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From Parental Bonds to Couple Coping: The Mediating Role of Adult Attachment Styles

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the relationship between Parental bonding and Dyadic coping with adult attachment styles acting as a mediator. It particularly observed how the type of parental bonding; high in either care or overprotection, shapes the attachment style of individuals leading to either secure or insecure, which in turn affects the collaborative coping efforts of couples in the face of adverse situations in their lives. The study implements a cross-sectional, correlational survey design utilizing a sample of 300 individuals aged 18 to 40 years (M=122, F=178), who were selected through purposive sampling technique. Standardized measures, including Parental Bonding Instrument (PBI), Dyadic Coping Inventory (DCI), and Experiences in Close Relationships - Short Form (ECR-S), were used to measure the variables. Results depicted that adult attachment styles significantly mediated the relationship between parental bonding and dyadic coping ($p < 0.01$). Both parental care ($B = 0.2414$, 95% CI [0.1563, 0.3330]) and parental overprotection ($B = -0.2405$,

95% CI [-0.3303, -0.1565]) exerted significant indirect effects on dyadic coping through attachment, suggesting full mediation. Hence, the results of the study underscore the importance of providing positive childhood attachment and suggest that promoting secure attachment and positive parenting can enhance relationship coping in adulthood through the development of secure attachment styles.

Keywords: Parental Bonding, Dyadic Coping, Adult Attachment Styles, Parental Care, Parental Overprotection, Secure Attachment, Insecure Attachment.

INTRODUCTION

Every individual maintains relationships with other people that are an important part of their life. These relationships have a significant impact on an individual's life which is either favorable or adverse and directly determines their personal wellbeing and life satisfaction. Attachment, a concept rooted in early childhood experiences, forms the basis for future interpersonal interactions. From an evolutionary perspective, cultivating and maintaining strong relationships is essential for forming secure attachments. These attachments formed by an individual's early experiences of contact with their primary caregivers, result in better interpersonal connections, making an individual feel safe and valued thus satisfying their core “need to belong” that fuels all human behavior. However, despite this intrinsic need to belong, love, and relationships are rarely perfect or free from challenges. How individuals cope with interpersonal problems often traces back to attachment styles, which are shaped by early life experiences, particularly the quality of parental bonding.

Parental bonds are the determinant in a child's life of the kind of experiences the child encounters and their emotional capability to cope with those experiences. According to Parker et al. (1979) the parents' contribution to the relationship between parents and children is termed as parental bonding and is evaluated by the Parental Bonding Instrument (PBI). The parental bond is shaped by the parental care provided to the infants and this emotionally significant bond later determines the nature of interpersonal relationships an individual acquires in life. Parental bonding encompasses two dimensions namely parental care and overprotection (Parker, 1994). Parental bonding proves to be beneficial for the child's emotional growth if provided appropriately by maintaining a balance between the levels of care and overprotection. However, it can also have damaging consequences for the child's development disrupting their emotional growth and impairing their future coping tendency and interpersonal relationships if imbalanced parental bonding is provided.

The behaviors of parents that are rooted in care, acceptance or acts of love such as being attentive, emotionally available and encouraging to the child are categorized as parental support or care. (Felson and Zeilsinski, 1989). Parental care has favorable outcomes for the child boosting their emotional growth and self-sufficiency. In contrast, parental control or overprotection is marked by parent's harsh enforcement of rules and regulations and strictly disciplining the child that has differing effects on children determined by the types of parental control

exhibited. (Barber et al., 2005). Parental control can have damaging effects on child's self-esteem, their capability to provide for oneself and their ability to make decisions in the face of adversity. As per Bosmans et al., 2006, since the earliest relational bond to form is the Parental bond, it sets the precedent for the attachment patterns for all the relationships to come during the course of a child's life. This primes their capacity to navigate the trials and conflicts later in relationships, acts as a predictor of their future relationship satisfaction and provides a child with the necessary support to develop and grow.

Adult attachment, as per Berman and Sperling, 1994, is the individual tendency to actively look for and uphold attachment through objects that provide solidity and security through physical and psychological means. They argued that the attachment system is active throughout life and follows the same pattern in adulthood as that of infant attachments; however, newer life experiences might be able to alter these attachment styles. Attachment styles also play a pivotal role in aiding adolescent development (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Bowlby, 1969). They are the deciding factor of the types of experiences an individual acquires and how open they are to versatile experiences. Individuals with healthy attachment patterns will persist in the face of difficulties and will figure out a way of dealing with it using problem focused strategies, whereas, individuals with insecure attachment styles will employ unhealthy ways of coping.

