

The Role of Insecure Attachment in Emotional Disorders: From Children to the Elderly

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Abstract: Certain emotional disorders pose a significant societal concern due to their association with recurring suicidal tendencies and behaviors. Beyond the ongoing debate surrounding genetic and personality factors, this paper underscores the importance of considering attachment in the context of emotional disorders. Through a comprehensive review of literature in the fields of social and clinical psychology, this paper explores the connection between insecure attachment and emotional disorders. The exploration encompasses a concise historical overview and categorization of attachment, followed by an in-depth analysis of the role of insecure attachment in emotional disorders across the lifespan, from childhood to old age. Additionally, potential mediator and moderator mechanisms are discussed. Notably, emotional regulation emerges as a predominant mediator during various life stages, serving this role in both childhood and adulthood, while self-esteem is identified as a sole mediating factor during adolescence. By elucidating the detrimental impacts of insecure attachment, this article emphasizes the crucial need to understand attachment dynamics throughout the human lifespan. Future research endeavors may focus on promoting heightened awareness among parents regarding the significance of sensitive early family interactions and encouraging individuals to identify and cultivate secure attachment figures.

Keywords: attachment, insecure attachment, emotional disorder, emotional regulation, self-esteem

1. Introduction

The global attention on the issue of suicide has intensified, with a marked increase in suicide rates in several countries [1]. Notably, suicide attempts are on the rise as well, as reported by Olfson et al. [2]. Shaffer et al. [3] have established that emotional disorders, particularly depression, constitute a significant risk factor for suicide. Furthermore, mood disorders, specifically depression, have been identified as positive predictors of self-harm behavior [4], with potential repercussions for subsequent generations [5]. When exploring the origins of mood disorders, various theories attempt to elucidate why certain individuals are more predisposed to these problems than others. One such explanation posits that the symptoms of mood disorders are intricately linked to an individual's attachment style [6]. In contrast to the conventional focus on genetic factors [7] and personality traits [8], attachment is increasingly recognized as a crucial contributing factor to the development of emotional disorders.

The genesis of Attachment theory can be traced back to the collaborative efforts of John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth in 1991. Bowlby laid the foundational principles of the theory, and Ainsworth,

in turn, expanded upon and empirically tested some of Bowlby's propositions. The term "Attachment" was first introduced in Bowlby's seminal 1958 paper, "The Nature of the Child's Tie to His Mother". According to Bowlby, attachment constitutes a bond established through interactions between children and their primary caregiver, particularly the mother. This bond is posited to influence natural and healthy functioning even in adulthood [9]. Simultaneously, Ainsworth operationalized this concept by assessing maternal sensitivity to infant cues and identified three distinct attachment styles: secure, ambivalent, and avoidant [10]. Securely attached infants display increased exploration in the presence of their mothers and exhibit reduced crying. Conversely, insecurely attached infants, including ambivalent and avoidant types, tend to be less explorative and cry more, even when held by their mothers. Ainsworth emphasized the crucial role of maternal sensitivity in shaping the quality of attachment. Building on the foundational work of Bowlby and Ainsworth, a growing number of researchers have analyzed various forms of attachment across diverse settings and age groups [9]. This includes investigations into peer attachment in preschoolers [11], father attachment [12], attachment in daycare settings [13], attachment in deaf children [14], among others. Recent studies continue to explore attachment dynamics, encompassing friend attachment during the college transition [15], adult attachment among first-generation immigrants in the United States [16], sibling attachment in young adults in Mexico [17], as well as parental and toy attachment [18], among others. In essence, attachment manifests in diverse forms and can be succinctly described as a bond formed with a specific attachment figure.

