj.R</i> <sup>2</sup>	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>P</i>
Secure attachment style	.162	.026	.024	409	11.05	.001
Preoccupied attachment style	.202	.041	.038	409	17.41	.000
Fearful	.383	.147	.145	409	70.26	.000

attachment style

Dismissing attachment style	.317	.101	.098	409	45.74	.000
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*n=411, P<.000 \**

**Table 6**

*Summary of Coefficient of linear regression analysis of Attachment styles as predictors of Expressive Suppression in adolescents*

Model	Unstand.Coeff.		Stand.Coeff.	T	P.
	B	SE	$\beta$		
(Constant)	12.400	2.720		4.559	.000
Secure	-.171	.052	-.162	-3.32	.001
Fearful	.590	.070	.383	.838	.000
Preoccupie d	.266	.064	.202	.417	.000
Dismissing	.488	.072	.317	6.76	.000

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a. Dependent Variable: Expressive Suppression, *P<.000 \**

Linear regression analysis showed that 4% of changes in expressive suppression are caused by preoccupied attachment style, 14.7 % changes are

caused by fearful attachment style and 10 % changes are attributed to dismissing attachment style. In this model, the preoccupied attachment style and dismissing attachment style had significant and positive predictive impact on expressive suppression as an emotional regulation strategy. Secure Attachment style found to have a negative predictive impact on expressive suppression

## **DISCUSSION**

The finding of the present study indicates that adolescents with secure attachment style use cognitive reappraisal to regulate their emotion which is a healthy coping strategy. In contrast, having fearful, preoccupied and dismissing attachment styles predispose an adolescent to use expressive suppression to cope with strong emotions. Expressive suppression helps in reducing the emotion but it is an unhealthy way of dealing with emotions than can contribute to emotional difficulties later in life. Attachment style of an individual is one of the most important factor which effects an individual's growth, interactions and decisions in the family (Bowlby, 1980; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Various kind of behavioural and emotional management is also predicted in an individual and it is evident from researches that secure attachment style positively correlates with problem solving skills, optimistic self-image and higher emotional awareness (Thompson & Gullone, 2008). It is also associated with improved anger controlling mechanisms (Gilliom, Shaw, Beck, Schonberg, & Lukon, 2002), enhanced stress coping skills (Contreras, Kerns, Weimer, Gentzler, & Tomich, 2000) and they are less likely to have internalizing and externalizing behaviour issues (Brumariu & Kerns, 2010).

Thus, the hypothetical view of research is supported through these findings which states that in time of stress parental responsiveness lead towards secure attachment results in improved emotion management skills because negative emotions can be handled due to presence of a responsive caregiver (Cassidy, 1994; Kiel & Kalomiris, 2015).

Children who are securely attached tend to show less negative emotions and an inclination towards more positive emotions. These findings are consistent with a research done on children which showed that securely attached children reported more positive emotions before an attachment assessment, and their mood overall appeared to be more positive and less negative (Abraham & Kerns, 2013) securely attached children adopt more adaptive emotion regulation

strategies such as coping through seeking support or problem solving (Psouni & Apetroaia, 2014).

Current researches have reported that experiences of early years of life determine attachment styles, which have a great role in regulating emotions during life concerning relationships with others (Kerns, Abraham, Schlegelmilch, & Morgan, 2007). Children are reliant on caregiver to calm them when their emotional balance gets disturbed. The child and caregiver have a two way communication which helps the caregiver to understand and meet the need of child. The Rejection Sensitivity theory states that Humans are strongly affected by the opinion and feedback from others (Feldman & Downey, 1994). Mischel studied Bowlby's Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1969) and merged it with Michel's Cognitive Social Learning Perspective (Mischel, 1973). They explained that early childhood experiences of rejection shapes the way how a person will interpret, understand and assess social situations in life and their reaction afterwards. They stated that people who have multiple past experiences of rejection can easily observe social rejection cues and their expectation forms about being repeatedly rejected. In order to save themselves from rejection they start avoiding situations or require reassurance from others that they won't be rejected in future. To describe the characteristic traits of anxiously assuming, perceiving and overreacting to perceived rejection, they have specified the term as 'rejection sensitivity'.

