



Exploring the Relationship Between Adverse Childhood Experiences and Preoccupied Attachment Style Among Young Adults: A Correlational Study

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Abstract: This research involves 200 young individuals aged 18 to 25 and explores the relationship between preoccupied attachment styles and adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). Using the Childhood Adverse Experiences Questionnaire (CAQ) and the Attachment Styles Questionnaire (ASQ), the study delves into how early life challenges impact attachment behaviors. The participants exhibit moderate levels of ACEs and relatively low rates of preoccupied attachment styles based on descriptive data. Correlation study results show a substantial negative relationship between ACEs and preoccupied attachment styles as well as a relationship between lower levels of attachment preoccupation and larger levels of childhood adversity. These results underscore the importance of prompt intervention and support for individuals who have encountered childhood trauma. It is imperative to take into account the study's shortcomings, though, namely its cross-sectional design and dependence on self-reported metrics. Overall, the study emphasizes the significance of addressing childhood trauma in both research and practical settings to enhance positive outcomes and well-being for individuals and communities.

Keywords: *Adverse Childhood Experience, Preoccupied Attachment Style, Attachment style, childhood experiences*

Introduction

Childhood experiences play a fundamental role in shaping an individual's life, significantly their development and overall welfare. The nature of these experiences is closely tied to how families, communities, and societies interact with children. The best outcomes for children's well-being come from environments that are secure, caring, and consistent, meeting their physical, emotional, and social needs effectively and continuously. (Boynton-Jarrett, Ryan, Berkman, & Wright, 2008). However, not every child is fortunate enough to be raised in such ideal circumstances. Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), which various stressful or traumatic events such as abuse, neglect, and household dysfunction, can and enduringly affect a child's health, overall well-being, and developmental trajectory for the duration of their life (Anda, 2007). Childhood adversities (ACEs) commonly encompass different types of abuse, including emotional, physical, and sexual, as well as neglect in both physical and emotional forms. Moreover, they extend to issues within the household like substance abuse, mental health problems, domestic violence parental divorce or separation, and incarceration of a family member. (Qirjako, Burazeri, Sethi, & Miho, 2013). The series of these encounters can profoundly influence a child's development trajectory, impacting not only their immediate well-being and mental health but also their future social and emotional outcomes.

Recent studies have emphasized the enduring impact of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) on attachment styles, underscoring the lasting effects of early hardships on psychological well-being. Bowlby's attachment theory, established in 1980, suggests that early relationships with caregivers shape internal "working models" of self and others, which play a crucial role in an individual's capacity to establish and sustain meaningful connections throughout their life. Disruptions or lack of sensitivity in early attachment bonds can result in the establishment of insecure attachment patterns, which can detrimentally affect personality development and socio-emotional functioning in the long term. (Bowlby, 1980).

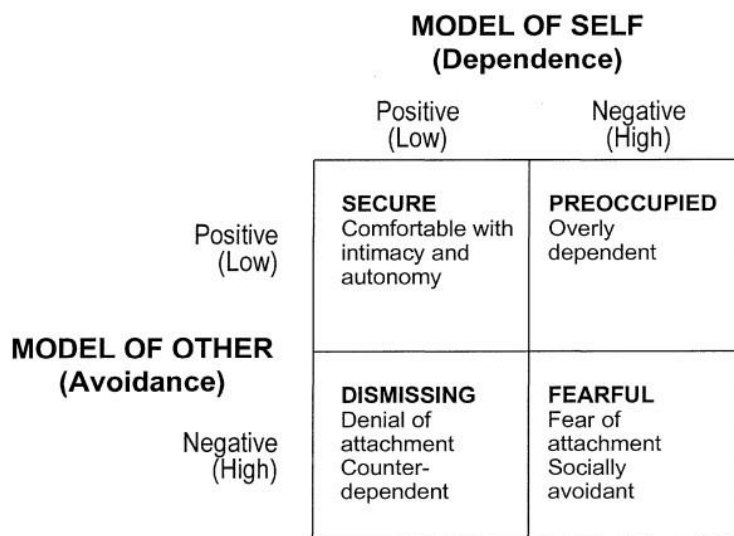


Figure 1.1: Four-category Model of Adult Attachment (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991).

