

Research Article

The mediating role of gratitude in the relationship between attachment styles and psychological well-being

Australasian Psychiatry

1–5

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DOI: 10.1177/1039856220930672

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Abstract

Objective: To determine the mediating role of gratitude in the relationship between attachment styles and psychological well-being in students.

Method: We selected 200 students using randomised cluster sampling in the academic year 2016–2017. They completed the attachment style, psychological well-being and gratitude questionnaires.

Results: On path analysis, secure attachment style had a positive relationship with both gratitude and psychological well-being. Conversely, anxiety-avoidance styles had a negative relationship with both outcomes.

Conclusions: Gratitude plays a mediating role attachment and psychological well-being. These results may have implications for the development of interventions to improve mental well-being with a focus on enhancing gratitude.

Keywords: gratitude, attachment styles, well-being

Gratitude is an emotion following aid from others,¹ although sometimes this is widened to the appreciation of things considered meaningful to oneself.² All definitions agree that gratitude is beneficial. For instance, it is associated with decreased depression, positive affect and life satisfaction.¹ Gratitude has both direct and indirect effects on well-being in terms of spirituality, physical health and the appreciation of positive life experiences.³ For instance, indirect effects may be through being less prone to negative emotions like regret, envy or resentment.

One outcome where gratitude might act as a mediator is attachment.⁴ Secure attachment in adulthood is linked to psychological adjustment, healthy functioning and increases in subjective well-being.^{5,6} In older adults, secure attachment is also associated with fewer depressive symptoms⁷ and higher marital satisfaction.⁸

By contrast, there is less information on possible correlates of attachment style, such as gratitude. For instance, gratitude from a partner could serve as a buffer against

negative views of intimacy held by avoidant individuals while conversely enhancing their self-worth.⁹

It is unclear how applicable these findings on gratitude are to non-Western cultures, which are more collectivist. We therefore studied the mediator role of gratitude in the relationship between attachment and psychological well-being in Iranian adults. We hypothesised the following:

1. A secure attachment style has a positive relationship with gratitude and psychological well-being, while anxious and avoidant styles have a negative relationship.

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Table 1. Descriptive statistics

<i>Variables</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Standard deviation</i>	<i>Maximum</i>	<i>Minimum</i>	<i>Skewness</i>	<i>Kurtosis</i>
Psychological well-being	80.31	10.795	53	103	-0.335	-0.452
Gratitude	18.27	3.817	7	29	-0.238	0.703
Secure attachment	12.53	2.795	4	20	-0.199	0.683
Avoidant attachment	12.18	3.195	0	20	-0.881	1.602
Anxious attachment	11.43	4.798	0	23	-0.123	-0.111

- Gratitude has a mediating role in the relationship between attachment styles and psychological well-being.

Method

This is a descriptive, correlational study. The sampling frame consisted of all undergraduate and masters students of the Islamic Azad University's South Tehran Branch in the academic year 2016–2017, from where ethical approval came. Of these, 225 subjects were selected by random cluster sampling from the Faculties of Engineering, Management, Literature and Foreign Languages, and Psychology and Educational Sciences. Following informed consent, 200 (89%) completed the questionnaires. We administered the following three instruments and used path analysis to test our hypotheses.

The Attachment Style Questionnaire

This is a self-assessment of relationship building skills and consists of 18 items measured on a five-point Likert scale (1 = not at all my attribute to 5 = absolutely my attribute).¹⁰ Test–retest reliability was at the 95% level. There are three sub-scales:

- An anxiety style (A), which is consistent with an ambivalent attachment style.
- A closeness style (C), which is consistent with a secure attachment style.
- A dependency style (D), which equates to an avoidant attachment style.

The Psychological Well-being Questionnaire

This instrument evaluates the six main elements of psychological well-being in terms of self-acceptance, relationships with others, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life and personal growth.¹¹ We used the 18-item version. The answer to each item lies on a six-point range from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the Iranian version was 0.924.¹²

The Gratitude Questionnaire (GQ6)

The gratitude questionnaire contains six questions scored from 1 (strongly disagree) up to 7 (strongly disagree).¹³ Questions 3 and 6 are reversely scored. Each question measures the degree and intensity of appreciation that one experiences. The reliability coefficient of the Iranian version was 0.8, while convergent validity was significant.¹⁴

Findings

The sample of 200 adults consisted of 138 males (69%) and 62 females (31%). Their mean age was 45 with a range of 20–60 years; 46% were undergraduates ($n = 92$) and 54% were master's students ($n = 108$) (Table 1). The results from the three research instruments had a normal distribution in terms of the means, standard deviation, skewness and kurtosis (Table 1).

There was a significant positive relationship between secure attachment and gratitude or psychological well-being (Table 2). Similarly, there was a significant positive relationship between psychological well-being and gratitude. By contrast, both anxious and avoidant attachment had a negative relationship with gratitude and psychological well-being.

Given the significant relationship between the three research variables (psychological well-being, gratitude and attachment styles), it was then possible to study the mediating role of gratitude in relation to attachment styles (secure, avoidant and anxious) with psychological well-being using path analysis. No basic assumptions of sample size, normal distribution and multi-collinearity were violated given that the variance inflation factor (VIF) was less than 10 and tolerance index greater than 0.10 (Table 3).

Table 4 shows the path analysis of direct effects of attachment styles on gratitude and psychological well-being. Secure attachment was positively and significantly associated with both gratitude and psychological well-being. By contrast, avoidant or anxious attachment showed a negative association with both outcomes, all results reaching statistical significance, and small to large effect

Table 2. Pearson correlation coefficients

Variables	1	2	3	4
1. Psychological well-being	-			
2. Gratitude	0.347**	-		
3. Secure attachment	0.239**	0.420**	-	
4. Avoidant attachment	-0.202*	-0.176*	0.206*	-
5. Anxious attachment	-0.218**	-0.272**	-0.096	0.213**

* $p < 0.01$. ** $p < 0.001$.