Attachment styles are categorized into 4 main categories based on how an individual copes with internal and external stressors in cooperation with another. These categories include secure attachment styles and insecure attachment styles. Insecure attachment styles include anxious-ambivalent attachment, avoidant attachment style, and disorganized attachment style (Bowlby, 1969). An ample amount of research resulted in these attachment styles being categorized under two main dimensions of insecurity which are attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance. (Mikulincer, Shaver, & Pereg, 2009).

A person that is on the avoidance dimension prefers to be more self-reliant, has trouble depending on partners and seeks emotional independence. However, a person in the second dimension, attachment related anxiety, seeks close proximity and protection of their partner, are concerned about their partner availability and focus on measuring one's own value to their partner. Individuals that score low on both dimensions are concluded to have a secure attachment style who have trust in their partners, find comfort in their closeness and interdependence, and employ constructive ways to cope with stressors. Individuals who attain high scores on either of the dimensions or both are said to have insecure attachment style. These individuals then employ secondary attachment strategies, where they either hyper-activate or deactivate their attachment system when faced with stressors (Mikulincer, Perez & Shaver, 2009).

The joint efforts made by partners as a response towards dealing with stressful situations in a relationship is termed as Dyadic coping. (Guy Bodenmann, 1995). These efforts encompass but are not limited to timely and transparent

communication about struggles, providing support when your partner is struggling and joint initiative to work on issues. Individuals possessing stable interpersonal relationships are more likely to experience optimal levels of wellbeing; both physical and psychological. (Reis, 1984). As per Guy Bodenmann, an individual's romantic partner's mental state and outlook retains the capability to influence them as well through the process of stress spillover which dictates the interpersonal climate. This means that your partner's stress will also affect you and vice versa. This is why the mechanism of collective stress leads to collective coping efforts made by partners resulting in shared problem solving or joint regulation of emotions.

Individuals with experiences of timely and attentive care develop the ability to mutually solve problems and engage in dyadic coping (Bodenmann, 1997; Mukilincer and Shaver, 2007). Thus, individuals who are recipients of love and care in their early childhood have higher levels of confidence and a strong sense of self that facilitates them later in life and aids in adjusting to various social situations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This study investigated the intrapersonal and interpersonal links of attachment and how it determines the level of satisfaction an individual has in their relationship. It was found that individuals had a higher chance of experiencing relationship satisfaction if they exhibited a secure attachment style, and for men, this satisfaction extended to their partners' as well. The results demonstrated that adults' representation of their childhood experiences that are shaped by early attachment to caregivers play an integral role in using their partners as a source of comfort and in turn also providing them with comfort. The study also investigated any mediational factors in this link, which is dyadic coping. Results uncovered that collaborative joint coping of partners serves as a mediator in this link. (Wendołowska, Stec & Czyżowska, 2022).

Another study conducted on Parental Bonding and its link with attachment patterns of adults' in the context of different cultural backgrounds using a sample of adults from Spanish, Japanese and Italian populations employing standardized measures of Experiences in Close Relationships scale (ECRS) and the Parental Bonding Instrument (PBI), using a cross-sectional and multi-cultural comparative design on a population of three hundred five participants from the respective three countries. Results disclosed the Spaniards and Italian to have preoccupied insecure attachment styles whereas the Japanese population displayed the dismissing avoidant style more frequently. (Hoenicka et al., 2022).

This study explores the level of trust individuals' have in their partner shaped by their attachment patterns, their experiences with parental divorce and their personal experiences and perception of intimate relationships. This dynamic was examined in a sample of 131 Turkish undergraduate university students and targeted their orientation of horizontal collectivism that implies interdependent functioning in a community where all individuals are viewed equal in status. This sample was tested with questions pertaining to the individuals own relationship status as well as

their parents', employing the measures of the Dyadic Trust Scale (DTS), Experiences in Close Relationships Inventory-Revised (ECR-R), and Inventory of Close Relationship Beliefs (ICRB). Outcomes demonstrated anxious attachment style to be influencing trust in a relationship through relationship beliefs whereas, avoidant attachment style was found to primarily influence trust in a relationship, as well have a weaker impact through relationship beliefs (Yilmaz, Lajunen & Sullman, 2023).

