

Parental Attachment and Emotional Regulation in Young Adults: A Quantitative Correlational Study

Muhammed Rashid TA

M.Sc. Psychology (Counselling Psychology), Centre for Distance and Online Education, JAIN (Deemed-to-be University), Bengaluru, India
Email: [rashita14\[at\]gmail.com](mailto:rashita14[at]gmail.com)

Abstract: *Parental relationships remain an important aspect of psychological functioning throughout our lives. However, little research has been carried out examining their relationship with emotional regulation in non-clinical populations. This study aimed to investigate the relationship between perceived parental attachment and emotional regulation in young adults using a quantitative non-experimental correlational design. An online questionnaire consisting of sociodemographics and 30 Likert scale statements, 15 statements relating to parental attachment (1-15) and 15 statements relating to emotional regulation (16-30) was completed. From the sample of 102 responses exported, 1 case did not give consent and so were removed from analysis, giving a total of 101 complete cases. Reverse scoring was applied to negatively worded statements. Mean scores for parental attachment were 51.83 (SD = 12.15). Mean scores for emotional regulation were 49.42 (SD = 8.41). Internal reliability for parental attachment was high with a Cronbach's alpha score of .877. Internal reliability for emotional regulation was acceptable with a score of .767. There was a significant positive association between parental attachment and emotional regulation ($r(99) = .511$, 95% CI [.35, .64], $p < .001$). Approximately, 26% of variance appeared to be shared between the two variables. Young adults with higher levels of perceived parental attachment (closeness, trust and open communication) reported higher levels of emotional regulation. As this study used a correlational design, this represents an association rather than a causal relationship. Overall, the findings provide evidence to take a relational approach and consider individuals within their context in counselling psychology.*

Keywords: Parental attachment, emotional regulation, young adults, counselling psychology, correlational study

1. Introduction

Young adulthood (approx. 18-40 years) is a time of increased independence, self-identity and exposure to stressful events related to education, career and relationships. Emotional regulation plays an important role in determining how well young adults cope. This involves self-monitoring, appraisal, modification and expression of emotions to adapt to situations. According to the Process Model of Emotional Regulation (Gross), regulation strategies fall into antecedent focused strategies (e.g. cognitive reappraisal) or response focused strategies (e.g. expressive suppression) [1]. Adaptive emotional regulation does not mean completely avoiding negative emotions, but being able to identify strong emotions, think clearly under pressure and control impulsive behaviours whilst still maintaining goals. This is an interpersonal process. The attachment theory suggests that due to frequent interaction with primary caregivers, internal working models form. These are long-term beliefs about whether we are deserving of care and whether others are available and responsive [2, 3]. Sensitive and responsive caregiving provides a secure working model, meaning individuals can express distress and regulate emotions. Inconsistent and unresponsive caregiving leads to hyperactivating/deactivating strategies [2, 3]. It is thought these working models remain throughout life. When considering young adults, parental attachment can be perceived without physical proximity. They feel they can trust their parents, there is open communication, acceptance and confidence they can rely on them as a secure base. This study aimed to see if there is a significant association between perceived parental attachment and emotional regulation in young adults.

2. Literature Survey

Attachment Theory suggests differences in caregiver sensitivity influence secure and insecure attachment [2, 3]. Emotional Regulation according to the Process Model involves different strategies at different stages in the generation of emotions [1]. Both approaches suggest that early caregiving provides external regulation which becomes internalised over time. Secure working models make flexible strategies such as reappraisal more readily available. Evidence from children and adolescents show secure attachment provides a basis for adaptive regulation [4]. A review concluded that anxious and avoidant patterns were associated with suppression [4]. A meta-analysis of 72 studies found secure attachment predicted higher emotional understanding and lower dysregulation [5]. Studies have also been carried out with college students and emerging adults. Parental attachment predicted variance in emotional regulation independent of peer and romantic influences in a sample of 170 students from Portugal [6]. Secure parental attachment predicted better adjustment via adaptive regulation in a sample of 942 freshmen [7]. Alienation was associated with dysfunctional coping. A sample of 352 emerging adults from Hong Kong showed parental intimacy predicted higher levels of reappraisal and parental conflict predicted higher suppression [8].

