

## HOW DOES THE MOTHER-CHILD BOND REFLECT IN ADULT ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS? AN INDIAN PERSPECTIVE

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**Paper Received On:** 25 FEBRUARY 2023

**Peer Reviewed On:** 28 FEBRUARY 2023

**Published On:** 01 MARCH 2023

### Abstract

*Early attachment history with the attachment figure has been linked to the attachment style used in adulthood especially in romantic relationships. The present study aimed to investigate the role of parenting styles of mothers and mother-child attachment security in the development of attachment styles and how these attachment styles work as prototypes in adulthood impacting romantic relationships. The sample consisted of young Indian participants (n=157) with an equal number of males and females ranging from ages 18-25. An online survey form was distributed consisting of three tools- Parental Authority Questionnaire, on mothers (PAQ; Buri, 1991), Experiences in Close Relationships - Revised Questionnaire (ECR; Fraley, Waller & Brennan 2000), and Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment (IPPA; Armsden and Greenberg, 1987). The results revealed a significant negative association between insecure attachment styles (anxious and avoidant) and authoritative parenting style as well as mother-child attachment security and a significant positive correlation with authoritarian parenting style.*

**Keywords:** *authoritative, authoritarian, permissive, mother-child attachment, anxious-attachment, avoidant-attachment, gender*



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### Introduction

Human beings are said to be unique in the characteristics they own, however, the innate strong desire for love and nurturance from the attachment figures remains the same for everyone. Every child, in early childhood, needs their mothers for physical & psychological needs to survive. Consequently, they indulge in certain behaviours, triggered by survival instincts. Similarly, in adulthood, the attachment figure changes from the parent to the romantic partner, and thus, for the survival of the romantic relationship and healthy life the individual requires

the love and support of their romantic partner. A multitude of research studies has found that the attachment style formed in early childhood is more likely to be carried into adulthood.

*Parenting Styles:* Diana Baumrind's theory of parenting styles is based on two dimensions: responsiveness and demandingness. These include authoritative (high on responsiveness & demandingness), authoritarian (low on responsiveness & high on demandingness), and permissive (high on responsiveness & low on demandingness) parenting styles. There is a significant association between the parenting styles and their influence on their children's behavior & psychology (Baumrind, 1967; 1971).

Early studies suggest that the authoritative parenting style is the optimal style among others as they are responsive to the needs of their child making them less sensitive to rejection (Du, 2020), is affectionate, warm, encourage psychological autonomy, and exercise reasonable parental control (Hong and Park, 2012; Karavasilis, 2003). Moreover, children develop higher self-esteem & can self-regulate distressing emotions using active coping strategies (e.g. problem-solving) unlike children of authoritarian parents who have low self-esteem & resort to passive coping strategies such as avoiding the stressor or withdrawing (Anwer, 2017; Hong and Park, 2012; Wolfradt, 2003).

*Attachment Theory and Internal Working Models:* Bowlby (1973) proposed the attachment theory stating that the relationship between the infant and the mother (primary caregiver) plays a significant role in the development of the infant's internal working models of self and others, and emotional regulation.

This attachment behavior is common to every infant, however, the attachment figure's behavior, especially the mother's response to the calls and demands of the infant determines the type of attachment style. The mother-child attachment is healthy when the mother provides a secure base from which the child can explore the environment knowing s/he can seek comfort when needed and the mother is going to be available. On the contrary, if attachment security is absent where the mother is unavailable for the needs of the child then there is a likelihood of developing an unhealthy attachment style. This attachment pattern formed in childhood works as a prototype for future relationships (Bowlby, 1973; Collins & Read, 1990; Griffith, 2004; Hazan & Shaver, 1987).

*Attachment Styles and Mother-Child Attachment Security:* The early infant-parent (mother) relationship was studied by Mary Ainsworth in 1969 (Ainsworth, 1978; Karen, 1998) whose famous Baltimore Lab study helped discover three distinct attachment patterns based on

the human babies' (aged 12 months) reactions to their mother's separation and reunion, namely- secure, anxious and avoidant.

## **Methodology**

### *1.1. Sample*

The sample was selected based on a convenient sampling method. This consists of 157 Indian participants between the ages of 18-25 who either were currently studying or had just completed their education in the same year the study was conducted. The inclusion criteria consisted that the participants were unmarried, had been in a romantic relationship at least once in the last 3 years, and lasted for at least 6 months.