This research sought to investigate the relation between the early caregiving experiences of an individual, the adaptive coping strategies they employ and their patterns of attachment in adulthood, particularly targeting the defenses linked with insecure attachment styles. This relationship was tested in a sample of 238 university students, by obtaining data through standardized questionnaires which were the Response Evaluation Measure-71, the Attachment Style Questionnaire, and the Measure of Parenting Style. Results concluded that immature defenses were rooted in non-secure attachment patterns and specific defenses were tied to specific insecure attachment patterns. On the other hand, the role of mature coping strategies was found to be secondary since they only contributed to predicting secure or stable attachment patterns (Prunas et al., 2019).

Research Objective

To examine the mediating role of adult attachment styles in the relationship between parental bonding and dyadic coping.

Research Question

Do adult attachment styles mediate the relationship between parental bonding and dyadic coping?

Research Hypothesis

Adult Attachment Styles will mediate the relationship between Dyadic Coping and Parental Bonding; (a) Parental Care (b) Parental Overprotection.

1a. Adult Attachment Styles will mediate the relationship between Parental Care and Dyadic Coping.

1b. Adult attachment styles will mediate the relationship between Parental Overprotection and Dyadic Coping.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

A quantitative correlational research design with a cross-sectional framework was employed to investigate the relationship among variables. Participant selection procedure was conducted by utilizing the purposive sampling technique.

Population and Sample

A sample of 300 people was recruited for this study, who were required to be of 18 years minimum and 40 years maximum. In addition they were required to be part of a romantic relationship either married, engaged, or dating. In terms of gender distribution, about 40% of the respondents were male, while 60% were female.

Research Measures

1. Parental Bonding Instrument (PBI)

This 25-item self-report scale assesses parental behavior during the first 16 years of life (Parker, 1994). It comprises two subscales: Care and Overprotection, scored using a 4-point Likert scale. Higher scores on each subscale reflects more care or more overprotection. The scale demonstrates strong internal consistency that is 0.88 for care and 0.74 for overprotection and test-retest reliability; however, a satisfactory construct and convergent validity were shown.

2. Dyadic Coping Inventory (DCI)

DCI is a 37-item scale with a self-report format measuring coping behaviors in both individual and joint contexts in relationships (Bodenmann, 2008). It encompasses supportive, delegated, negative, as well as joint coping styles. Responses are rated on a 5-point Likert scale. This scale has high internal consistency ($\alpha = .71-.92$) with cross-cultural reliability and shows convergent and divergent validity too.

3. Experiences in Close Relationship Scale-Short Form (ECR-S)

This 12-item self-report questionnaire measures for attachment styles with two subscales that evaluate attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance. (Wei et al, 2007). The responses were rated on a 7-point Likert scale (1=Strongly Disagree, 7=Strongly Agree). The long and short versions of ECR-S showed high internal consistency and construct validity. (Wei et al. 2007), (Brennan et al. 1998).

Procedure & Ethical Considerations

The study utilized a cross-sectional correlational design. Purposive and convenience sampling was used to acquire participants. Participants were debriefed about the study and written informed consent was acquired after which they completed the demographic forms and the three scales. Confidentiality was guaranteed and participants had the right to withdraw at any given stage without any repercussions. No deception was done, participants were debriefed about the study and necessary steps were taken to avoid all psychological and physical harm to the participants.

RESULTS OF STUDY

Table 1

Frequency and Percentages of Demographic Variable (N=300)

Variables	<i>F</i>	%	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Age	-	-	2.373	.6234
18-24	211	70.3		
25-30	66	22.0		
31-35	23	7.7		
Gender	-	-	1.593	.4920
Male	122	40.7		
Female	178	59.3		
Relationship Status	-	-	1.927	.9004
Committed	133	44.3		

Engaged	56	18.7		
Married	111	37.0		
Duration	-	-	2.000	.0000
less than 6 months	0	00		
6 months and above	300	100		
Socio-economic Status	-	-	3.127	1.2092
Low Income	36	12.0		
Lower Middle	50	16.7		
Middle Income	98	32.7		
Upper Middle	72	24.0		
High Income	44	14.7		
Education Level	-	-	3.130	.5664
Matric/O'Levels	0	00		
Inter/A Levels	31	10.3		
Undergraduate	199	66.3		
Postgraduate	70	23.3		
Employment	-	-	1.517	.5006
Yes	145155	48.3		
No		51.7		
Diagnosis			2.000	.0000
Yes	00	.00		
No	300	100		

Table 2 (a)

Mediation Analysis showing the impact of Parental Care dimension of Parental bonding on Dyadic Coping with mediation by Adult Attachment Styles.