The term "Emotional disorders," while not a clearly defined medical term according to Sung et al. [19], commonly alludes to psychological disorders, particularly major depressive disorders and generalized anxiety disorders, which are known to impact individuals' emotional well-being. Furthermore, Bullis et al. [20] provide an insightful perspective, stating that "emotional disorders" manifest when individuals frequently experience intense negative emotions and respond aversively to these feelings due to a perceived lack of control, resulting in negative behaviors such as avoidance and escape. Numerous studies, highlighted below, consistently underscore the significant role of insecure attachment in predicting individuals' susceptibility to emotional disorders. [21-26]

Insecure attachment represents one of the distinctive attachment styles identified in Ainsworth's seminal work, particularly through the Strange Situation experiment, which introduced three attachment styles: secure, ambivalent, and avoidant [10]. The ambivalent attachment style, now broadly conceptualized as anxious attachment [27], is characterized by excessively needed behavior, as elucidated by Ainsworth's Strange Situation experiment. In the realm of insecure attachments, individuals are primarily classified into anxious and avoidant attachment categories. Compared to their secure counterparts, those with insecure attachments exhibit distinct strategies: hyper-activating strategies for anxious attachments and deactivating strategies for avoidant attachments. Hyper-activating strategies manifest as clingy and controlling behaviors within relationships, coupled with challenges in disengaging from negative emotions, thoughts, and psychological distress within the relational context. Conversely, deactivating strategies entail a propensity to eschew interdependency, striving for independence and control, along with a tendency to evade negative emotions [28]. Expanding beyond Ainsworth's initial classifications, Main and Solomon introduced another form of insecure attachment known as disorganized attachment [29,30]. The disorganized attachment style presents a more intricate dynamic; unlike hyper- and de-activation, which may be adaptive responses to sub-optimal caregiving, disorganized attachment appears non-adaptive and may signify a potentially pathological reaction to inadequate caregiving. Behaviors associated with disorganized attachment can be comprehended as a dilemma involving both approach and avoidance [31]. It is noteworthy that anxious, avoidant, and disorganized attachment styles collectively fall under the umbrella of insecure attachment styles, each presenting unique challenges in understanding and addressing attachment-related dynamics.

This paper comprehensively examines various emotional disorders stemming from insecure attachment, spanning from childhood to the elderly, and elucidates potential mediating and moderating mechanisms specific to each developmental stage. Theoretically, the significance of attachment throughout the human lifespan is underscored, shedding light on how insecure attachment detrimentally influences emotional well-being at different life stages. In practical terms, given the widespread belief that attachment lays its foundation in infancy and early childhood, this paper serves as a call to action for parents to place heightened emphasis on early sensitive family interactions. The findings presented herein have the potential to inspire proactive parenting approaches that prioritize the establishment of secure attachment bonds from the very beginning. Additionally, by emphasizing the possibility of finding secure attachments in various forms, including friends, pets, siblings, and more, the paper encourages individuals to actively explore and identify sources of support and connection throughout their lives.

2. Literature review

2.1. Insecure Attachment in Childhood

The term "children" typically refers to individuals aged between 3 and approximately 10 years old [21,22,32]. Specifically, the category of left-behind children (LBCs) encompasses those youngsters left in the care of grandparents or relatives due to one or both parents migrating to urban areas in search of better economic opportunities [33]. LBCs often grapple with the absence of warm care and guidance from their parents, resulting in prevalent insecure attachments and an elevated risk of depression [34,35]. A study by Tan et al. [21] utilized a cluster sampling method to select 614 LBCs from the third grade of primary school in Anhui Province, China. Employing self-report surveys, including parent-child attachment scale, depression scale, and loneliness scale, the researchers investigated the relationship between insecure attachment and emotional disorders in LBCs. Tan's findings indicate that insecure attachment, particularly in the maternal context, positively predicts loneliness and depression in LBCs. Additionally, insecure attachment between children and their parents emerges as a predictor for specific anxieties in academic domains, such as math anxiety. Bosman & Smedt [22] suggests "higher levels of mathematics anxiety are associated with insecure attachment". For instance, children with avoidant attachments may refrain from actively seeking assistance from parents or teachers, contributing to diminished proficiency in domain knowledge.

Emotional regulation emerges as a potential mediator mechanism linking children's insecure attachment to emotional disorders. Secure attachment fosters effective emotional regulation skills, with children exhibiting secure attachments demonstrating greater proficiency in this regard [32]. Surprisingly, paternal attachment security significantly predicts a child's emotional regulation in comparison to maternal attachment [32]. In childhood, insecure attachment, particularly influenced by paternal interactions, can result in poor emotional regulation and potentially trigger emotional disorders.