### *1.2. Tools used*

The sample was collected by using an online survey method. The following questionnaires were used to collect the data:

#### *1. Demographic questionnaire*

Demographic information such as name, age, gender, educational qualification, and current city & state of residence was collected using a questionnaire containing.

#### *2. Parenting Styles*

Parenting styles of mothers were measured using Parenting Authority Questionnaire (PAQ; Buri,1991). It measures Baumrind's (1971) three parenting prototypes with 10 questions for each on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). The PAQ produces authoritarian, permissive, and authoritative scores for the parent. Test-retest reliability for mother's permissiveness (0.81), authoritarianism (0.86), and authoritativeness (0.78). Internal consistency reliability (Cronbach's alpha coefficient) for Mother's permissiveness was 0.75, authoritarianism 0.85, and authoritativeness 0.82.

#### *3. The mother-child attachment security*

It was measured using the Inventory of parent & Peer Attachment (IPPA; Armsden & Greenberg, 1987) where only parent attachment was measured to assess individuals' perceptions of the positive and negative affective/cognitive dimension of relationships with their parents. Three broad dimensions are assessed: degree of mutual trust; quality of communication; and extent of anger and alienation on a 5 point Likert scale (1=Almost never or Never true to 5= Almost always or Always true). The original version consists of 28 items for parents, yielding two attachment scores. Test-retest reliability is 0.93 for parent attachment.

#### 4. Attachment style

It was measured using the *Revised Experiences in Close Relationships- Revised Questionnaire (ECR-R; Fraley, Waller, and Brennan, 2000)*. ECR was developed to measure levels of relationship anxiety and/or avoidance experienced by individuals in romantic relationships. The ECR consists of 36 items producing a score for attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance. Items are rated on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree), where higher scores reflect a higher prevalence of attachment anxiety or attachment avoidance. Internal consistency reliability (Cronbach’s alpha) is 0.90.

#### 1.3. Procedure

A Google survey form consisting of all the mentioned standardized questionnaires was distributed to participants by employing the convenient and snowball sampling method. The first page of the survey form was the consent form consisting of some basic details of the researcher and the study without revealing the actual purpose of the research. Then, the nature of participation, confidentiality, and contact information of the researcher was mentioned. Each questionnaire had standardized instructions to be followed along with that they were also informed that there were no right or wrong answers and that their honest answers were the requirement of this study. Once the form had been submitted, they were thanked for their patience and participation.

#### 1.4. Data Analysis

The SPSS (Version 36.1) was employed for all the statistical analyses. After preliminary analyses for checking outliers, descriptive statistics were computed for demographic variables, predictor, and outcomes variables. An independent t-test was run to check for gender differences. Further, Pearson’s Product Moment Correlation analysis was run among all the variables. Lastly, stepwise regression analyses were computed using parenting styles and mother-child attachment security (and its subscales) as predictors of attachment styles.

### Results

**Table 1.1: Descriptive Statistics for Demographics**

Variable	Mean	Median	Standard Deviation	Skewness
Age	21.83	22.00	1.948	-.093
Gender	1.50	1.50	.502	.000
Education Background	2.28	2.00	.717	.056

City & State	3.38	1.00	5.341	2.571
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The descriptive statistics for demographic variables have been summarized in Table 1.1. In Table 1.2. the mean and median of all the predictor and outcome variables were fairly close to each other with their respective standard deviations. Among parenting styles authoritative parenting has the highest mean ( $M=35.90$ ,  $SD=5.90$ ) followed by permissive parenting style ( $M=32.16$ ,  $SD=5.37$ ) and the lowest is authoritarian parenting style ( $M=29.85$ ,  $SD=7.65$ ). The subscale Trust has the highest mean ( $M=38.54$ ,  $SD=7.26$ ) followed by Communication ( $M=33.57$ ,  $SD=7.69$ ) and the lowest is Alienation ( $M=21.72$ ,  $SD=6.86$ ). Among the attachment styles, the anxious-attachment style has the highest mean ( $M=65.86$ ,  $SD=18.36$ ) and the avoidant-attachment style has the lowest mean ( $M=59.26$ ,  $SD=16.25$ ). Overall, among all the variables the mother-child attachment scale as a whole has the highest mean ( $M=98.40$ ,  $SD=19.01$ ).