Longitudinal studies and reviews show emotional regulation can have long lasting effects. Infant attachment predicted prefrontal amygdala connectivity during regulation 22 years later [9]. Secure attachment was associated with better recovery from stress [10]. A review of 37 studies found a consistent association between secure representations and adaptive emotional processing [11]. Recent studies have shown emotional regulation acts as a mediator between secure attachment and wellbeing [12]. High parental care predicted

reappraisal whilst cold/overprotective parenting predicted suppression [13]. Anxious/insecure attachment predicted higher regulation difficulties [14-16]. Parental regulation was associated with secure attachment in offspring [17]. Non-clinical young adults showed attachment dimensions predicted preference for reappraisal and suppression [15]. Overall, it is expected that higher levels of perceived parental attachment will be associated with higher levels of self-

reported emotional regulation. As this is a correlational study, this would indicate an association between the variables. Table 1 below summarises the studies reviewed. Overall, findings are consistent across western and Asian samples. However, emotional regulation may be expressed differently depending on cultural factors. In collectivist cultures, emotional regulation may be highly valued to maintain harmony.

Table 1: Summary of Studies

Study Sample/Design	Main Finding
Brumariu [4]	Review (Children & Adolescents) Secure attachment promotes adaptive regulation. Insecure attachment associated with suppression
Cooke et al. [5]	Meta-analysis (72 studies) Secure attachment predicts higher emotional understanding and lower dysregulation
Ávila et al. [6]	170 Students (Portugal) Parental attachment predicted variance in regulation independent of romantic/peer influences
Cabral et al. [7]	942 Freshmen (SEM) Attachment predicted better adjustment via adaptive regulation. Alienation associated with dysfunctional coping
Cheung et al. [8]	352 Emerging Adults (Hong Kong) Parental intimacy predicted higher reappraisal. Parental conflict predicted higher suppression
Moutsiana et al. [9]	Longitudinal study (22 years) fMRI attachment in infants predicted prefrontal amygdala connectivity during regulation in adulthood.
Obeldobel et al. [10]	Systematic review Secure attachment associated with better recovery from stress.
Eilert & Buchheim [11]	Review (37 studies, 2,006 participants) Consistent association between secure representations and adaptive processing.
Mota et al. [12]	Path Analysis (2,258 young adults) Regulation acted as a mediator between attachment and wellbeing/symptoms.
Sombuling [13]	105 Young Adults (Malaysia) High care and low overprotection predicted reappraisal.
Unterrainer et al. [15]	299 Non-clinical young adults Secure dimensions predicted reappraisal. Insecure dimensions predicted suppression
Mortazavizadeh & Forstmeier [16]	Systematic review Insecure attachment in adults predicted regulation difficulties
Vernon & Moretti [17]	Parents & Youth Parental regulation associated with secure attachment in offspring

3. Problem Statement

Much of the foundational work surrounding attachment and emotion regulation has centred around infant, child or adolescent populations. Where adult populations are used, it often focuses on romantic or peer attachment, with parent-child attachment being a secondary factor. Many studies have used clinical or specific institutional samples. There is limited research examining perceived parent attachment and overall emotional regulation capacity, within a non-clinical young adult population. This study aimed to address the following issue: Is there a significant relationship between perceived parent attachment and emotional regulation?

This study aimed to: (i) measure perceived parent attachment using a standardised self-report questionnaire, (ii) measure perceived emotional regulation, and (iii) measure the direction and strength of the relationship between variables. The hypotheses were H0 - There is no significant relationship between perceived parent attachment and emotional regulation in young adults and H1 - There is a significant relationship between perceived parent attachment and emotional regulation.

4. Method

4.1 Design and Participants

A quantitative non-experimental cross-sectional correlational design was used. The study did not manipulate any variables. Participants were recruited from an online student population

using a non-probability sample. The export contained 102 responses. One response was removed as the participant had not consented. This left a final sample of 101 complete responses from participants who had consented. Participants were included if they had consented (yes), were within the age ranges provided and completed all 30 items.

4.2 Procedure

A three-part online questionnaire was used. Part A gathered socio-demographic information. Part B contained 15 items relating to perceived parent attachment (items 1-15). Items 11-15 contained negative wording. Part C contained 15 items relating to emotional regulation (items 16-30). Items 26-30 contain negative wording. All items were measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1= strongly disagree, 5= strongly agree). This measure has not been validated.

4.3 Data Collection and Analysis

Items containing negative wording (items 11-15 and 26-30) were reversed scored (1=5, 2=4, 3=3, 4=2, 5=1). This means higher scores represent higher levels of the constructs. Parental attachment was calculated by adding the scores from items 1-15 (range 15-75) and emotional regulation was calculated by adding the scores from items 16-30 (range 15-75). The data was analysed using descriptive statistics, Cronbach's Alpha and a two-tailed Pearson's product moment correlation ($\alpha=.05$). The coefficient of determination was calculated (R^2). A 95% confidence interval for r was calculated using the Fisher z transformation. The summative

Likert data was treated as approximate continuous data, which is a common practice in psychological research.

4.4 Ethics

The questionnaire was delivered electronically. An information sheet outlining the purpose of the research, voluntary participation, right to withdraw and privacy was included. No personal information was collected meaning the data was anonymous.

