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Impact of Attachment Styles on Decision Making Styles of College Students

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ABSTRACT

The study examined the effects of childhood attachment styles on adult decision making. It was hypothesized that securely attached individuals are satisficing while individuals with insecure attachments are generally maximizing in making decisions. A cross sectional design was used to collect the data from 102 young college students (age group: 18-25 years) using the Maximization Scale and Attachment Style Questionnaire. Upon the correlational analysis of the data, obtained results confirmed the hypothesis. It was concluded that students having secure attachment were predominantly satisficers whereas those with insecure attachments such as fearful, preoccupied or dismissive styles were maximizers in their decisions. Therefore, childhood attachment significantly affects future decision making.

Keywords: Attachment Styles; Decision-Making Styles; Secure Attachment; Insecure Attachment; Maximization; Satisficing; College Students

INTRODUCTION

As the famous poet William Wordsworth said "child is the father of man". He reasonably implied that our childhood experiences significantly affect our adult personalities that we carry throughout life. Psychoanalyst and pioneer of attachment theory John Bowlby (1907–1990) thought that behavioural and mental health issues could be traced back to early childhood. Bowlby postulated that a biological need to stay in touch with mothers and babies had developed over time. Bowlby held that species-specific attachment behaviours, such as proximity seeking (e.g., crying, smiling, crawling, etc.), are instinctive behaviours that will be triggered by any circumstances that appear to threaten achieving proximity, such as separation, insecurity, and fear. According to Bowlby's maternal deprivation theory, if a baby's attachment to their primary carer (often their mother) is continuously strained, they may develop long-term cognitive, social, and emotional issues [1]. Maternal attachment failure or breakdown would have major negative consequences, maybe even resulting in affectionless psychopathy.

On the basis of his studies, Bowlby created the idea of attachment style, or how confident a person feels in their interpersonal relationships. During their first interactions with an adult, infants learn two fundamental attitudes. The first is a mindset towards oneself, or self-esteem. The newborn might learn through the caregiver's acts and emotional outbursts whether they are a valued, important, and loved person. The second fundamental attitude is about others and it entails broad expectations and assumptions about them. This attitude, known as interpersonal trust, is mostly determined by how trustworthy, dependable, and reliable the infant believes the carer to be compared to other people. Infants, children, teenagers, and adults can be loosely categorised as having a certain attachment style with others based on different patterns of these two fundamental attitudes. These are: (1) High self-esteem and trust are indicators of a secure attachment style, (2) a fearful attachment style is exhibited by a person who lacks interpersonal trust as well as self-esteem, (3) when interpersonal trust is high and self-esteem is low, the result is a preoccupied attachment style and (4) a dismissing attachment style is characterised by high self-esteem and low interpersonal trust. The relationships that individuals have with other people can be significantly shaped by these divergent attachment types [2].

The attachment styles adopted early in the childhood affect adult personality of the individual through their cognitive, behavioural and emotional abilities. One such ability that we considered is the decision-making style. We classified decision making into two broad categories on the basis of the strategizing tendencies while making decisions. Schwartz, explained that “Maximizing" and "satisficing" are distinct concepts [3]. The desire to choose the best alternative is known as the maximizing tendency, whereas the willingness to accept a sufficient or "fairly good" option is known as the satisficing tendency [4]. People who settle for something that is satisfactory are known as satisficers because of their decision-

making approach. Maximizers are those who make decisions in an effort to maximise outcomes; they frequently consider a wide range of possibilities. With more options available, the task gets much more difficult [1]. Maximizers can make decisions that are objectively superior to Satisficers, while Satisficers feel better subjectively. Schwartz conceptualized the tendency to satisfice (and to maximize) as an individual difference or trait. He suggested that some individuals consistently attempt to find the best solution (which demands an exhaustive search of the options), while others consistently attempt to find a solution that is satisfactory or good enough given their standards (which can be met by a non-exhaustive search) [5].

Vargová, found that Maximizing as a decision-making strategy was negatively correlated with extraversion and happiness and positively correlated with neuroticism and depression [6]. Maximizers strive persistently for the best results, while Satisficers typically accept their decisions as long as they satisfy a specified set of requirements [7]. Hence, maximizing tendency towards decision making seems like a relatively poorer option whereas satisficing indicates a more adaptive approach for maintaining the general well-being of the deciding individual, with every decision. Relationships of relevant variables in this context were discussed in the current study.