The skewness for all the predictor and outcome variables was between -0.5 to 0.5 indicating that the data for all variables was fairly symmetrical.

Males have slightly higher means for Permissive ( $M=32.83$ ) and authoritative ( $M=36.01$ ) parenting styles, whereas females have a slightly higher mean ( $M=30.38$ ) for the authoritarian parenting style.

For the mother-child attachment variable, and its Trust subscale it is observed that males have

a higher mean ( $M=101.14$  and  $M=39.71$ , respectively) compared to females ( $M=95.65$  and  $M=37.38$ , respectively), and on the alienation, subscale females have a higher mean ( $M=23.17$ ) than males ( $M=20.27$ ). However, on the communication subscale, both females and males have almost similar means ( $M=33.44$  and  $M=33.71$ , respectively).

Females have higher means of anxious-attachment style ( $M=66.81$ ) and avoidant-attachment style ( $M=59.27$ ) compared to males ( $M= 64.91$  and  $M= 59.24$ , respectively).

**Table 1.2: Descriptive Statistics for predictor & outcome variables**

Variable	Mean	Median	Standard Deviation	Skewness
<b>Permissive parenting style</b>	32.16		5.377	
Female	31.49	33.00	5.754	-0.197
Male	32.83		4.916	
<b>Authoritarian parenting style</b>	29.85		7.651	
Female	30.38	30.00	8.065	0.039
Male	29.31		7.226	
<b>Authoritative Parenting Style</b>	35.90		5.907	
Female	35.78	36.00	6.373	-0.248
Male	36.01		5.440	
<b>Mother-Child Attachment</b>	98.40		19.01	
Female	95.65	99.00	20.329	-0.223
Male	101.14		17.296	
<b>Trust</b>	38.54		7.263	
Female	37.38	39.00	7.496	-0.516
Male	39.71		6.876	
<b>Communication</b>	33.57		7.691	
Female	33.44	34.00	8.442	-0.134
Male	33.71		6.912	
<b>Alienation</b>	21.72		6.869	
Female	23.17	21.00	6.974	0.341
Male	20.27		6.488	
<b>Anxious-Attachment Style</b>	65.86		18.365	
Female	66.81	69.00	19.197	-0.225
Male	64.91		17.567	
<b>Avoidant-Attachment Style</b>	59.26		16.258	
Female	59.27	58.00	17.212	-0.080
Male	59.24		15.357	

**Table 2: Pearson’s Product Moment correlation**

Variable	PERM	ATR	ATT	MCA	Trust	COMM	ALN	ANX	AVO
<b>Permissive</b>	1.00								
<b>Authoritarian</b>	-0.154	1.00							
<b>Authoritative</b>	0.565**	-0.329**	1.00						
<b>MCA</b>	0.426**	-0.513**	0.585**	1.00					
<b>Trust</b>	0.503**	-0.475**	0.629**	0.903**	1.00				
<b>Communication</b>	0.417**	-0.380**	0.544**	0.889**	0.747**	1.00			
<b>Alienation</b>	-0.180*	0.491**	-0.346**	-0.817**	-0.607**	-0.553**	1.00		
<b>Anxious</b>	-0.037	0.326**	-0.312**	-0.367**	-0.297**	-0.240**	0.434**	1.00	
<b>Avoidant</b>	-0.204*	0.252**	-0.374**	-0.398**	-0.311**	-0.295**	0.443**	0.704**	1.00

**\*\*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)**

**\*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)**

**PERM= Permissive parenting style, ATR=Authoritarian parenting style, ATT= Authoritative parenting style, MCA= Mother-child attachment, Comm=Communication, ALN= Alienation, ANX=anxious-attachment style, AVO=avoidant-attachment style**

Pearson’s Correlation was computed, after checking for the normality assumption, to check for significant relationships between the variables and to check for the general hypotheses (Table 2).

According to the results obtained, there is a negative correlation between Permissive parenting style and insecure attachment styles [(anxious-attachment style  $\rho = -0.037$ , n.s.) and (avoidant-attachment style  $\rho = -0.204$ ,  $p < 0.05$ )]; and positive correlation between Authoritarian parenting style and insecure attachment styles [(anxious-attachment style  $\rho = 0.326$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) and (avoidant-attachment style  $\rho = 0.252$ ,  $p < 0.01$ )].

