

Gender Differences in the Association between Attachment Style and Adulthood Relationship Satisfaction

**DR JOHN BARRY
MARTIN SEAGER
BELINDA BROWN**



In general, the quality of the caregiver-child attachment formed in early childhood will influence the quality of relationships in adulthood. Our survey of 217 adults aimed to assess to what extent relationship satisfaction in adults is accounted for by attachment style. After controlling for demographic variables, we found that an increase in attachment problems predicted a reduction in adulthood relationship satisfaction. The effect of attachment on adulthood relationships was stronger in women than men for avoidant attachment ($\beta = -5.67$, $p < .00000005$, and $\beta = -4.60$, p

$<.001$ respectively), and weaker for women than men for anxious attachment ($\beta = -2.21, p < .05$, and $\beta = -4.33, p < .01$ respectively). Implications for child rearing and adult therapy are discussed.

Keywords: attachment, gender, males, females, satisfaction in relationships

INTRODUCTION

An attachment (1,2) is an emotional bond which forms in humans and other mammalian species from birth, usually between infants and adults, and develops through interaction with a primary caregiver. Seager (2014) states that “A human being’s first non-verbal attachment experiences lay down the first pattern or blueprint of ‘self in relation to other’ onto which subsequent language-based experience must be mapped and through which subsequent relationships are interpreted” (3, Seager 2014, p.215). The emotional bond that develops between adult romantic partners is influenced by the type of attachment developed in early childhood. (4) A *secure childhood attachment* is likely if a person describes their adult relationship in something like the following terms:

“I find it relatively easy to get close to others and am comfortable depending on them and having them depend on me. I don’t often worry about being abandoned or about someone getting too close to me”. An *ambivalent attachment*, which corresponds to the ‘anxious attachment’ (5)(described below), is likely if the adult’s attitude is:

“I find that others are reluctant to get as close as I would like. I often worry that my partner doesn’t really love me or won’t want to stay with me. I want to merge completely with another person, and this desire sometimes scares people away”. The *avoidant attachment* style is suggested by the attitude:

“I am somewhat uncomfortable being close to others; I find it difficult to trust them completely, difficult to allow myself to depend on them. I am nervous when anyone gets too close, and often, love partners want me to be more intimate than I feel comfortable being”.

A person’s attachment style is of clinical importance because attachment difficulties are associated with difficulties in later life. For example, some previous research suggests that avoidant attachment contributes to psychological and behavioural problems, such as antisocial behaviour (6) and poorer coping with stressful life events. (7)

Some studies have found sex differences in how childhood attachment is related to later behavior. For example, insecure attachments led to externalizing behavior in girls more than boys. (8) Despite the fact that such sex differences are of potential importance to theory and clinical practice, many studies do not analyse data on attachment separately by sex. Thus, the aims of the present study were to:

- 1/ Assess the association between adult relationships and attachment style,
- 2/ Identify sex differences in such association, and
- 3/ Assess the degree to which attachment is related to psychological functioning

Method

The design was a cross-sectional online survey, analysed using multiple linear regression.

Participants

Between June 2013 and September 2014, 140 women and 77 men, mean (+ SD) age 32.5 (+ 11.5) completed an online survey. Participants were recruited via two general psychology websites (Psychology on The Net and Online Psychology Research) and, to help the recruitment of male participants, two male-focused sites (Men's Health Forum and Mensmindsmatter). Participants were excluded if they: did not provide key information (health behaviour, marital status etc.), were under 18, or did not complete the consent form.

Materials

Relationship quality

The Relationship Assessment Scale (RAS) (9) is a seven-item measure. It includes items such as 'How well does your partner meet your needs?', 'How satisfied are you with your relationship?' and 'To what extent has your relationship met your original expectations?' Higher scores represent more satisfaction with the relationship.

Attachment style

Avoidant and anxious attachment styles were measured using The Relationship Structures (ECR-RS) questionnaire, (5) a nine-item scale based on Hazan & Shaver's work.(4) In the ECR-RS, *Anxious Attachment* (which corresponds to Hazan & Shaver's description of *ambivalent attachment*, above) is described by three items: 'I often worry that this person doesn't really care for me', 'I'm afraid that this person may abandon me', and 'I worry that this person won't care about me as much as I care about him or her'. *Avoidant Attachment* is described by six items: 'It helps to turn to this person in times of need', 'I usually discuss my problems and concerns with this person', 'I talk things over with this person', 'I find it easy to depend on this person', 'I don't feel comfortable opening up to this person', 'I prefer not to show this person how I feel deep down'. Higher scores on the scales indicate more problems with attachment.