5. Results and Discussion

5.1 Demographics

Table 2 provides a summary of the participant demographics (total $n=N = 101$). The sample was skewed towards more established adult ages, with 62.4% aged 28 years and over. There were slightly more female participants ($n=56.4\%$). Most had a postgraduate qualification (59.4%) and were married (63.4%). Over half (57.4%) lived with both parents meaning they had regular contact with their parents. The remaining participants were single (25.7%), in a relationship (6.9%) or did not specify (4.0%).

Table 2: Participant demographics ($n=N = 101$)

Variable	n	%
Age	33-40	34
	28-32	29
	23-27	27
	18-22	10
	27-30	1
Gender	Female	57
	Male	44
Education	Postgraduate	60
	Undergraduate	25
	Other	16
Contact with their parents	Lives with both parents	58
	Lives away from parents	20
	Lives with one parent	11
	Other	9
	Lives with relatives	3

Note: The age group 27-30 appears in the data export

5.2 Descriptive Statistics and Reliability

Table 3 provides the descriptive statistics and reliability scores. There was more variation in perceived parent attachment ($M=SD = 12.15$) compared to emotional regulation ($M=SD = 8.41$). Both measures had good internal consistency meaning they have good composite scores to analyse. However, this does not mean they are valid.

Table 3: Descriptive statistics and internal consistency (α =Cronbach's Alpha) ($n=N = 101$)

Variable	Items	M	SD	Range	α
Parental Attachment	15	51.83	12.15	26-75	.877
Emotional Regulation	15	49.42	8.41	30-73	.767

Note: Range of 15-75

5.3 Hypotheses

There was a positive statistically significant correlation between parental attachment and emotional regulation

($r(99)=.511$, 95%CI [.35,.64], $p<.001$). The null hypothesis was rejected and the alternative hypothesis supported. The coefficient of determination meant that approximately 26.1% of the variance in self-reported emotional regulation was shared with parental attachment ($R^2=.26$).

5.4 Discussion

The correlation was moderate to strong (.511). Young adults with higher levels of parental attachment (perceived parents as close, trusting and open communicators) had higher levels of emotional regulation. This supports the integration of attachment theory [2,3] and process model of emotion regulation [1]. The secure base provided by working models of parental figures still exist in adults. This supports the conclusions of Brumariu [4], Cooke et al.'s meta-analysis [5], studies with college and emerging adults showing that trust in parents led to lower suppression [6,7] and recent evidence showing secure attachment relates to adaptive regulation in adults [12].

Over half the participants lived with their parents and family interdependence is valued. Perceived parental acceptance may be key to emotional regulation in everyday life. This was also suggested in studies with Chinese and Malaysian populations [8,13]. The analysis only looked at summative scores so no information can be given about whether there is a difference in the relationship depending on the type of attachment (trust, communication or alienation) or regulation (reappraisal or suppression).

The R^2 was .26 meaning that approximately 75% of the variance in regulation was not shared with parental attachment. This means that peer support, temperament and individual regulation skills would likely also play a role. This is just one relational correlate.

As this was a cross-sectional correlational study it is impossible to determine the direction of causality. This means that those who are better regulators may perceive their family relationships more positively. There may be other variables influencing some of the shared variance. The data were all collected using an online self-report. The sample was small and a non-probability sample taken from an online student population. The questionnaire was developed by the researcher and was not validated. No diagnostics were provided for Pearson's assumptions. Despite this the findings support a person-in-context approach to counselling. Family trust and communication should be assessed. The findings can help guide interventions with families of origin and provide useful information when running workshops with young adults in transition.

5.5 Implications for Counselling

The findings encourage practitioners to take a person-in-context approach and include family of origin assessments. Mental health educators can create workshops based on relational factors for young adults undergoing major transitions. They can include individual regulation techniques such as cognitive reappraisal but also include elements to improve healthy boundaries, functional communication and secure relationships within families.

6. Conclusion

There was a significant positive relationship between perceived parental attachment and emotional regulation amongst 101 young adults ($r(99) = .511, p < .001$). Both questionnaires had an adequate level of internal consistency. Participants with higher perceived parental attachment (closeness, trust & communication) reported higher levels of emotional regulation. Due to the correlational nature of the study this can only indicate an association.

7. Future Scope

Future research should be conducted using larger sample sizes with probability sampling methods along with validated questionnaires. Longitudinal research should be utilised to determine if attachment security improves emotional regulation. Self report data could also be combined with interview data or behavioural measures. Mediators and moderators such as self-esteem or social support could also be examined. It would also be beneficial to separate maternal and paternal attachment.

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