2.2. Insecure Attachment in Adolescence

Adolescents, typically defined as individuals aged 12 to 18 years old [36-38], undergo significant developmental changes, with noteworthy shifts in both parental and emerging peer attachments during puberty. Wilkinson [39] emphasizes the additive and complementary roles of peer attachment and parental attachment, positing that these connections, rather than competing, collectively influence adolescents, primarily impacting self-esteem. The evaluation of oneself, the development of self-identity, and the cultivation of self-esteem are identified as crucial components in adolescent development, closely linked to psychological well-being. In particular, self-esteem is manifested through perceived competence and value. "Ability relates to the amount of "self-competence" that the

individual feels, while worth relates to the extent of "self-liking" that the individual experiences" [40]. The significance of self-esteem is notably pronounced during adolescence.

Building on this, Lee and Hankin highlight the positive correlation between insecure attachment and emotional disorders, proposing self-esteem as a mediating factor. Their findings reveal that anxious and avoidant attachments positively predict anxiety and depressive symptoms while exhibiting a negative correlation with self-esteem [23]. Additionally, Lee and Hankin identify a negative association between dysfunctional attitudes and self-esteem, establishing that insecure attachment can also positively predict dysfunctional attitudes. Dysfunctional attitudes, defined as cognitive products influenced by schemas, accumulate negative bias and contribute to a pessimistic worldview associated with depressed feelings [23,41]. In a specific context, the relationship between anxious attachment in adolescents and subsequent depression and anxiety symptoms is found to be mediated by dysfunctional attitudes and low self-esteem [23].

2.3. Insecure Attachment in Adult

Adults, defined as individuals aged 18 to 55 [42], typically exhibit psychological maturity, and their attachment patterns tend to be relatively stable compared to children. Despite these differences, the common mediator mechanism between insecure attachment and emotional disorders remains consistent: emotional regulation (ER) [32,43]. Nielsen et al. conducted a study with 147 adults, both with and without diagnosed anxiety disorders, utilizing the Beck Anxiety Inventory (BAI), Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale (DERS), and Experiences in Close Relationships–Revised (ECR-R) to investigate the mediating mechanism between insecure attachment and anxiety [44-46]. Their findings suggest that emotional regulation serves as a mediator between anxious attachment and anxiety in adulthood [43]. While the significance of emotional regulation as a mediator aligns with Fernandes et al.'s study on children, Nielsen et al.'s research provides a more concrete and profound understanding of emotional regulation's role in adulthood. Paola et al. [42] further supports this by demonstrating that adults with preoccupied (anxious) and fearful-avoidant (disorganized) attachment exhibit more negative self-thinking models, which positively predict anxiety. However, the empirical validation of the potential mechanism of negative self-thinking warrants further investigation.

An alternative mediator explored in research is rumination, considered a passive and negative coping strategy. Mohammadkhani et al. [47] found that rumination mediates avoidant attachment and depression in adults, with a stronger correlation between these variables and depression compared to anxiety. Adults with avoidant attachment, when faced with activated avoidant tendencies, tend to resort to rumination as a coping mechanism, potentially leading to depression. Lastly, an investigation into adult separation anxiety, attachment styles, and Vaginismus suggests that women with an anxious-avoidant (disorganized) attachment have a higher risk of vaginismus. Furthermore, those experiencing vaginismus are more likely to have adult separation anxiety. Consequently, it is inferred that anxious-avoidant (disorganized) attachment may positively predict specific phobias such as adult separation anxiety.[24]

In summary, in adulthood, emotional regulation and rumination emerge as potential mediator mechanisms between insecure attachment and emotional disorders. Emotional regulation specifically mediates between anxious attachment and anxiety, while rumination mediates between avoidant attachment and depression. Additionally, anxious and avoidant attachment (disorganized attachment) patterns may predict adult separation anxiety.