Psychological well-being

This was measured using the Positive Mindset Index (PMI).(10) This scale measures how positively a person is thinking currently, and consists of six items: happiness, confidence, being in control, emotional stability, motivation and optimism. Higher scores represent a more positive mindset.

Neuroticism

This was measured using the EPQ-R-Short Neuroticism items,(11) with higher scores representing more neuroticism.

Aggression

This was measured using the short version of the Aggression Questionnaire.(12) Higher scores indicate more aggression.

Attitudes Towards Women's Equality

Attitudes Towards Women Scale – Short version.(13) This is a 25-item scale which measures attitudes towards women's roles in society. Responses are on a four-point Likert scale from 'agree strongly' to 'disagree strongly'. Higher scores indicate more gender egalitarian views.

Alcohol problems

Problem alcohol use was measured using The Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test (AUDIT): Self-Report Version.(14) This is a 10-item questionnaire designed to detect early signs of harmful drinking behaviour. Items include 'How often do you have a drink containing alcohol?' and 'Have you or someone else been injured as a result of your drinking?' Items are scored on five point scale e.g. from 'Never' to 'Daily or almost daily'.

Demographic variables

Age, educational level, relationship status (married, cohabiting etc).

Procedure

An invitation to participate in the survey was posted on the four websites. Participants filled in the questionnaires after completing the information sheet and consent sections of the survey. The trial recruited between June 2013 and Sept 2014. Ethical approval was granted by the Research Ethics Committee.

Statistics

Background variables were analysed using χ^2 and *t*-tests. Data for the main hypotheses were analysed with multiple linear regression, using the enter method. The criterion variable was Relationship Satisfaction, and the predictors were: demographic variables (age, relationship status, educational achievement) psychological variables (Neuroticism, alcohol problems, PMI, and Aggression, Attitudes to Women Scale) and attachment style (Avoidant attachment and Anxious attachment style). The sample size required, based on guidelines in Tabachnick and Fidell (15) was 50+8m (50+(8*10)) thus 130 participants were required for multiple linear regression. The threshold for significance was $p < .05$, and all significance values are two tailed. Data were analysed using SPSS statistical software, Version 22.

Results

After 16 participants who had never been in an adult romantic relationship were excluded, 140 women and 77 men were entered into the analysis.

Table 1 shows the background variables for men and women. There were no differences in educational achievement. There were significant differences between women and men for age and marital status - in this sample, men were older and more likely to be married than the women. In order to control for the sex difference in age and marital status, these variables were entered into the multiple regression model.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and comparison by gender for background characteristics. Values are shown as mean (SD) or frequency (percentage) as appropriate.

		Men (N = 77)	Women (N = 140)	Test statistic
Age		37.161 (14.11)	28.95 (9.76)	3.922 ^{a****}
Educational Achievement	Doctorate	2 (3%)	6 (4%)	
	Masters	14 (19%)	29 (21%)	
	Bachelor / college	40 (53%)	61 (44%)	2.463 ^b
	Secondary / high school	19 (25%)	43 (31%)	
	Primary school	0 (0%)	1 (1%)	
Relationship Status	Married	36 (47%)	32 (30%)	13.184 ^{***}
	Divorced	3 (4%)	5 (4%)	0.150
	Cohabiting	10 (13%)	24 (17%)	0.649
	Not-cohabiting with partner	5 (7%)	19 (14%)	2.530
	Currently single	25 (33%)	60 (43%)	2.250

* P<.05, ** P<.01, *** P<.001, **** P<.0001 (two tailed).

^a Independent groups *t*-test with 'equal variances not assumed' correction used

^b χ^2 with Fisher's Exact Test correction for cells with expected count of less than 5

Table 2 shows the descriptive statistics and comparison by gender for the variables in the model of the predictors of Relationship Assessment.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics and comparison by gender (using independent t-tests) for the influence of the predictors of Relationship Assessment. Values are show as mean (SD).

	Men	Women	t value
Relationship assessment	4.38 (0.81)	4.33 (0.78)	0.449
Avoidant attachment	3.59 (0.81)	3.33 (0.89)	2.056*
Anxious attachment	2.38 (1.13)	2.36 (1.12)	0.102
Positive mindset	3.23 (0.81)	3.40 (0.80)	-1.363
Neuroticism	5.45 (3.35)	6.17 (3.60)	-1.386
Aggression	22.80 (8.51)	22.51 (8.27)	0.864
Attitude to Women	3.33 (0.44)	3.44 (0.42)	-1.598
Alcohol	7.2 (5.30)	5.16 (4.69)	2.724**

* $P < .05$, ** $P < .01$ (two tailed).