"Anda et al. (2006) found that individuals who have encountered a higher number of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) more likely to develop insecure attachment styles, particularly a preoccupied attachment. Preoccupied attachment is characterized by a strong desire for acceptance and intimacy, coupled with a deep-seated fear of rejection and abandonment. Those showcasing this attachment style often exhibit heightened emotional reactions and struggle with effectively managing their emotions, which can impede their ability to form stable and healthy relationships (Murphy et al., 2014). Individuals with insecure attachment styles tend to react strongly social rejection and have unmet needs for approval, contrasting with securely attached individuals (Baumeister & Leary, 2017; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2010).

Research conducted by Riggs and Kaminski (2019) reveals that individuals with a history of ACEs often display increased emotional reactivity and difficulties in emotional regulation, which are linked to preoccupied attachment. These individuals may grapple with feelings of shame and self-worth, further complicating their capability to establish secure attachments (Tangney & Dearing, 2002). Feelings of shame, a powerful emotional response to perceived losses and rejections, often originate from early bonding experiences and internalized social standards (Lewis, 1971). Individuals preoccupied with seeking acceptance may find themselves especially susceptible to feelings of shame and may adjust their behavior to evade rejection (Wei, Shaffer, Young, & Zakalik, 2005).

Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991) added to Bowlby's (1980) attachment theory by presenting four adult attachment styles: secure, preoccupied, dismissing, and fearful. These styles are based on positive or negative self and others' models. Individuals with a negative model of others (fearful, dismissing) tend to avoid emotional intimacy, while those with a positive model of others (secure, preoccupied) seek intimacy and support. Preoccupied individuals, motivated by a strong need for belongingness, often struggle to form steady relationships due to their constant vigilance against rejection and maladaptive behaviors (Feeney & Noller, 1990).

Recent studies have delved into the specific ways ACEs impact attachment styles. Waters and Cummings (2000) proposed that exposure to chronic stress and inconsistent caregiving in childhood can lead to the development of maladaptive attachment behaviors, such as hypervigilance and anxiety, commonly seen in preoccupied attachment. Measelle et al. (2017) supported this by reporting that children exposed to high levels of adversity were more likely to exhibit anxious and preoccupied attachment behaviors in adulthood. These maladaptive behaviors are believed to arise from the child's constant need to monitor and manage their caregivers' availability and responsiveness, resulting in heightened anxiety and emotional arousal."

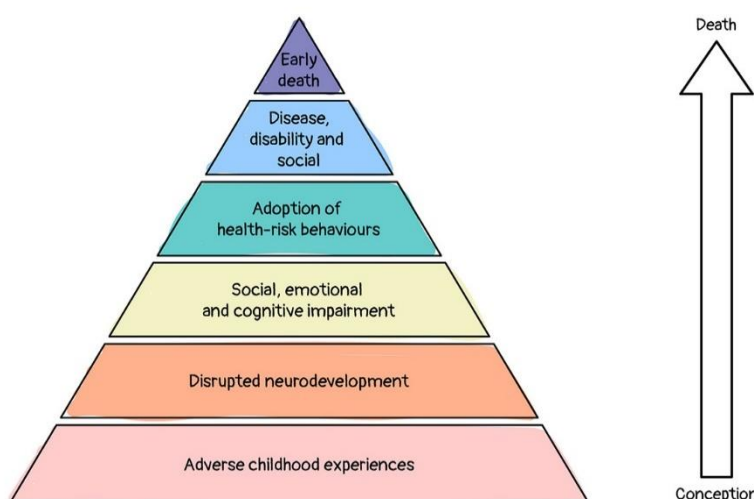


Figure 1.1: The ACEs Pyramid by Felitti et al. (1998): The method by which Adverse Childhood Experiences affect health and well-being throughout life