Downey, Khouri and Feldman (1997) proposed that neglect or maltreatment by caregiver and the dismissal of basic needs can strengthen the assumption of rejection in future interactions. The sensitivity of rejection triggers cognitive mechanisms of self-blaming and emotional reactions of feeling angry or depressed, further leading towards aggression, passivity and submissive attitude. These responses in which an individual expects rejection from others can also instigate actual rejection by others through the process of self-fulfilling prophecy.

Higher levels of rejection sensitivity is linked with higher levels of hostility and insecurity in close relationships (Purdie & Downey, 2000), deficits in emotion regulation strategies (Silvers, McRae, Gabrieli, Gross, Remy, & Ochsner, 2012) and hostile communications (Ayduk, Gyurak & Luerssen, 2008). Moreover, rejection sensitivity is linked with higher levels of neuroticism (Downey et al., 1997).

A research precisely studied the difference between antecedent and response focused emotion regulation strategies and established that both of these strategies were useful in reducing the expression of emotions. The antecedent focused strategies (cognitive reappraisal) were better at reducing the experience of emotions while response focused strategies (expressive suppression) only modifies physiological variations. This study indicates that although both strategies work, both serve different purpose. Hence when we particularly talk about the adolescents who have insecure attachment patterns, they use response focused strategies to lower their experience of emotions (Paul, Simon, Kniesche, Kathmann & Endrass, 2013).

In addition, parent's secure attachment may consider children's feelings and their causes accurately providing effective support and guidance. They may also discuss with children about their feelings and experiences in a supportive way and assist them in considering useful strategies to manage their emotions (Psouni & Apetroaia, 2014). Hence, the factors linked with attachment security may promote emotion regulation in children in many ways. Individuals who are flexible and have the ability to accept and integrate positive as well as negative emotion have secure attachment patterns; on the other hand, individuals characterized by either restricted or exaggerated negative emotions are more likely to be having insecure attachment patterns. Denham, Bassett and Wyatt (2007) found that when parents showed positive parenting approaches, such as supporting the children's negative emotions, this related to higher levels emotion regulation in their interactions with peers.

One noteworthy finding of the study shows that, in all four attachment styles, the preoccupied attachment style has weak association with expressive suppression as well as with cognitive reappraisal showing that adolescents with preoccupied attachment did not employ these emotional regulation strategies. The reason may be that children with a preoccupied attachment style show themselves to be very calm and composed but internally they are distressed. Studies on psychophysiology on these individuals show elevated heartbeat and stress hormone (Spangler & Grossmann, 1993). With time the child with preoccupied attachment style learns to control and suppress their distress but they are unable to find appropriate solution to their problem. So they try to over regulate their emotions and appear emotionally numb. As these child needs are not met, they gradually learn to live their life as they don't have any needs and actively control them.

### ***Conclusion***

The collective results of the present study display that different attachment styles exert different effects on coping strategies of adolescents. Insecure preoccupied, fearful and dismissing attachment styles have a role in increasing maladaptive coping strategies and secure attachment style has a role in decreasing maladaptive coping strategies.

In the light of these findings, it is evident that attachment styles create an impact on individual's emotional handling strategies; therefore by spreading awareness about the importance of early attachment and its impact on later in life, there are chances to improve well-being of adolescents in the longer run. Insecure attachment depicted to be major contributing factor towards expressive suppression and by working on improving parenting strategies, there is a potential to cultivate healthy emotional handling strategies in children and give them an appropriate shield of resilience against emotional disturbances and mental health issues. These findings can also benefit mental health professionals to develop appropriate prevention based training programs for parents that could facilitate them in adoption of healthy attachment styles with their children, These findings would also facilitate professionals in effective treatment planning of patients suffering from mental illness having a history of childhood neglect and early traumatic experiences and how it impacted their coping on emotional level.

### ***Limitations and Recommendations***

The research data focused majorly on self-report measures that depicts an individual's perceived self-image in terms of attachment relationships, however if the data involved information from parents and caregivers as well, it might have generated more meaningful finding regarding attachment and its impacts on emotional regulation strategies of adolescents. In addition, attachment develops through the interaction of several factors, hence for future prospects it is recommended to control socio-demographic characteristics of the sample to get significant and rich information in terms of understanding of link between attachment styles and emotion coping strategies. The equal representation of all social classes would be advantageous as it has a profound influence on the personality development of children.

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