



Correlation between Attachment Style and Alexithymia in University Students

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Abstract

Certainly Bowlby's attachment theory is one the most important changes in the contemporary psychology field which highlights the role of early emotional experiences of the child under his/her care person in the emotional and cognitive development of the individual. The current research method is descriptive-correlative. The population of this research is 400 individuals, and based on the Krejcie and Morgan table, the research sample is 196 individuals. For collecting the required data, two questionnaires of adult attachment scale and the 20-item Toronto Alexithymia Scale were used. Results showed that a correlation exists between the components of attachment style and components of alexithymia of the university students. Furthermore, no difference exists between the attachment styles and alexithymia of girl and boy university students. It is concluded that the role of early emotional experiences of the child with its care person has a positive effect on the emotional and cognitive development of a person.

Keywords: Attachment Styles; Alexithymia; University Students.

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1. Introduction

Undoubtedly, Bowlby's attachment theory is one of the most important evolutions in the contemporary psychology field, which highlights the importance of role of early emotional experiences of the child with its care person in the emotional and cognitive development of the person. According to Bowlby, attachment is one of the fundamental human needs, Besharat (2010). This style is mostly formed based on the experiences of child with his/her mother (care person), and at different stages they affect the nearly stable life and social interactions (Bowlby, 1980; Rothbard & Shaver, 1994).

Hazan and Shaver adult attachment theory (1987) is rooted from the Bowlby attachment theory, and it is proposed for explaining the individual differences in cognitions, feelings and behaviors about the close relationships during adolescence. Adult attachment refers to the individual's stable tendency toward hard effort for keeping the

closeness and contact with one person or a specific number of people which could provide the individual with peace and physical and mental security. Besharat's study shows that no significant difference exists between the attachment style of university boys and girls.

The conducted researches about the teenagers and adults showed that people who have secure attachment style, report lower levels of negative feelings, they build strong relationships with other people who come to them at the time of emotional distress, also they have appropriate self-confidence, strong emotional relationship and the ability of self-expression. People who have insecure attachment, comparing to the secure ones experience lower levels of positive feelings, and they show disability in self-regulation, controlling anxiety, depression and other negative feelings, Parker (1982). According to the studies of Montebanocci et al (2004) attachment styles are related to the differences of emotional ordering in

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different stages of life. For example, within the relationships insecure teenagers experience more negative emotions and less positive emotions compared to their secure friends.

Parker (1982) showed that the secure people use the pattern of recognitions opposite to the emotion (the best way for reviewing positive information) and the nervous insecure people use the pattern of recognitions in compliant with emotion (the worst way for reviewing positive information).

Alexithymia is driven from Greek words of Lexi and Thymia and it means lack of existence of a word for feelings and expressing emotions and conceptually it is defined as difficulty in recognizing feelings, difficulty in describing feelings and thinking outside the circuit, Taylor and Bagby (2000). This term was proposed by Sifneos in 1967. Sifneos considers the alexithymia as a personality style, which prepares the person for physical disorders and related psychosomatic disorders. In addition to disability in expressing feelings, Sifneos describe these kinds of people as people who confront difficulty in recognizing the feelings and their imaginary world is poor and they have objective thinking style.

In the last two decades, the concept of alexithymia is considered as a concept of personality, which is determined by special disorder in cognitive evaluation of emotions. Alexithymia is an indicator of disorder in cognitive performance, which includes cortical insufficiency for regulating and adjusting the distressing emotions, Taylor and Bagby (2000). Based on the findings, the individual differences in active patterns and following in the orientation of adults attachments are related to the different patterns of styles such as coping and emotional and cognitive ordering methods (McCarthy et al., 2006).

In other words, people with different attachment styles use different methods for adjusting the feelings and processing the emotional information. Simpson and et al (1992) studied the family factors related to the alexithymia. The research results showed that children who grow in physically and emotionally insecure environments and they were prohibited from emotion revealing, won't learn the successful coping with their emotional states, and ultimately experience of difficulties and lack of appropriate model for expressing the emotion may lead to concern and ambivalence in feelings expressions. Sullivan et al (1995) reported that in the study about the university students who had experienced poor mother care, the examinees showed the features of alexithymia, especially in the field of difficulty in expressing feelings.

Since university students are considered as the main base of the state educational organization, and they have a special position in realizing the educational system goals, thus paying attention to

this huge group of the society from the perspective of education and training leads to the prosperity of the educational system of the society. Results of this research and previous researches could be used as guidance for using new efficient methods for experts in the field of consultant and psychological services.

2. Materials and Methods

Based on the subject, the current research methodology is descriptive, correlative. The research population includes all of the psychology students of Islamic Azad University, Sari branch. The population size of this research is 400 individuals. The research samples are chosen by the use of stratified sampling, and based on the Mikulincer (2003) table the population is 400 individuals and the sample is 196 individuals. A few questionnaires were used in this study for collecting the data.