Negative effects of Adverse Childhood Experiences (s) on mental-being have been extensively recorded, associating such occurrences with significant mental health challenges in later stages of life (Lian et al, 2024). The impacts of childhood adversity in fostering psychopathology have long been acknowledged (Benjet et al., 2011). Copious evidence indicates that ACEs can harm mental health, potentially resulting in modifications in brain functionality and configuration (Vyas et al., 2014). Studies suggest that childhood adversity boosts the likelihood of psychosis due to cognitive limitations (Bailey et al., 2018;). However, the exact influence of early adverse events on outcomes of psychotic disorders is not completely discerned.

Efforts directed towards countering the influences of ACEs on attachment styles have displayed potential. Cyr et al. (2010) revealed that therapeutic interventions concentrating on enhancing caregiving environments and boosting emotional regulation skills in children can alleviate the negative repercussions of ACEs on attachment evolution. This underscores the significance of early assistance and backing for vulnerable groups. By tackling the root causes of insecure attachment and providing children with secure, caring, and supportive surroundings, it is plausible to cultivate secure attachment bonds and bolster long-term psychological health.

Considering the substantial evidence tying ACEs to different mental health consequences and the theoretical groundwork proposing that early adverse experiences mold attachment styles, this study is geared towards scrutinizing the correlation between ACEs and preoccupied attachment styles in young adults. Grasping this correlation can guide interventions aimed at minimizing the enduring effects of childhood trauma on attachment patterns and mental health. Precisely, this investigation endeavours to examine how diverse forms and severity levels of ACEs shape preoccupied attachment styles and to pinpoint potential mediating elements that could be addressed in therapeutic strategies. A correlational approach will be employed to scrutinize the connections between ACEs and preoccupied attachment styles within a sample of young adults. Participants will be requested to complete a set of questionnaires evaluating their encounters with childhood adversity, attachment styles, and current mental well-being. Through data analysis, we aspire to glean insights into the intricate interplay between early adverse experiences and adult attachment behaviors, as well as to pinpoint key factors contributing to the establishment of preoccupied attachment.

This exploration strives to enrich the expanding body of knowledge on the lasting impacts of ACEs and to put forward evidence-based recommendations for initiatives centered on fostering secure attachment and psychological strength in individuals impacted by childhood trauma. By deepening our comprehension of the association between ACEs and preoccupied attachment styles, we can better bolster individuals in surmounting the adverse effects of their initial experiences and in nurturing healthier, more secure relationships during adulthood.

To achieve a comprehensive grasp of the association between Adverse Childhood Experiences and Preoccupied Attachment Style among individuals, this research endeavors to:

- Investigate the correlation between Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and preoccupied attachment style in young adults, concentrating on comprehending how early life adversity influences attachment structures and their implications for mental health outcomes.
- Explore the mediating role of shame in the link between Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and preoccupied attachment styles, aiming to provide a deeper perception of the psychological mechanisms underpinning the connection between early life adversity and attachment structures.

Methodology

Sample

This research employed a correlational design involving 200 participants, evenly distributed between male and female individuals. The data was obtained using parametric snowball sampling techniques.

Tools

Childhood Adverse Experiences Questionnaire (CAQ)

The Childhood Adverse Experiences Questionnaire (CAQ) created by Moradi and Bankar (2018) consists of 30 items, which were initially compiled from various sources and then improved with the help of expert feedback. Respondents use a five-point Likert scale (ranging from 0 to 4), where higher scores indicate a stronger perception of adverse childhood experiences. Through exploratory factor analysis, a total of 13 factors were identified, encompassing Psycho-Social Adversities, Threat and Deprivation, Violence against Mother, Familial Challenges, School-Related Adversities,lect and Discord, Violence and Sexual Assault Controlling Behavior and Confinement, Assault and Theft, Accidents and Emotional Mistreatment, Family Mental Health Issues, Feelings of Rejection, and Physical Abuse.