Predictor (X)	Path	β	SE	<i>T</i>	<i>P</i>	95% CI	
						<i>LL</i>	<i>UL</i>
Care	a (Care → ECRS)	- 0.248	0.044	- 5.65	<.001	-0.335	-0.162
	b (ECRS → DCI)	- 0.973	0.104	- 9.37	<.001	-1.177	-0.768
	c' Direct effect (Care → ECRS → DCI)	0.106	0.083	1.28	.202	-0.057	0.268

Indirect effect (Care→ DCI)	0.241	0.045	-	-	0.156	0.333
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Note. β =Standardized beta, SE=Standardized Error, CI=Confidence Interval, LL=Lower limit, UL= Upper limit, ECRS=Adult Attachment Styles Scale, DCI=Dyadic Coping Inventory

Table 2(a) shows mediating role of adult attachment in the relationship between parental care and dyadic coping, a mediation analysis was conducted using PROCESS Model 4 (Hayes, 2017). Results indicated that parental care significantly predicted adult attachment style (ECRS), $B = -0.2481$, $SE = 0.0439$, $t = -5.6535$, $p < .001$, such that greater care was associated with more secure attachment.

Attachment insecurity, in contrast, significantly predicted dyadic coping, $B = -0.9727$, $SE = 0.1038$, $t = -9.3713$, $p < .001$. However, the direct effect of parental care on dyadic coping was not significant when accounting for attachment, $B = 0.1057$, $SE = 0.0826$, $t = 1.28$, $p = .202$, suggesting that the influence of care on dyadic coping occurred through the mediator. The indirect effect of parental care on dyadic coping through attachment was significant, $B = 0.2414$, 95% CI [0.1563, 0.3330], indicating that adult attachment fully mediated the relationship between parental care and dyadic coping.

Table 2 (b)

Mediation Analysis showing the impact of Parental Overprotection dimension of Parental bonding on dyadic coping with mediation by adult attachment styles.

Predictor (X)	Path	B	SE	t	P	95% CI	
						LL	UL
Overprotection (OP)	a (OP→ ECRS)	-0.248	0.044	-5.65	.000	-0.334	-0.162
	b (ECRS→ DCI)	-0.973	0.104	-9.37	.000	-1.177	-0.768
	c' Direct effect (OP→ ECRS →DCI)	0.106	0.083	1.28	.202	-0.057	0.268
	Indirect effect (OP→ DCI)	0.241	0.045	-	-	0.156	0.333

Note. β =Standardized beta, SE=Standardized Error, CI=Confidence Interval, LL=Lower limit, UL= Upper limit, ECRS=Adult Attachment Styles Scale, DCI=Dyadic Coping Inventory

Table 2(b) shows a second mediation analysis examined whether Adult Attachment mediated the relationship between Parental Overprotection and Dyadic Coping. Parental overprotection significantly predicted higher attachment insecurity, $B = 0.2485$, $SE = 0.0435$, $t = 5.7130$, $p < .001$.

Attachment insecurity again significantly predicted lower Dyadic Coping, $B = -0.9676$, $SE = 0.1036$, $t = -9.3403$, $p < .001$. The direct effect of Overprotection on Dyadic Coping was not statistically significant when controlling for Attachment, $B = -0.1054$, $SE = 0.0826$, $t = -1.2764$, $p = .203$. However, the indirect effect of Overprotection on Dyadic Coping via Attachment was significant, $B = -0.2405$, 95% CI $[-0.3303, -0.1565]$, suggesting full mediation.