2.1 Adult attachment scale

This questionnaire is a self-reporting measuring tool created by Hazen and Shaver (1987) based on this hypothesis that we can find some similarities in care child's attachment style and the relationship of adults. This measuring tool consists of three descriptive sentences of individual's feelings about the convenience, closeness and intimacy in relationships. Each of the descriptions shows one of the three attachments. The respondents were asked to show the usability of each of the three descriptions in describing themselves on 7-point Likert scale. Also the examinees should choose one of these descriptions which best describes their feelings in close and intimate relationships. Several surveys showed that the retest reliability of measuring the case was near 0.70.

2.2 20-item Toronto Alexithymia scale

A self-reporting test including 20 questions which is divided to three sub-scales of difficulty in recognizing feelings, difficulty in describing the feelings and thinking objectively with 5-point Likert measures from point 1 (completely disagree) to point 5 (completely agree). Also a total score is calculated from the summing of three sub-scales for the overall alexithymia. Besharat (2005) provided a Persian version of 20-item Toronto alexithymia scale, and respectively reported the Cronbach's Alpha for the overall alexithymia and three sub-scales of difficulty in recognizing feelings, difficulty in describing feelings, and thinking objectively as 0.85, 0.82, 0.75 and 0.72, which indicate a good internal homology of the scale (Besharat, 2010).

After collecting the information in order to analyze the hypotheses, data were analyzed in two parts, 1) descriptive statistics including frequency table, mean and standard deviation, and 2) inferential

statistics including t-test and Pearson correlation coefficient were used) through SPSS software.

Table 1. Frequency and percent of respondents based on the attachment style

Groups	Frequency	Percent
Secure attachment	164	83
Insecure attachment	13	6.64
Ambivalence attachment	19	9.69
Total	196	100

3. Results

The current research findings were offered in the form of descriptive and inferential findings. In the descriptive findings part, frequency table, mean, standard deviation, minimum and maximum of the score were used in the studied variables. In inferential findings, in order to compare the groups, t-test, and also the correlation coefficient were used

for surveying the correlations between the research variables. According to table 1 it is observable that 83% of the examinees had secure attachment and 6.64% of the examinees had insecure attachment and 9.69% of the examinees had ambivalence attachment.

As it was mentioned before, the variables of attachment style and alexithymia have 3 components, which in table 2, the descriptive statistics related to these components are provided. In order to study the difference between the mean of scores of attachment style and alexithymia of the boy and girl students, the test of studying the mean difference was used separately in two groups. The results of independent t-test for the attachment style and alexithymia in two groups of boy and girl university students show no difference between these groups.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of components of attachment and alexithymia.

Variables	N		Mean		SD	
	Girl	Boy	Girl	Boy	Girl	Boy
Secure Attachment	98	98	5.40	5.19	0.91	1.07
Insecure Attachment	98	98	2.01	2.01	0.94	0.78
Ambivalent Attachment	98	98	2.19	2.39	0.60	0.67
Difficulty in recognizing feelings	98	98	14.12	15.34	3.86	4.60
Difficulty in describing feelings	98	98	9.22	6.63	17.56	16.11
Thinking Objectively	4.58	3.66	14.28	13.35	98	98

Table 3. Statistical analysis of difference between mean of scores of attachment style and alexithymia in boy and girl university students.

Variable	N	M	SD	Mean difference	df	t	Sig.	
Secure attachment	Girl	98	5.40	0.91	-0.2142	194	-1.50	0.134
	Boy	98	5.19	1.07				
Insecure attachment	Girl	98	2.01	0.94	0.1122	194	0.906	0.366
	Boy	98	2.01	0.78				
Ambivalent attachment	Girl	98	2.19	0.60	0.2040	194	1.74	0.026
	Boy	98	2.39	0.67				
Difficulty in recognizing feelings	Girl	98	5.40	3.86	1.2040	194	1.88	0.048
	Boy	98	15.34	4.60				
Difficulty in describing feelings	Girl	98	16.11	6.63	1.3775	194	1.20	0.231
	Boy	98	17.56	9.22				
Thinking objectively	Girl	98	13.35	3.66	0.9285	194	1.83	0.068
	Boy	98	14.28	4.58				

Mean difference of scores of secure attachment of boys and girls is -0.2142 which with $t=-1.50$ and $p=0.134$ in level 0.05 was not significant. Mean difference of scores of insecure attachment of boys and girls is 0.1122 which with $t=0.906$ and $p=0.366$ in level 0.05 was not significant. Mean difference of scores of ambivalent attachment of boys and girls is 0.2040 which with $t=2.24$ and $p=0.026$ in level 0.05 was not significant. Mean difference of scores of

difficulty in recognizing feelings of boys and girls is 1.2040 which with $t=1.98$ and $p=0.048$ in level 0.05 was not significant. Mean difference of scores of difficulty in describing feelings of boys and girls is 1.3775 which with $t=1.20$ and $p=0.231$ in level 0.05 was not significant. Mean difference of scores of thinking objectively of boys and girls is 0.9285 which with $t=1.83$ and $p=0.068$ in level 0.05 was not significant.