Attachment Styles Questionnaire (ASQ)

The Attachment Style Questionnaire (ASQ) authored by Van Oudenhoven, Hofstra, and Bakker in 2003 evaluates four attachment styles: secure, preoccupied, dismissive, and fearful. These styles are rooted in the theoretical frameworks proposed by Bowlby (1980) and Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991) and encompass a total of 24 items. Secure attachment is gauged through seven items, preoccupied with seven, dismissive with five, and fearful with five items. The ASQ exhibits enhanced internal consistency, as shown by higher Cronbach's alpha values compared to previous tools (Secure: 0.75, Preoccupied: 0.80, Dismissive: 0.62, Fearful: 0.79). Scoring is done using a 5-point Likert scale without any time constraints for completion. The cumulative scores for each subscale determine the primary attachment style, with higher scores indicating dominant tendencies. The items within each subscale incorporate both direct and mirrored questions. Notably, the secure subscale comprises items 1, 8 (mirrored), 10, 14, 15, 18, and 22.

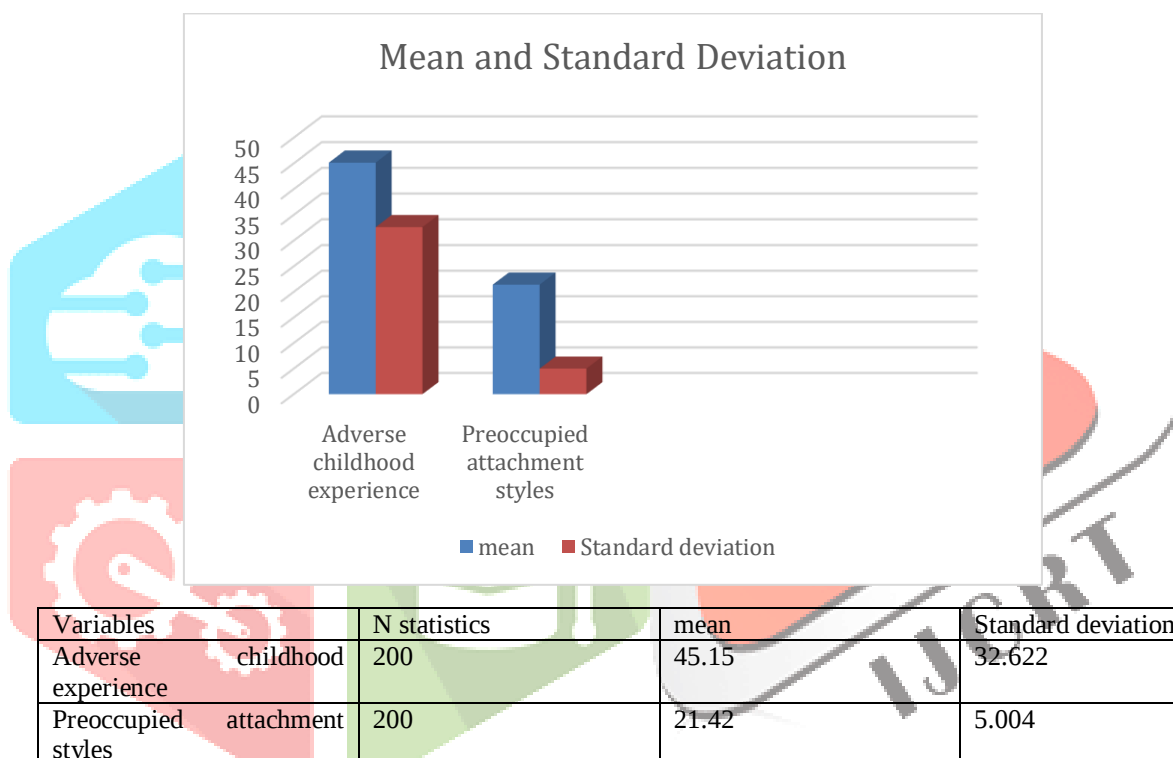
Statistical Analysis

Data from the study is analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistical methods. Descriptive statistics, including measures such as mean, standard deviation, range, and percentiles are used to summarize the data. Furthermore, inferential statistics are used, with the p-value from statistical hypothesis testing acting as a key consequence. A p-value is considered significant if it equals or less than 0.05. Correlation analysis is used to investigate the relationship between the variables.

Results

This research aims to explore the connection between adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) the preoccupied attachment style, focusing on the impact of early-life adversities on attachment patterns. The study includes individuals who have disclosed varying levels of ACEs, with some participants displaying preoccupied attachment styles. Specifically, the objective is to investigate whether increased ACEs correspond to a higher inclination towards a preoccupied attachment style. By conducting a thorough analysis, the study seeks to illuminate the complex link between childhood adversities and attachment patterns, contributing to a deeper comprehension of the psychological consequences of early-life experiences.

Table 1.1: Mean and standard deviation differences of both the variables



The findings of this research study show that out 200 participants, the average score for adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) 45.15 (standard deviation = 32.622), while the average score for preoccupied attachment styles was 21.42 (standard deviation = 5.004). The Pearson correlation analysis indicated a significant negative correlation between ACEs and preoccupied attachment style (correlation coefficient = -0.225, $p < 0.01$). These results suggest that individuals with higher levels of adverse childhood experiences tend to have lower levels of preoccupied attachment style, showing a reduced focus on relationships and potentially better emotional control. This study enhances our understanding of how early life stressors can impact attachment behaviors in adulthood.