Furthermore, significant negative correlation was found between Authoritative parenting style and insecure attachment styles [(anxious-attachment style  $\rho=-0.312$ ,  $p<0.01$ ) and (avoidant-attachment style  $\rho= -0.374$ ,  $p<0.01$ )].

There is a significant negative correlation found between Mother-child attachment and insecure attachment styles [(anxious-attachment style  $\rho=-0.367$ ,  $p<0.01$ ) and (avoidant-attachment style  $\rho=-0.398$ ,  $p<0.01$ )] as well as between trust subscale and insecure attachment styles [(anxious-attachment style  $\rho=-0.297$ ,  $p<0.01$ ) and (avoidant-attachment style  $\rho=-0.311$ ,  $p<0.01$ )] and communication subscale [(anxious-attachment style  $\rho=-0.240$ ,  $p<0.01$ ) and (avoidant-attachment style  $\rho=-0.295$ ,  $p<0.01$ )]. On the contrary, a significant positive correlation has been found between alienation subscale and insecure attachment styles [(anxious-attachment style  $\rho=0.434$ ,  $p<0.01$ ) and (avoidant-attachment style  $\rho=0.443$ ,  $p<0.01$ )].

Thus, this analysis provided evidence to support the general hypothesis as well as the first two (completely) and the third hypothesis (partially) out of the three specific hypotheses

**.Table 3.1: Stepwise multiple regression analysis (Anxious-Attachment style)**

Model	R	R square	Adjusted R Square	Change Statistics R Square Change
1	0.434	0.189	0.183	0.189
2	0.467	0.218	0.208	0.030
3	0.494	0.244	0.229	0.026

**a. Predictors: (Constant), Alienation**

**b. Predictors: (Constant), Alienation, Authoritative parenting style**

**c. Predictors: (Constant), Alienation, Authoritative parenting style, Permissive parenting style**

The above data indicates the predictor variables- Alienation, Authoritative parenting style, and permissive parenting style, as significant predictors of anxious-attachment style (criterion variable). In all the seven variables only these three variables were upheld as significant predictors.

Furthermore, multiple correlations for alienation, authoritative and permissive parenting styles are  $R=0.434$ ,  $R=0.467$ , and  $R=0.494$  respectively. R square which represents the contribution of the Predictor variable to the criterion variable is also seen here. Here, we have considered the R square change that is the actual contribution of the predictor variable to the criterion variable. Hence the real covariance of the magnitude of the

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independent variable which contributed to the dependent variable (anxious-attachment style) came out as 18.9% for alienation, for authoritative parenting style it is 21.8% and for permissive parenting style it is 24.4%

**Table 3.2: Details of coefficients**

Model	Unstandardized coefficient		Standardized coefficient	t	Sig	Correlation Partial
	B	Std. Error	Beta			
3						
(Constant)	55.956	11.453		4.886	<0.001	
Alienation	0.982	0.201	0.367	4.887	<0.001	0.368
Authoritative	-0.919	0.279	0.296	-3.298	0.001	-0.258
Permissive	0.671	0.292	0.196	2.296	0.023	0.183

**Dependent variable: anxious-attachment style**

The above data illustrates that alienation, authoritative and permissive parenting styles (Predictors) influence anxiety (criterion). The statistical values of t given in the table are alienation (t=4.887), while for authoritative parenting style (t= -3.298) and for permissive parenting style (t=2.296), which indicates that all three t values are significant for the above-mentioned predictors providing enough evidence for the relationship between predictors and the criterion variable (anxious-attachment style). The correlation partial for alienation is r=0.368, for authoritative parenting style it is r= -0.258 and for permissive parenting style, it is r=0.183 thus indicating that these variables significantly influence the degree of anxiety.

**Table 4.1: Stepwise multiple regression analysis (Avoidant-Attachment style)**

Model	R	R square	Adjusted R Square	Change Statistics R Square Change
1	0.443	0.196	0.191	0.196
2	0.502	0.252	0.242	0.056

**a. Predictors: (Constant), Alienation**

**b. Predictors: (Constant), Alienation, Authoritative parenting style**

The above data indicates the predictor variables- Alienation and Authoritative parenting style, as significant predictors of avoidant-attachment style (criterion variable). In all the seven variables only these two variables were upheld as significant predictors.