DISCUSSION

The present study was conducted in order to examine the role of adult attachment styles as a mediator between parental bonding and the joint coping efforts made by partners i.e. dyadic coping. It was predicted that adult attachment styles would mediate the relationship between Parental bonding and Dyadic coping, such that both the dimensions of Parental bonding, Parental care and Parental overprotection will be mediated by adult attachment styles in relation with dyadic coping. The research by Singh & Simon, 2025 supports these findings, while Parental bonding did not have any direct effects on the coping capacities of adults, secure attachment style was found to significantly mediate the relationship between early caregiving experiences of individuals' and their coping capacities later in life.

In accordance with the hypothesis 1(a) individuals who were recipients of higher parental care, the first sub-dimension of parental bonding, were more likely to form a secure attachment style which facilitated dyadic coping. Thus, results affirmed that Adult attachment style was a significant mediating factor in the relationship between Parental care and Dyadic coping. Prior research by (Calvo et al., 2015) supports this hypothesis, which found out that individuals experiencing stressful transition together i.e. a pre-adoptive phase, those with positive early caregiving experiences revolving around higher Parental care exhibited having greater attachment security leading to better dyadic adjustment and thus navigating the challenges better. In another research, higher levels of Parental care resulted in formation of secure Adult attachment patterns which in turn led to higher levels of satisfaction individuals experienced in their relationships, thus confirming the mediating role of adult attachment styles (Osteen, S. R., 1999). Moreover, experiences of higher maternal care predicted lower anxious attachment in individuals that in turn predicted greater romantic intimacy in adult relationships (Akbay & Gündoğdu, 2021). In a cross cultural study utilizing Japanese, Spanish and Italian participants, the Spanish participants who reported lower avoidance in attachment styles had experienced higher levels of maternal care in childhood and thus reported better current relationship functioning (Hoenicka et al., 2022).

Secondly, individuals reporting higher parental overprotection, the second

sub-dimension of parental bonding exhibited lower attachment security which in turn diminished the dyadic coping. Results also confirmed hypothesis 1(b) which posits that Adult attachment style is a significant mediator between Parental overprotection and the collaborative efforts made by couples in intimate relationships. These findings are in line with prior literature emphasizing on how early caregiving experiences high in overprotective behaviors shape adult attachment insecurity which eventually influences relational dynamics specifically higher levels of Parental overprotection results in formation of insecure Adult attachment patterns which leads to lower levels of satisfaction individuals experience in their relationships, confirming the mediating role of adult attachment styles (Osteen, S. R., 1999). Overparenting leads to development of insecure attachment in emerging adults with their parents as well as romantic partners which leads to these individuals either delaying marriage or not getting married at all (Jiao et al., 2021).

These findings are also supported by prior cross cultural research on Japanese, Italian and Spanish populations by (Hoenicka et al., 2022), which discovered that in the Japanese sample a strong recollection of experiences of maternal and paternal overprotective behaviors was linked with elevated levels of attachment avoidance that was a predictor of less closeness in adult intimate relationships. Another research by (Arya, 2023) also supports this hypothesis, where romantic attachment styles of individuals rooted in either insecurity or security depending on their childhood trauma, determined their level of satisfaction experienced in their intimate relationship.

CONCLUSION

This study confirms that adult attachment styles significantly mediate the relationship between parental bonding and dyadic coping in adult intimate relationships. Parental bonding rooted in higher levels of care and lower levels of overprotection ensured the development of a secure attachment style which results in increased collaborative coping efforts made by partners or better dyadic coping. Hence the results of the study underscore the importance of providing positive childhood attachment and suggest that promoting secure attachment and positive parenting can enhance relationship coping in adulthood through the development of secure attachment styles.

Limitations & Recommendations

Various limitations were encountered during the course of the study. Pertaining to the questionnaire, the length of the questionnaire was a major limitation as it impacted the respondent investment and their response quality. The respondents' emotional state while completing the form, the lack of sample diversity due to respondents being from a single city and reduced generalizability due to missing age groups were also few of the major limitations.

To further improve this research in the future, researchers should simplify data collection tools to reduce participant fatigue and increase response accuracy.

More diverse samples across different regions and age groups should be considered to improve the study's generalizability and representativeness. Stratified sampling and mixed-method approaches, like qualitative interviews, can be employed to gain more understanding and obtain better insights. The findings of this research can provide guidance for therapeutic interventions, improve interpersonal relationships, and help develop parental training programs.

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