The possibility of a sustainable future lies in a safe, social world and the efficacy of individual approaches to making decisions for their lives and those of others. Since these two factors are correlated with each other, it is important to understand their relationship. Individuals' decision-making tendencies are influenced by their respective attachment styles, yet there is currently no research or literature that directly addresses the relationship between the two. In order to understand this relationship, the current study aimed to address the question that how does an individual's attachment styles correlates to their decision making in adult life? We also attempted to compare the specific ways of making decisions with their childhood attachments. For fulfilling the purposes of study we employed a correlational research method to analyse the data of college students obtained through ASQ- Attachment Style Questionnaire and Maximization Scale [3,8]. Through the observed results of the study subjects, we focused on the relationships between the determining variables of attachment styles (i.e., self-esteem and interpersonal trust of the individuals) and the pattern of decision making. Furthermore, we extended the use of our findings with reference to the relevant literature to predict the potential positive as well as negative effects of various childhood attachment styles and corresponding decision-making styles on the levels of general well-being of individuals. In conclusion, the current study summarised the hypothesized correlations and comparisons between the principal variables of attachment styles and decision-making styles with suggesting their possible relationships to individual well-being.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Overview

A combined form of two questionnaires with questions regarding basic socio-demographic details separately were presented to all the participants (total N=102). Participants completed the questionnaires individually. It took less than 15 minutes to complete the full questionnaire. For each administration the content of the questionnaire was the same.

Participants

Subjects of the study were selected on the basis of random-probability sampling. Population aimed to be tested on which the results of the study were later generalized was of young college students. The sample consisted 102 college students of the age group 18-25 (M= 21.5; S.D. = 1.80) who were randomly selected from different colleges and universities of India belonging to various regions of the country, including urban (n=49), semi-urban (n=28) and rural (n=25) areas. Out of total (N=102) participants, around 68% (n=70) were females and around 32% (n=32) were males.

Participants were briefed about the purpose of the questionnaire and the contribution expected from them to fill it completely through their genuine introspection was elaborated.

Measures

The measurement of attachment styles and maximization was done through collecting data of the participants in the form of responses to a cumulative questionnaire. The first part of the questionnaire presented at the beginning was a nominal scale which was used to categorize the research participants on the basis of their socio-demographic details. The scale used in the questionnaire to measure attachment styles included questions for all the four dimensions of attachment, each of these dimensional scales were the ratio scales which contained a meaningful absolute zero. The Maximization scale was an interval scale, which measured the extent of maximizing or satisficing tendency of the participants according to the 3 intervals of the scale. The questionnaire didn't contain any forced or irrelevant questions. The details about 3 parts of the questionnaire are described below:

Part 1: Socio-demographic information

The first part included the basic biographical details of the participants including name, age, gender and residential region. This information was taken to tabulate the data through names of participants which were kept confidential from other participants, to eliminate outliers or participants not fulfilling the required age criteria, categorize the data based on different identity characteristics (female/male/other) and provide literature for further research.

Part 2: ASQ- Attachment Style Questionnaire (22 item)

The original Attachment Style Questionnaire was developed by Van Oudenhoven, which consisted of 23 items [9]. Polek, modified the questionnaire in their study by reducing one item and used a 22-item ASQ. In the current study we used this version of the questionnaire [8]. The ASQ evaluates attachment using several scores (on each component separately), allowing for the categorization of people in terms of each of the four

attachment dimensions: secure, fearful, preoccupied, and dismissive. Questions 1, 3, 7, 9, 12, 13, 16, 20 assessed secure attachment style, 2, 4,18, 21 assessed fearful, 6, 8, 10, 15, 19, 22 assessed preoccupied and 5, 11, 14, 17 assessed dismissive attachment style. An item's correlation with the specific factor(secure/fearful/preoccupied/dismissive) it is given to, is artificially high because the item fully correlates (Pearson's correlation coefficient: r=1) with itself, inflating the correlation between the item and any factor the item is assigned to, i.e., the questionnaire exhibits high reliability.

Most attachment tests only evaluate attachment in certain relationships. The ASQ is distinctive in that it gauges overall attachment to others, enabling evaluation of a respondent's general sociability. The extent of each kind of attachment style as indicated by the respective questions were assessed by the answers given on a 5-point Likert-type scale, with 1 being the strongest disagreement and 5 being the strongest agreement. Question numbers 3, 7 and 15 were reversely keyed. While scoring, each response carries the weightage equal to the extent (numerical value) of agreement to it on the Likert scale and 3 questions with reverse scoring contributes to the total score of a participant for a particular dimension of ASQ, which was calculated by simply summing up the responses of the questions.