^a 'Equal variances not assumed' correction used

Multiple linear regression

Collinearity statistics in the model were within acceptable limits (Field 2005), with the maximum VIF at 2.35 and the minimum tolerance level at 0.558. The regression models performed significantly better than chance for men ($F(8, 40) = 6.276, p < .00005$) and women ($F(8, 90) = 15.998, p < .000000000000005$). For men, the overall regression model was a moderate predictor of the amount of variation in Relationship Assessment scoring (Adjusted R Square = 46.8%) and for women it was a strong predictor (Adjusted R Square = 54.9%). Table 3 shows that for women, greater relationship satisfaction was predicted by having a less avoidant attachment style ($\beta = -5.67, p < .00000005$) and a less anxious attachment style ($\beta = -2.21, p < .05$). For men, greater relationship satisfaction was predicted by having a less avoidant attachment style ($\beta = -4.60, p < .001$) and a less anxious attachment style ($\beta = -4.33, p < .01$). None of the other predictors were significant.

Table 3. Predictors of Relationship Assessment in men and women.

Variable	Men			Women		
	B	SE B	β	B	SE B	β
Avoidant attachment	-.437	.120	-.460***	-.497	.084	-.567*****
Anxious attachment	-.299	.114	-.433**	-.153	.070	-.221*
Age	-.009	.008	-.150	-.009	.008	-.116
Marital status	.044	.219	.029	.098	.178	.056
Positive mind	-.180	.153	-.190	.017	.110	.018
Neuroticism	-.002	.029	-.008	-.003	.024	-.014
Aggression	-.011	.011	-.124	-.009	.009	-.102
Attitudes to women	.049	.207	.029	-.015	.178	-.008
Alcohol	-.008	.015	-.062	-.007	.015	-.039

* $P < .05$, ** $P < .01$, *** $P < .001$, **** $P < .0001$, ***** $P < .000001$ (two tailed).

To test the hypothesis that attachment is related to psychological functioning, four further models were run. These models were the same as that in Table 3, but in each case replacing the original outcome variable (relationship assessment) with a psychological variable (previously a predictor), and keeping all other predictors in place. Thus the psychological variables (positive mindset, neuroticism, aggression, and risky drinking behavior) each in turn became an outcome variable in each model. The main findings from these models are in Tables 4a and 4b.

Table 4a. Predictors of positive mindset (PMI) in men and women. Only significant predictors are shown.

Variable	Men			Women		
	B	SE B	β	B	SE B	β
Anxious attachment	-.403	.106	-.559***	-	-	-
Marital status	-.485	.209	-.301*	-	-	-
Neuroticism	-.096	.028	-.398**	-.113	.024	-.509****

* $P < .05$, ** $P < .01$, *** $P < .001$, **** $P < .0001$ (two tailed).

Table 4a shows that men had a less positive mindset if they had a more anxious attachment style, if they were married, or if they were more neurotic. Women had a less positive mindset if they were more neurotic.

Table 4b. Predictors of neuroticism in men and women. Only significant predictors are shown.

Variable	Men			Women		
	B	SE B	β	B	SE B	β
Positive mind	-2.539	.745	-.613**	-2.333	.504	-.517****
Aggression	-	-	-	.095	.046	.219*
Alcohol	-	-	-	.151	.075	.196*

* $P < .05$, ** $P < .01$, *** $P < .001$, **** $P < .0001$ (two tailed).

Table 4b shows that men were more neurotic when they had a less positive mindset. Women were more neurotic when they had a less positive mindset, when they engaged in more risky drinking behaviour, and when they were more aggressive.

Increased aggression was predicted only by increased neuroticism, and only in women ($\beta = 0.306$, $p < .05$). Increased risky drinking was predicted only by increased neuroticism, and only in women ($\beta = 0.323$, $p < .05$). For women, being unmarried ($\beta = 0.209$, $p = .054$) and believing more in gender equality ($\beta = -0.204$, $p = .058$) were borderline significantly related to a less positive mindset.

DISCUSSION

The main finding of this survey was that, after controlling for other variables, greater relationship satisfaction was predicted by having fewer problems in attachment style. For avoidant attachment, the effect was stronger in women than men ($\beta = -5.67$, $p < .00000005$, and $\beta = -4.60$, $p < .001$ respectively), and for anxious attachment the effect was weaker for women than men ($\beta = -2.21$, $p < .05$, and $\beta = -4.33$, $p < .01$ respectively). It appears therefore that avoidant attachment has a much bigger impact ($\beta = -5.67$ versus $\beta = -2.21$) on relationship satisfaction for women than anxious attachment does, but for men anxious attachment and avoidant attachment have about the same degree of impact on relationship satisfaction.