Furthermore, multiple correlations for alienation and authoritative parenting style are  $R=0.443$  and  $R=0.502$  respectively. R square which represents the contribution of the predictor variable to the criterion variable is also seen here. Here, we have considered the R square change that is the actual contribution of the predictor variable to the criterion variable. Hence, the real covariance of the magnitude of the independent variable which contributed to the dependent variable (avoidant-attachment style) came out as 19.6% for alienation, and for authoritative parenting style it is 25.2%

**Table 4.2: Shows details of coefficients**

Model	Unstandardized coefficient		Standardized coefficient	t	Sig	Correlation Partial
	B	Std. Error	Beta			
2 (Constant)	106.239	7.306		14.541	0.000	
Alienation	-0.843	0.176	-0.356	-4.782	0.000	-0.443
Authoritative	-0.691	0.205	-0.251	-3.371	0.001	-0.374

**Dependent variable: avoidant-attachment style**

The data indicate that alienation and authoritative parenting style (Predictors) influence avoidance (criterion variable). The statistical values of t are - alienation ( $t=-4.782$ ), and for authoritative parenting style ( $t= -3.371$ ), which indicates that both the t values are significant for the above-mentioned predictors providing enough evidence for the relationship between predictors and the criterion variable (avoidant-attachment style). The correlation partial for alienation is  $r= -0.443$ , and for authoritative parenting style is  $r= -0.374$  thus indicating that these variables significantly influence the degree of avoidance.

**Discussion**

*1. Influence on Romantic relationships*

The stepwise regression analysis has shown that absence of alienation, and authoritative parenting, and the presence of permissive parenting were factors predictive of the presence of anxious-attachment style while the absence of both alienation and authoritative parenting was predictive of avoidant-attachment style in adult romantic relationships. These findings provide  
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evidence in concurring with previous research (Del, 2012; Millings et al., 2013) that individuals who do not have a healthy relationship with parents and have negative internal working models of self and/or others tend to have anxiety and be avoidant in their romantic relationships.

Avoidantly attached individuals, known characteristically for being emotionally distant from attachment figures and having fear of intimacy, are uncomfortable in romantic relationships which demand expressions of love, affection, and healthy communication especially when their partners need their support (Millings et al.,2013). Therefore, a child who has constantly conditioned himself/herself to suppress strong emotions, not trust attachment figures and resort to passive coping strategies to avoid feeling the frequent negative emotions (eg. fear of abandonment) is likely to use the same strategies in their adulthood with their romantic partners unless a life-changing event takes place or use psychological interventions (Doiniata et al.,2015).

## 2. *Gender differences*

Another notable finding is that, in this sample, the majority of females receive more authoritarian parenting, while the majority of males enjoy permissive as well as authoritative parenting styles which are relatively better forms of parenting styles than the nonoptimal authoritarian parenting style. Firstly, the reason can be that India still harbors patriarchy where females are confined to strict rules and codes of conduct while boys are allowed more freedom, less supervision as they are valued than females, which allows them better treatment (Nkosi & Daniels, 2007; Kausar and Shafique, 2008).

Consequently, they develop insecure attachment styles which hamper their romantic relationships.

### *Limitations*

response bias, as the survey was online and there was no one to monitor the participants.

### *Future research prospects*

India is home to diverse cultures which can at times be conflicting. It is necessary to investigate them to understand their role in the development of attachment styles. Future studies need to also focus on the father's parenting style, as studies show a correlation between the parents' behavior and how the differences influence the child. Moreover, parental influence is just as integral as past experiences when planning therapeutic intervention for young adults,

thus necessitating more similar studies. Parents need to be explained how their influence can affect their children's romantic lives. This will make them monitor their behavior and make a difference in the child's life.

Furthermore, it is recommended that future researchers consider other factors that possibly influence the parent-child relationship such as the parent's/family's background such as socioeconomic status, parents age, educational level, or any history of mental illness or substance abuse, and more.

Moreover, the current study might contribute to the awareness of the fact that there is a need to provide education to caregivers even before they become parents so that they can have enough time to work on themselves and try to employ a secure attachment style from early childhood.

### *Conclusion*

The previous literature and the present findings suggest that there is a considerable amount of overlap of both the attachment style and the felt security, in the romantic and parental realms in adulthood. Individuals who have had a healthy bond with their mothers since early childhood are more likely to have a strong bond with their romantic partners in adulthood.

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