2.4. Insecure Attachment in the Elderly

The elderly, categorized as individuals aged 50 to above 90 years old [25,48], constitute a demographic for which limited research focuses on the underlying causes of emotional disorders. Despite their age, the elderly are particularly vulnerable compared to other life stages, facing increased susceptibility to the loss of social support and isolation [25]. Mental health challenges such as depression and loneliness among the elderly are critical social issues demanding attention. Spence et al. conducted a study involving 80 elderly women, aged 50 to 83 years old, assessing their social support, isolation, and loneliness, and exploring their attachment styles through interviews. Results indicate that elderly individuals with an angry-avoidant attachment style are significantly more prone to depression than those with secure attachments. Additionally, those with an angry-avoidant style experience heightened feelings of loneliness when compared to those with avoidant styles. The emotional toll of loneliness and vulnerability can significantly impact the perceived quality of life among the elderly, contributing to the often underestimated problem of depression [25].

Social support plays a pivotal role among the elderly, and while constant human companionship may not always be feasible, owning a pet can provide a simple yet effective means for elderly pet lovers to enhance their social interaction and receive support [49]. However, findings related to pet attachment yield surprising results, suggesting that the stronger the attachment to pet dogs among the elderly, the higher the rate of depression [49]. Notably, the type of pet owned by the elderly appears to contribute as a moderator between attachment and emotional disorders. For instance, Branson et al. [48] indicate that "Cat owners reported significantly lower levels of depressive symptoms than dog owners". This distinction may be attributed to cats' greater emotional independence, lower need for attachment maintenance, and reduced physical requirements from owners. Consequently, the type of pets owned by the elderly may serve as a significant moderator in the relationship between their attachment style and emotional disorders.

In summary, insecure attachment in the elderly, particularly the angry-avoidant style, emerges as a predictor of depression, potentially linked to its influence on acquiring or perceiving social support. Additionally, the intensity of attachment to pets, with the type of pets as moderators, may positively predict depression among the elderly.

3. Discussion

This paper explores the potential influence of insecure attachment on emotional disorders spanning from childhood to the elderly. The abundance of evidence gathered across various life stages establishes a clear positive correlation between insecure attachment and prevalent emotional disorders, notably depression and anxiety.

Insecure attachment, as discussed, manifests several detrimental effects on mental health, serving as a positive predictor of depression, loneliness, and anxiety across different age groups, from childhood to the elderly. Building on the understanding from the book "Attached," which posits that attachment styles persist throughout one's lifetime, previous research by Levine and Heller [50] suggests that altering attachment styles is challenging and often perceived as resistant to change. However, Hudson et al.'s [51] research introduces a promising perspective. They propose that individuals seeking to change their anxious or avoidant attachment styles can succeed through intentional efforts to reduce anxiety or avoidant behaviors. Success is attributed to aligning behaviors with personal desires and the strategy of "faking it until they make it." Despite these promising findings, it is essential to acknowledge the limitations of this experiment, which may not conclusively determine the effectiveness of voluntary change across different age groups.

Recognizing the perceived unalterability of attachment styles, future research directions may shift toward mitigating the negative effects through alternative avenues. Researchers advocate for a focus

on changing potential mediators, particularly those emphasized in this paper—emotional regulation and self-esteem. Emotional regulation emerges as a crucial mediator throughout the lifespan, notably in childhood and adulthood. Early family interactions, pivotal for emotional regulation development, offer a strategic intervention point to alleviate the adverse impacts of insecure attachment. Although the essay does not explicitly discuss infancy, it recognizes this period's foundational significance for attachment development and emotional regulation. According to Bowlby [52], early emotional interactions with infants significantly influence the development of their emotional regulation abilities. Caregivers who sensitively respond to infants' distress, engage in meaningful conversations about their feelings, and take responsibility for addressing their emotional needs contribute to the optimal development of emotional regulation. This insight underscores the importance of targeted interventions in early family interactions to foster emotional regulation and counteract the negative consequences of insecure attachment.