Part 3: 13-item Maximization Scale

The 13-item Maximization Scale (Cronbach's alpha reliability: α=0.60) was created by Schwartz, with maximizing and satisficing representing the two opposite extremes of a continuum [3]. In order to gather repeated measures, Gillham, administered the Maximization Scale four times over a nine-month period to 102 undergraduate students [10]. These data imply that a maximizing orientation enjoys some degree of stability since scores at Time 1 correlated with scores at Time 2 (r=81), with scores at Time 3 (r=82), and with scores at Time 4 (r=73). The scale consists of 3 intervals to categorize respondents into different categories. A participant is considered to be a "maximizer" if their overall score on the full maximization scale is 65 or higher. They fall into the "satisficer" category of the scale if their total is 40 or less. (The intermediate region is defined as 41 to 64) [1]. In other words, a higher total score on the full Maximization scale reveals a greater maximizing tendency. Scores were calculated by the participant's response to a 7-point Likert-type scale with 1 being the strongest disagreement and 7 being the strongest agreement for each item on the scale. Each response carried the weightage equal to its extent (numerical value) of agreement, with no question items being reversely keyed, responses to every question were simply summed up for calculating the total score of a participant. The total score revealed the extent of maximizing tendency of a participant.

Procedure

Data collection was done by presenting the questionnaire to each participant through online mode. By responding to the socio-demographic questionnaire, the participants indicated that their participation was voluntary. It was mandatory for all the participants to respond to every question from all parts of the questionnaire, in order to collect complete data about respective factors. There was a brief written debriefing following the completion of the data collection. Contact information was given to subjects in case they needed more information or were uncomfortable after being questioned.

The data obtained from the responses of the participants was stored securely and used for further analysis to find out the results. The process of reporting the results of the study consisted of two parts; first part involved describing the data through graphical representation and tabulating the respective means, standard deviations, minimum and maximum values for each dimension of the tests being evaluated. In the second part, appropriate correlational analysis was applied on the organized data and the results were reported. Comparison between the scores of research participants in the secure attachment dimension and maximization scale was also done in order to find their potential connection to each other. The results were accordingly discussed afterwards.

RESULTS

Received information of the participants through their responses to the cumulative questionnaire was tabulated and subsequently categorized according to different attachment styles and maximizing tendency. The further evaluation of data obtained in the form of scores of research participants on the four dimensions of ASQ and Maximization scale revealed their normal distribution. Representative graphs of normally distributed scores of the sample on different scales are shown in stored at https://osf.io/e73ty/files/osfstorage#.

Descriptive statistics and correlational research methods were used to test the hypothesized relationship between relevant variables. Results of the study were found through appropriate data analysis. The data obtained from the research was analysed using Python (version: 3.11) on the Jupyter notebook (version: nb 7). The results as obtained are summarized here.

Descriptive analysis

The tables consisting of descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations and range of analysed variables) of the obtained data are presented here.

Categories	Count	Mean	S.D.	Minimum	Maximum
Secure	102	26.15	5.18	12	39
Fearful	102	14.14	3.24	6	20
Preoccupied	102	17.83	5.34	6	30
Dismissive	102	16.05	2.76	8	20
Maximizing	102	58.77	11.95	20	84

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics

Analysis of relationship

Data obtained from the sample of participants was used to determine the correlations between described variables. The calculated correlation coefficients (Pearson's product moment correlation coefficients) of the sample can be further used to estimate the population correlation coefficient of young college students. The correlations between attachment styles; secure, fearful, preoccupied and dismissive and maximizing tendency is shown in table 2.

	Maximizing	Secure	Fearful	Preoccupied	Dismissive
Maximizing	1	-0.08	0.32	0.33	0.19

Table 2: Correlations

As the hypothesized correlations between variables of attachment and maximizing were directional (positive or negative), so, one-tailed test of significance is used to determine thestatistical significance of obtained correlations. Table 3 shows the alpha(α) level of significance at which the values of correlation coefficients are judged to be statistically significant and corresponding p-values (probability of correlations to occur by chance) for correlation coefficients between variables of attachment style and maximizing.