Table 3. Multi-collinearity of variables**Multicollinearity indices**

Predicted variables	VIF	Tolerance
Gratitude	1.386	0.721
Secure attachment	1.349	0.742
Avoidant attachment	1.182	0.846
Anxious attachment	1.115	0.896

VIF = variation inflation factor.

sizes (0.2–1.1), other than the relationship between anxious attachment and psychological well-being.

Table 5 shows both direct and indirect effects of secure attachment on gratitude and well-being. These were both positive and statistically significant. By contrast, and as before, avoidant or anxious attachment showed a negative association with both outcomes. In particular, anxious attachment showed a significant indirect and negative effect on psychological well-being.

Discussion

Although initial work on attachment theory targeted the pathological effects of poor attachment in adulthood, later research has focused on the role of confident and secure relationships on healthy behaviours, greater productivity, personal growth and positive psychology. We therefore studied the relationship between attachment styles and psychological well-being with gratitude as a mediating factor.

Iranian society is more collectivist and hierarchical than in the West. Social relationships are therefore defined through a codified hierarchy of responsibility and obligations. Gratitude is not an inner state or explicitly stated, but expressed through gifts or favours as part of the reciprocal fulfilment of needs and responsibilities.

Previous studies have examined the relationship of attachment with psychological well-being, attachment with appreciation, and appreciation with psychological well-being.^{6,15} However, this is the first study to examine the mediating role of gratitude in the relationship between all three attachment styles and the psychological well-being of adults aged 18–60 years, particularly in a non-Western culture. These findings may be generalisable to other culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) populations in a multicultural society like Australia.

We showed a positive relationship between secure attachment, gratitude and psychological well-being. From an attachment point of view, the experience of gratitude is similar to the sense of protection, acceptance, and worthiness.⁴ A positive attachment style predicts purposefulness, good interpersonal relationships and individual growth, as well as an appreciation of others.⁵ Individuals with secure attachment therefore experience more positive emotions, including gratitude, and thus, their psychological well-being is increased. Gratitude implies intimacy and dependence on others, emotions that are unpleasant for those with insecure attachment. In addition, previous negative experiences may lead to apprehension and anxiety when people with insecure attachment are confronted with new challenges.

By contrast, avoidant or anxious attachment showed a negative association with the other two variables. One explanation is that people with insecure attachment are unable to appreciate others even when they are well intentioned, possibly through being more prone to negative feelings rather than those of joy and gratitude.⁵ Another is a relationship between insecure attachment and behavioural disorders at pre-school or school. Subsequently, insecure attachment is also associated with borderline personality disorder, suicide attempts, depression and vulnerability to mental illness in general. People with insecure attachment evaluate their life's events and situation as non-optimal and mostly experience negative emotions such as anxiety, depression and anger.¹⁶

Table 4. Path analysis

Hypothesis (Paths)		B	SE B	β	T
Secure attachment	Gratitude	0.617	0.076	0.463	8.068**
Avoidant attachment	Gratitude	0.247–	0.078	–0.182	–3.180**
Anxious attachment	Gratitude	–0.167	0.053	–0.180	–3.139*
Secure attachment	Psychological well-being	0.709	0.271	0.183	2.618*
Avoidant attachment	Psychological well-being	–0.758	0.248	–0.192	–3.061*
Anxious attachment	Psychological well-being	–0.291	0.169	–0.108	–1.719
Gratitude	Psychological well-being	0.555	0.210	0.191	2.638*

* $p < 0.01$ ** $p < 0.001$.

Table 5. Standard coefficients of model

Hypothesis (Paths)	Total effect	Direct effect	Indirect effect	R²
On gratitude from				0.280
Secure attachment	0.463**	0.463**	–	
Avoidant attachment	–0.182**	–0.182**	–	
Anxious attachment	–0.180*	0.180*	–	
On psychological well-being from				0.172
Secure attachment	0.272*	0.183*	0.088**	
Avoidant attachment	–0.227*	–0.192*	0.035*	
Anxious attachment	–0.142*	–0.108	–0.034*	
Gratitude	0.191*	0.191*	–	

* $p < 0.01$. ** $p < 0.001$.

Strengths of the present study include the use of standardised questionnaires that have been validated for the Iranian population, as well as the high participation rate (89%). However, there are limitations. Firstly, the sample was restricted to Iranian students and the results may not be generalisable to other settings, populations or age groups. Furthermore, most were male. We only considered gratitude as a mediating variable and other factors may be important. In addition, our assessment of gratitude was based on self-reported data and future research should use other methods such as peer reports and interviews. Effect sizes ranged from small to large. As this was a cross-sectional study, only experimental and longitudinal studies can establish causality.

Clinically, many psychotherapies aim to achieve more secure attachment styles through the therapeutic relationship. Given the correlation between attachment and gratitude, both should be measured in psychotherapy trials with the aim of increasing positive psychological functioning in addition to reducing psychiatric symptoms. Targeting insecure attachment may increase

gratitude and so increase well-being and social support as people who are not thanked may provide less future help.¹⁷

In conclusion, our results show that gratitude plays a mediating role in the relationship between attachment and psychological well-being and this may have implications for clinical practice, particularly in CALD populations in Australia.

Disclosure

The authors report no conflict of interest. The authors alone are responsible for the content and writing of the paper.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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