According to table 1, the calculated correlation coefficient for the component of secure attachment and difficulty in recognizing the feelings ($r=-0.727$), difficulty in describing feelings ($r=-0.618$), and thinking objectively ($r=-0.611$) in level 99% ($\alpha=0.1$) is bigger than the correlation coefficient of critical table ($r=0.597$). It is concluded that a correlation exists between the secure attachment and components of alexithymia of university students. The calculated correlation coefficient for the component of insecure attachment and difficulty in recognizing feelings ($r=0.456$) and difficulty in describing feelings ($r=0.470$) in level 99% ($\alpha=0.1$) is bigger than the correlation coefficient of critical table. It is concluded that a correlation exists between the insecure attachment and components of alexithymia of university students. The calculate correlation coefficient for component of ambivalent attachment and difficulty in recognizing feelings ($r=0.324$), difficulty in describing feelings ($r=0.466$) and thinking objectively ($r=0.384$) in level 95% ($\alpha=0.5$) is bigger than the correlation coefficient of the critical table. It is concluded that a correlation exists between the ambivalent attachment and components of alexithymia of university students.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The current research results showed that the secure attachment style has a negative correlation with alexithymia, and avoiding or ambivalent styles have positive correlation with alexithymia. These results which are consistent with previous researches of McCarthy et al 2006 and Montebanocci et al (2004) are explained based on the below odds. Sensitivity and responsiveness of mother (or people who are in charge of taking care of the child) to the emotional states of the child, are

the main determinants of learning the method of regulating emotions and interacting with others, Bowlby (1980) and Bretherton (1985). Secure children experience the optimum and coherent responding from the first care person and they learn that balanced express of emotions have positive outcomes. Based on this, sensitivity and responsiveness of the mother which is also considered as one of the cases of secure attachment (Bowlby, 1969, 1980, quoted by Besharat, 2010) creates a secure attachment style in the child and provides the necessary facilities for regulating the emotions.

These abilities explain the negative correlation of secure attachment style with alexithymia which its main characteristic is impairment and disability in emotional self-regulation. On the other hand, insufficient, poor care and disability in sensitivity and maternal responsiveness result in the insecure attachment pattern (avoiding or ambivalent) and it hinders the change of effective skills in emotion regulation. Failure in recognition, detection, process and regulation of emotions in insecure people are considered as the product of insufficient care. Mikulincer (2003) reported that in the study of university students who had the experience of poor maternal care, the examinees, showed characteristics of alexithymia, especially in field of difficulty in expressing feelings. Taylor and Bagby (2000) believe that the insecure attachment could lead to failure in learning the way of feeling things, and it leads to alexithymia. Based on the above mentioned contents, people with secure attachment style could optimally control and regulate their emotional behaviors by the ability of adapted process of emotional information. They use more efficient and more effective methods of communication and they have the ability to manage the effective and emotional relationships.

Table 4. Statistical analysis of correlation between attachment style and alexithymia of university students.

Variables	R	df	Significance Level	Sig.
Secure Attachment				
Difficulty in recognizing feelings	-0.727	194	0.1	0.000
Difficulty in describing feelings	-0.618	194	0.1	0.000
Thinking objectively	-0.611	194	0.1	0.000
Insecure attachment				
Difficulty in recognizing feelings	0.456	194	0.1	0.000
Difficulty in describing feelings	0.470	194	0.1	0.000
Thinking objectively	0.069	194	0.00	-
Ambivalent Attachment				
Difficulty in recognizing feelings	0.324	194	0.5	0.000
Difficulty in describing feelings	0.466	194	0.1	0.000
Thinking objectively	0.385	194	0.5	0.000

Compared to the two other styles (insecure, ambivalent attachment), the secure attachment has the most correlation with the component of emotional difference. Emotional difference consists of emotion and the use of. In fact, this component has the maximum role in understanding the emotions and use of them. As a matter of fact, this component has the maximum role in understanding the emotional information and the appropriate method of expressing emotional behaviors. Another explanation is that the secure attached people pay more attention toward the emotional states, and compared to the insecure attached people they have more ability in understanding the signs and hints of emotions which result in less alexithymia.

Insecure attached people are described with emotional characteristics such as experience of more negative emotions in relationships, less attention to the positive emotional information, suppression of negative emotional information, and emotional coping styles which result in the disability of cognitive processing of emotion. It should be noted that children experiences with care persons who do not show their emotions and they do not express then or the people who do not recognize the changing or forming emotions of the child, and they do not behave appropriately, could have a deep effect on the emotion regulation in other stages of the children life. Also children who are brought up in environments that they are physically or emotionally uneasy or insecure, and their emotional detection is hindered, they won't learn to successfully cope with their emotions, and these adversities are good models for expressing the emotions through concern or ambivalence in expressing feelings. Thus it is concluded that the role of early emotional experiences of the child with his/her care person has a positive effect on the emotional and cognitive development of the child.

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