ATTACHMENT STYLES	DECISION MAKING	CORRELATION	P-VALUE	INTERPRETATION
SECURE	MAXIMIZING	-0.08	0.43	Correlation is not statistically significant
FEARFUL	MAXIMIZING	0.32	0.0011	Correlation is statistically significant
PREOCCUPIED	MAXIMIZING	0.33	0.0011	Correlation is statistically significant
DISMISSIVE	MAXIMIZING	0.19	0.05	Correlation is statistically significant

Table 3: Alpha level of significance and p-values

LEVEL OF SIGNIFICANCE (α) = 0.05

As per the obtained results and analysis of the correlation coefficients between attachment styles and maximizing decision making tendency at the alpha level of significance(α) =0.05, the statistical significance of the results was determined for each of their obtained probability values. It was observed that secure attachment style was not significantly correlated with maximizing decision-making tendency (p value>0.05), which implied that scores of the individuals on the Maximization scale were not affected by their respective scores on the secure attachment domain of the ASQ. Whereas, the scores on fearful, preoccupied and dismissive attachment domains had significant (p-value greater or equal to 0.05) positive correlations to the maximizing tendency. This can be translated into the relationship between these insecure attachment styles with the particular type of decision making. The fearful and preoccupied styles were found to be having a correlation with the maximizing tendency significant at about 89% lower than the probability of occurring by chance. The dismissive attachment domain on the other hand was found to be significantly correlated with the maximizing decision-making style at the minimum required probability of its occurrence by chance (p=0.05).

The comparison between the scores of participants on both, secure attachment style and maximization scale was done by determining the decision-making tendency (Intermediate/ Satisficing or Maximizing) corresponding to each above average (>14.5) score on secure attachment style. There were total 43 participants in all who scored above mean on secure attachment score. It revealed that more than 74% (32 out of 43) of participants having highly secure (above mean) attachment style are either in the intermediate or satisficer region of the maximization scale, as shown in table 4.

No. of Above_Mean_Secure scores	Maximization Scale score	Decision Making tendency
32	Less than 65	Intermediate/Satisficer
11	65 or more	Maximizing

Table 4: Comparison Between Secure Attachment Style and Maximizing Tendency

DISCUSSION

We aimed to determine the impact of attachment style, which are the results of childhood bonding of individuals to their caregivers, on the adult decision making style. In this study, decision making style was measured as the extent of a single continuum. As explained by Schwartz in his 13-item Maximization scale, maximizing tendency revealed a score equal to or higher than 65 on the scale whereas everyone scoring below this score indicated either intermediate or satisficing tendency on the scale [3]. The participant's scores on ASQ were measured and tabulated for each dimension of attachment style separately. This resulted in their separate descriptive statistics as summarized in table 1. Correlations between the attachment variables and decision making style, as indicated in table 2,

revealed that the total score of a participant on secure attachment dimension was not significantly correlated to the decision making tendencies as given by their insignificant Pearson's correlation coefficient(r), on all accepted probability levels between both the variables. This signifies that the extent of an individual's secure attachment does not affect their decision making tendencies in any significant way. They can either be satisficers, maximizers or maybe somewhere in between the continuum of decision making style. However, the comparison between the participant's scores on the secure attachment dimension and maximizing tendency in table 3 shows that out of total 43 individuals having above average (>26.15) score on secure attachment dimension, 32 (74.41%) have below 65 score on maximization scale which indicates intermediate and satisficing decision making style. Hence, the comparison potentially predicted that securely attached individuals tend not to be typical maximizers but rather choose a more satisficing approach towards decision making.

The calculation of correlation coefficient for the scores on fearful attachment dimension and maximization scale revealed a strong positive impact of one on the other at a probability of it occurring by chance to be less than 0.05 (5%). It indicates that young college students having a fearful attachment, which is characterized by having low self-esteem and interpersonal trust as well, tend to be maximizing in their decisions. Similarly strong correlation was found between preoccupied attachment dimension, defined by having low self-esteem but high interpersonal trust, and maximizing tendency in decision making of young college students. Low self-esteem being a common determinant of both these attachment styles seems to facilitate the maximizing tendency in them. The relationship of dismissive attachment style and maximizing was also positively correlated to a lesser degree, i.e. having a correlation coefficient slightly lower than the other two insecure attachment styles. However, it was also found statistically significant at the same level of significance (α=0.05). As also supported by the evidence provided by Wolfe & Betz, that dismissive attachment style correlates positively with fear of commitment, which also has significant negative correlation with the decision making self-efficacy in career, in both males and females [11]. This attachment dimension as characterized by having high self-esteem seems to compensate a little bit for maximizing tendency on the continuum but low interpersonal trust leads the young individuals to tentatively maximize in most of the conditions.