Comparison with previous research

Some previous research suggests that avoidant attachment contributes to poorer psychological functioning, for example, antisocial behaviour (6) and poorer coping with stressful life events.(7) The only link between attachment and psychological functioning in the present study was that a more anxious attachment predicted a less positive mindset, and in men only. No link between attachment style was found for neuroticism, aggression, or risking drinking behavior.

Usually previous research has combined outcomes for men and women. Combining men and women runs the risk of obscuring potentially important gender differences and our study was therefore designed to look for the possibility of gender differences. Table 2 shows that men scored

significantly higher on avoidant attachment style, and Table 3 shows differences between men and women regarding the association between attachment style and relationship satisfaction. Tables 4a and 4b present further examples.

Interpreting the avoidant attachment findings

One way of interpreting the smaller beta value for avoidant attachment in men compared to women is that men find it less important than women to feel emotionally close to their partner. For example, women find it more important in a relationship to be able to share their feelings with their partner. However the sex difference in the size of the beta value is not large, so we should not over-emphasise this difference.

Interpreting the anxious attachment findings

One way of interpreting the larger beta value for anxious attachment in men compared to women is that men find it more important than women to feel cared for by their partner. For example, men find it more important in a relationship to feel that their partner won't abandon them. The beta value for the influence of anxious attachment is twice as big in men compared to women, thus we should take an interest in this finding.

Implications for child rearing

Sensitivity in child rearing is important in creating secure attachments. For example, avoidant attachment is said to result from separation from the mother.(16,17) The findings of the present study suggest that there are long-term implications for avoidant attachment, and they apply roughly equally to both sexes. On the other hand, regarding anxious attachment the findings of the present study suggest that the long-term effect of a child feeling that their primary care giver doesn't care very much about them is worse for boys than girls, because boys seem more likely to grow up to have more concerns that their wife or partner doesn't care about them. It might be useful to emphasise these findings in parenting classes and books on parenting, to advise parents on ways to help their children to form secure attachments.

Implications for adult therapy

Relationship problems in adulthood can be reduced by addressing problems with childhood attachment styles.(18) In a longitudinal study recruiting from daycare centers it was found that the schema that most clearly persisted from age six to age 21 was abandonment.(19) Because abandonment is a feature of anxious attachment, this might be significant to the present study, especially for men, whose adult relationships may have been damaged by childhood attachment problems.

Limitations of this study

Given the retrospective and self-reported nature of the data on attachment style, we cannot say for certain that the reported attachment style truly reflects the quality of the childhood bond. Also, the mean age and marital status were significantly different for men and women, such that the male sample was older and more likely to be married than the female sample. Although the effect of these differences on the link between attachment style and relationship assessment would have been minimised or eliminated by the use of linear regression, a more comparable sample would be preferable.

The sample size analysis indicated that the ideal number for regression in each sample should be 130 for each group. Although the sample size was sufficient to power the statistical tests used for

the female sample (n=140), it was underpowered for the male sample (n=77). Although this will have reduced the statistical significance of the strength of the correlation between the predictors and Relationship Satisfaction, the beta coefficients will have been relatively unaffected. Given that the non-significant beta values (Table 3) for men were all below 2.0, they are unlikely to have become significant even had the sample size been 140. Therefore the suboptimal sample size is unlikely to have affected the findings of this study, though future studies are advised to recruit a larger sample.

Conclusion

The present study aimed to assess how much relationship satisfaction in adults is accounted for by attachment style. The strongest predictor of better relationship satisfaction was a less avoidant attachment style, and it was an especially strong predictor in women. It is also interesting that anxious attachment was a stronger predictor of relationship satisfaction in men than in women. These results reinforce the importance of attachment in the field of mental health and demonstrate the value of analysing gender differences in understanding and promoting the health of adult relationships.

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John Barry, PhD, MSc, BA, Chartered Psychologist and Honorary Research Associate at UCL Medical School, London. Since 2010 John has published some 30 peer-reviewed papers on psychological aspects of gender and health, is a founder and organizer of the Male Psychology Conference at UCL, a campaigner for a Male Psychology Section of the British Psychology Society, and a founding member of the Gender Equity Network.



Martin Seager is a consultant clinical psychologist and an adult psychotherapist. He is a clinician, lecturer, author, campaigner, broadcaster and activist on mental health and male gender issues. He worked in the NHS for over 30 years and was head of psychological services in two large mental health Trusts. He had a regular monthly mental health slot on BBC Radio Essex (2003-2007) and BBC Radio Five Live (2007-2009). He has been an honorary consultant psychologist with the Central London Samaritans since 2006. He is a founding member of the London-based Men's Mental Health Research Team. He is also a member of the Mental Health Advisory Board of the College of Medicine.



Belinda Brown is an honorary researcher at University College London (UCL), Fellow of the Young Foundation, and writes on family and gender issues

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