Table 1.2: Correlation between Adverse Childhood Experience and Preoccupied Attachment Style.

Variables	ACEs	Preoccupied Attachment Style
ACEs	1	
Preoccupied Attachment Style	-.225**	1

Analysis of the relationship between preoccupied attachment style and adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). A statistical analysis demonstrates a substantial negative connection ($r = -0.225$, $p < 0.01$) between preoccupied attachment style and adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). This indicates that as the amount of adverse childhood experiences increases, there is a decrease in the tendency towards a preoccupied attachment style. This observation suggests that individuals subjected to greater childhood hardships may adopt coping mechanisms that lead to diminished worry over relationships and potentially improved emotional regulation. The findings offer valuable insights into the intricate dance between early life stressors and attachment styles in adulthood.

Discussion:

The study findings indicate a negative correlation between preoccupied attachment style and adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). This finding aligns with earlier research that indicates a link between attachment inclinations and early life problems (Smith et al., 2001). According to our findings, people who have experienced more adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) typically have lower levels of preoccupied attachment type. This implies that people who experienced traumatic events as children may go on to create coping mechanisms or adaptive strategies that lessen their propensity to become overly fixated on relationships. These results are consistent with attachment theory, which holds that early experiences shape attachment patterns and affect how people see others and themselves (Bowlby, 1980). Specifically, individuals who have faced significant challenges in childhood may prioritize emotional regulation and self-reliance to cope with stress and uncertainty (Waters & Cummings, 2000). Consequently, they may demonstrate less preoccupied attachment behavior characterized by excessive dependency and fear of abandonment. This discovery supports the idea that adversity can sometimes nurture resilience and adaptive strategies, encouraging greater self-sufficiency and emotional management. This dynamic showcases the intricate ways in which early adverse experiences can shape not only vulnerabilities but also potential strengths in personality development.