Then, active paternal involvement is recognized as a crucial factor for children. Fernandes et al. [32] underscore the paramount importance of paternal attachment in the development of emotional regulation, even exceeding that of maternal attachment. Additionally, Shenaar-Golan et al. [53] observed that paternal emotions, particularly negative ones such as sadness and anger, can positively predict the insecure father-child attachment, thereby forecasting challenges in children's emotional regulation and resulting in anxiety. This suggests that a father's emotional stability acts as a model for the child's ability to manage emotions. However, compared with a paternal role in childhood, Islamiah et al. [54] illustrate that "fathers' role in the development of child's ER is most prominent in infancy and toddlerhood". Future research should investigate the paternal role across different developmental stages, examining how its impact on children's emotional regulation varies with each developmental phase.

Transitioning to adulthood, it remains a great challenge to alter emotional regulation abilities. However, an intriguing finding suggests that music intervention holds promise in improving these skills. Music serves as a multifaceted tool, offering strategies for diversion, emotional discharge, solace, energization, relaxation, and more. For the elderly, Saarikallio's [55] research unveils the therapeutic potential of music in alleviating loneliness. Active participation in a choir, for instance, fosters social connections among the elderly. Additionally, the intertwining of music and emotions enables the elderly to reminisce about significant memories associated with specific songs. That is, "music was a way to increase strong emotions related to a first love in young adulthood, and served as an important means for alleviating loneliness through keeping up social connections among the elderly" [55].

The mediating role of self-esteem in the relationship between insecure attachment and emotional disorders during adolescence is a crucial aspect. Marshall et al. [56] reveal a noteworthy finding regarding self-compassion's buffering effect on the detrimental impact of low self-esteem. This insight proposes that adolescents with low self-esteem can cultivate self-compassion, which "may help young people to respond effectively to self-doubt" [56]. Consequently, the enhancement of self-esteem emerges as a viable strategy to mitigate the adverse effects of insecure attachment on emotional disorders.

Reflective Functioning (RF), also known as mentalizing, presents itself as a potential mediating factor. Acknowledging its role in understanding one's own and others' behaviors and intentions [37,57], Tanzilli et al. [58] and Borelli et al. [38] suggest that RF may mediate the connection between secure attachment and psychological satisfaction. Additionally, Chevalier et al. [59] find that RF-self, the ability to be aware of, evaluate, and understand one's mental states, may positively predict depressive feelings in anxious youths. Further investigation can explore whether RF, including RF-self, serves as a potential mediator between insecure attachment and depression.

Attachments can intersect and exert complex influences on each other. Shepherd et al. [26] demonstrate that sibling attachment not only predicts future life satisfaction but also correlates with parental attachment. However, the relationship between sibling attachment as a potential moderator between parental attachment and subjective psychological well-being remains unexplored [26]. Future research should delve into the impact of sibling attachment on insecure parental attachment and its connection to emotional disorders. Moreover, limited research exists on prenatal and postnatal attachment, and their interrelation. Ongoing studies could provide more evidence on whether strong prenatal attachment acts as a protective factor for postnatal mother-child attachment relationships and subsequent child developmental outcomes [60]. In summary, recognizing that individual attachments do not operate in isolation, future research should aim to unravel the multivariate interactions among various attachment figures.

4. Conclusion

This essay delves into various facets of attachment, with a primary focus on parental attachment and occasional exploration of specific attachments in distinct life stages, such as peer attachment in adolescents and pet attachment in the elderly. Attachment, a dynamic construct, can exhibit whether secure or insecure manifestations across different relationships. Notably, insecure attachment emerges as a potential harbinger of harm, impacting individuals from childhood through their elderly years and potentially leading to emotional disorders. Addressing insecure attachment proves to be a challenging endeavor, prompting researchers to explore avenues for change. The complexity of this task suggests the need to redirect efforts towards modifying potential mediators, such as emotional regulation and self-esteem. Additionally, the exploration of reflective functioning, encompassing reflective functioning-self, could serve as a promising avenue for future research into potential mediator mechanisms. The intricate interplay of sibling attachment as a potential moderator for parental insecure attachment and subjective psychological satisfaction warrants further investigation. Similarly, the buffering role of prenatal attachment in shaping postnatal attachment dynamics requires careful consideration in future research endeavors.

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