The previous literature shows that the decision making tendency of an individual as affected by their attachment styles also in-turn influence different dimensions of their general well-being, Zhu, discuss that maximizing tendency may lead to poor emotional experiences [12]. It could mean that variables of an individual's general well-being like happiness, depression, etc. are affected by their childhood attachment styles by having a relationship between them being mediated by decision making style. As Misuraca, describes a special kind of maximizing tendency to be negatively correlated with certain factors of well-being like self-esteem, optimism and life satisfaction whereas positively correlated to depression and regret [5]. Interestingly self-esteem happens to be an important determinant of attachment styles. A high level self-esteem characterizes secure and dismissive attachment dimensions whereas lower self-esteem is characteristic of fearful and preoccupied styles. So, attachment styles can have a significant impact over the factors of individual well-being as mediated by maximizing tendency. Maximizers also tend to suffer negative consequences in their interpersonal relationships due to having a negative correlation to variables of subjective well-being and positive correlations to insecure attachment styles with their characteristic decision making styles. Mikkelson & Pauley, specified the behaviours of maximizers in their relationships, which included their tendency to be aware of alternative options for partners and less satisfaction than satisficers [7]. Consequently, the tendency of maximizers to look for potential alternatives and their subjective assessment of gaining greater satisfaction from other available options of partners lead to the higher vulnerability and instability of their relationships as explained by Kelley, in their Social exchange theory [13].

Schwartz, explains the not so positive effects of the availability of too many choices, i.e., a favorable condition for maximizers, in terms of the difficulty it poses in front of individuals in all fields of life [14]. Misuraca & Teuscher, shown in the results of their study on the relative perception of time in maximizers and satisficers that the former put extra cognitive effort in completing a task than later [15]. Supported by Iyengar, who also found that maximizers face more cognitive load than satisficers and that maximizers felt more negative effects during the job-search process and were less satisfied with their jobs than satisfices [16].

Hence, through the results of the present study it can be satisfactorily concluded that childhood attachments styles significantly impact the adult decision making in terms of their maximizing and satisficing tendency. Additionally, maximizing tendency tends to lead the maximizers towards a tougher, less happier and dissatisfied life with respect to their general life outcomes. The stresses faced by people due to their maladaptive decision making styles and ways they adopt to cope with those stresses are accounted by Mann & Janis, in the conflict theory of decision making [17].

LIMITATIONS

However, there are more possible impacts of different decision-making strategies that influence people's overall wellbeing and are mediated by attachment patterns. The goal of this study was to investigate how childhood attachments to caregivers affect children's future propensity to make decisions. In this way, the general outcomes of people's lives can be understood as an indirect result of the strategies and tendencies people use to make decisions based on the characteristic attachments in their formative years. We only looked at this effect for the younger generation of college students, those between the ages of 18 and 25. More research is required to determine how these two variables relate to populations younger and older than this age range. The total sample size taken to represent the aforementioned population was 102 participants, which can also be increased and included in the similar studies to determine the effect on a deeper and more reliable level. It also needs to be discovered for the populations of various demographic backgrounds. The scope of this study is also limited in terms of its subject matter that investigates the

relationships of different attachment variables with the decision making variable as classified by Schwartz into maximizing and satisficing, whereas various other classifications of the decision making styles are also available in the literature, like the decision making styles as classified by Arroba, in their empirical study [18]. There is an immense use of such classification in consumer affairs as well as in the field of commercial and industrial decision making, as shown in the work of [19]. The understanding of impacts of childhood attachment factors in the commercial decision making could help in promoting sustainable decision making styles through the proper control of predictive factors.

FUTURE PROSPECTS

The potential of present study to motivate and facilitate future research can be pointed by below stated aspects:

- It is interesting to know that a particular relationship attachment style does or tend to impact decision making styles. Though the continuum of decision making style described by Schwartz possess the possibilities of potentially various kinds of decision making tendencies along the continuum than a seemingly dichotomous classification of them into maximizing and satisficing [3]. The exploration of those other decision making tendencies in terms of their potentially significant relationships with the attachment styles and other important variables is a certain prospect to be applied in the near future in the context of present study. Most importantly, the tendencies of securely attached individuals in making decisions need to be researched to fill the gap in current knowledge.
- The factors of interpersonal trust and self-esteem, with respect to their contribution to the characteristic attachment style of an individual, needs to be correlated separately with the variables of decision making styles and other important variables of use.
- The future of sustainable development relies upon the efficient and effective decision making by world leaders and other significant decision makers and hence a study like this could help monitor the inevitable, antecedent effects of some invisible factors like childhood attachment with the caregivers or the attachment styles in general which tend to alter the characteristic ways in which individuals make important decisions. Further use of such a study in the relevant fields will be fruitful.
- Due to the lesser life satisfaction, emotional instability and potentially maladaptive ways of decision making by maximizers in their important decisions of life they might be at a higher risk of suicide ideation and attempt. Hence, the relationship between decision-making and suicide ideation as mediated by the attachment variables should be studied in order to contribute to the understanding of suicidal tendencies in the relevant population and help management studies to develop suicide prevention techniques based on the data.

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