Furthermore, our findings contribute to the expanding body of literature emphasizing the intricate connection between childhood experiences and attachment patterns (Smith et al., 2001). The negative correlation between ACEs and preoccupied attachment style underscores the significance of early intervention and support for individuals exposed to adverse environments during childhood. By addressing the underlying factors contributing to adverse childhood experiences, such as family dysfunction, neglect, or abuse, interventions may help minimize the long-term impact on attachment development (Peterson, J, 2020). Initiatives aimed at fostering secure attachment in children who have encountered ACEs are essential. Programs that enhance parenting skills, offer emotional support, and cultivate stable and nurturing environments can effectively reduce the negative effects of early stressors. Additionally, therapeutic approaches focused on building emotional regulation and resilience in children can also be beneficial. Understanding the specific needs of children who have endured ACEs allows for personalized interventions that target both the immediate and lasting effects of such experiences.

Moreover, our study underscores the necessity for further research to uncover the underlying mechanisms driving the observed association between ACEs and attachment patterns. Future studies utilizing longitudinal designs and integrating measures of psychological processes, like emotion regulation and interpersonal functioning, may provide valuable insights into the pathways linking childhood experiences to attachment outcomes (Smith et al., 2019). Longitudinal research can help elucidate the causal relationships and developmental trajectories connecting ACEs to attachment styles, offering a more thorough understanding of how early adversities impact attachment over time.

Additionally, exploring various mediating and moderating factors, such as genetic predispositions, social support networks, and cultural influences, can deepen our understanding of how ACEs influence attachment styles. Investigating these factors can elucidate why some individuals develop more adaptive coping strategies while others may grapple with attachment-related issues throughout their lives.

In summary, our findings stress the importance of considering the role of early life experiences in shaping attachment patterns and highlight the potential implications for intervention and clinical practice. By integrating insights from attachment theory and developmental psychology, practitioners can better assist individuals affected by childhood adversities. Tailored therapeutic interventions focusing on rebuilding trust, enhancing emotional regulation, and fostering secure attachment can significantly enhance the psychological well-being of individuals with a history of ACEs.

Thus, our study adds to the mounting evidence underscoring the significant influence of adverse childhood experiences on attachment styles. Recognizing the potential for both vulnerability and resilience in individuals exposed to ACEs allows for the development of more effective strategies to support their emotional and relational growth. It is imperative to address the long-term impacts of childhood trauma by providing early intervention and continued support in order to foster healthy attachment styles and general mental health.

Implications

Our research clarifies the connection between preoccupied attachment style and adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), emphasizing the importance of early intervention and assistance for those who have experienced childhood trauma. With this information, clinicians can better target interventions to promote healthy attachment development and lessen the long-term effects of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). Policymakers should also push for programs and regulations that give early intervention and trauma-informed care top priority in order to address the underlying causes of ACEs and foster resilience in coming generations. Thus, in order to promote positive outcomes and well-being in people and communities, it is critical that childhood trauma be addressed in both study and practice.

Limitation

While our study provides valuable insights into the link between adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and preoccupied attachment style, it is important to recognize a few restrictions. Although the sample's distinctiveness might constrain generalizability, the cross-sectional methodology limits causal inference. Self-report measures introduce potential biases, and the focus solely on preoccupied attachment style overlooks other dimensions. Future research with longitudinal designs, diverse samples, and objective measures could offer a more comprehensive understanding of ACEs' impact on attachment patterns. Despite these limitations, our study underscores the importance of targeted interventions and preventive efforts to support individuals affected by childhood trauma.

Conclusion

This research demonstrates a strong inverse connection between adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) a preoccupied attachment style among young individuals. Elevated ACEs levels are linked to reduced levels of preoccupation with relationships, suggesting potential adaptive coping strategies. Despite the valuable insights offered by the findings, limitations like the cross-sectional design and reliance on self-reported measures need acknowledgment. However, in order to promote better results and well-being, the study emphasizes the importance of early intervention and support for those affected by childhood trauma. These correlations should be investigated further in future studies to inform successful interventions and preventative measures.

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