Anxious and Avoidant Attachment: Differences in Emotion Regulation Dimensions

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Abstract

Introduction. This study investigated the differences in emotion regulation dimensions between individuals with anxious and avoidant attachment styles. The initial hypothesis predicted that those with avoidant attachment would lack emotional awareness and clarity, while individuals with anxious attachment would struggle with impulse control and goal-directed behavior. **Method.** Participants primarily consisted of 143 university students, recruited via the research platform SONA. Self-report measures were used to assess attachment styles (Experience in Close Relationship Scale), and emotion regulation (Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale). **Results.** Awareness resulted having a strong association only with avoidant attachment style. Clarity resulted in a strong association with avoidant attachment style, and a weak association with anxious attachment style. Impulse control resulted in a weak association with avoidant attachment style and a strong association with anxious attachment style. Goals resulted having a weak association only with anxious attachment style. Non-Acceptance resulted having strong association with both anxious and avoidant attachment style. Strategies resulted in a weak association with avoidant attachment style and a strong association with anxious attachment style. **Conclusion.** The study highlights significant differencial effects of attachment styles on various dimensions of emotion regulation. The findings align with previous research on attachment and emotion regulation. The study's results provide valuable insights into the nuanced dynamics of attachment styles and their relation with dimensions of emotion regulation. Further research should aim to replicate and expand upon these findings to enhance our understanding of these complex processes and to inform the development of interventions tailored to individuals with different attachment patterns.

Keywords: Emotion Regulation, Avoidant Attachment Style, Anxious Attachment Style.

Anxious and Avoidant Attachment: Differences in Emotion Regulation Dimensions

According to John Bowlby's Attachment theory, each individual is born with the instinct of bonding to their parent or primary caregiver. This is in line with the evolutionary theory: the newborn creates a bond that helps increase chances of their survival and of the species. Attachment to the caregiver and its quality is greatly determined by the interactions between the two, but also by the type of attachment that characterizes the parent (Sonkin, 2005). Since the infant is not capable of regulating his or her emotions by themselves, they learn how to do so from their parents. Therefore, it is of great importance how the parent or caregiver deals with their emotions since the infant will observe and learn from that behavior. Attachment style developed during the first two years of life will have a valuable influence on future connections and relationships (Li, 2023).

Ainsworth et al. (2015) coined the definition of two main attachment styles: secure attachment, and insecure attachment, which then divides into avoidant, and anxious. All types of attachment are characterized by four distinct features: proximity maintenance, separation distress, safe haven, and secure base (Sonkin, 2005). As the first two features can be self-explanatory, the latter ones need description: safe haven is used for describing the possibility of being protected by the caregiver in case of danger, while secure base is the ability to venture the world while being protected by the caregiver. All attachment styles differ in how they perceive and act upon these features. Anxious attachment style is characterized by separation anxiety and the need for maintaining contact; avoidant attachment style by excessive independence and distance. Compared to a secure attachment style, both these two insecure attachment styles struggle with anxiety connected to attachment: they feel distressed and ambivalent when dealing with emotions and their regulation. However, Ainsworth et al. (2015) observed how avoidant attachment style differs from anxious in emotion regulation by repressing the need for proximity with the caregiver, even if they still feel the distress of the

separation (Sonkin, 2005). Available data shows that insecure attachment is a risk factor for deficits in various psychological functions including emotion regulation (Fearon et al, 2010).

Emotional regulation is defined as the attempt to regulate, and evaluate emotions, by highlighting some aspects and dimming others, trying to understand their meaning and origin (Gratz & Roemer, 2004). Emotional regulation can be divided into a hyper-activating strategy and into a deactivating strategy. Anxious attachment style makes use of the hyper-activating strategy, as the individual tries to gain closeness and attention from the caregiver due to their anxiety and need of reassurance. On the other hand, avoidant attachment style uses the deactivating strategy to detach from emotions and unmet needs (Stevens, 2014). In this way, the individual escapes the reality of the uncomfortable feeling and tries to compensate by believing they are not affected by it. Emotional regulation, divided into these two main strategies, are categorized in six dimensions (Gratz and Roemer, 2004): lack of awareness of emotional responses, lack of clarity of emotional responses, non-acceptance of emotional responses, limited access to emotion regulation strategies perceived as effective, difficulties controlling impulses when experiencing negative emotions, and difficulties engaging in goal-directed behaviors when experiencing negative emotions.

A theoretical attempt has been made to explain the association between attachment and emotion regulation (Mikulincer, 2003). It assumes that early contacts with caregivers help people form internal working models of attachment. These internal working models have a big impact on how people control their emotions. According to the model, healthy emotion management techniques are linked to secure attachment, whereas unhealthy emotion regulation techniques are linked to insecure attachment. In addition, people with avoidant attachment styles often turn to coping strategies like repression or detachment from sensations when confronted with strong emotions. They rely more on techniques for controlling emotions, such as reducing or avoiding them. Individuals with an anxious

attachment style, on the other hand, frequently exhibit strong emotions to get the caregivers' attention and emotional support. As a result, it can be concluded that people who have an anxious attachment style are more likely to use impulse control when trying to regulate their emotions.

Our knowledge of the association between attachment styles and emotion regulation has been improved by several papers. Fonagy et al. (2002) conducted a comprehensive study on the developmental roots of emotion regulation, highlighting the importance of early attachment experiences in determining an individual's ability to regulate emotions effectively. Their findings suggested that people with disorganized attachment patterns frequently struggle with emotion regulation. Building upon the work of Fonagy et al. (2002), Stern and Cassidy (2018) examined the relationship between attachment styles and emotion regulation, highlighting the complex dynamics between attachment and the regulation of emotional experiences. Their research highlighted how individuals with insecure attachment styles tend to employ less adaptive emotion regulation strategies, such as suppression or avoidance, which can prompt emotional dysregulation and hinder healthy psychological adjustment. Henschel et al. (2020) and Obeldobel et al. (2023) conducted studies that provide further support for the prevalence of maladaptive emotion regulation strategies among individuals with insecure attachment styles. Henschel et al (2020) highlighted how people with anxious attachment have more difficulty with emotion control than secure and avoidant individuals. Obeldobel et al.'s (2023) findings revealed that avoidant attachment is related to low emotion reactivity and recovery. However, both studies emphasized the need for additional research to explore the unique contributions of avoidant and anxious attachment dimensions to emotion regulation.

Although there has been significant progress in our understanding of the relationship between attachment styles and emotion regulation, there is still a substantial gap in our

knowledge of the relationship between emotion regulation dimensions and attachment styles since the available evidence is limited. Therefore, it is essential to comprehend the variations in emotional regulation dimensions between people with anxious and avoidant attachment styles. On one hand, it is expected that avoidant attachment would have a stronger association, indicated by beta coefficients and effect sizes, with awareness and clarity of emotions compared to anxious attachment (Stevens, 2014). On the other hand, it is expected that anxious attachment would have a stronger association with impulse control and goal-directed behaviors compared to avoidant attachment (Stevens, 2014). No a priori hypotheses were drawn regarding the dimensions of non-acceptance and strategies, due to lack of evidence in the literature. Investigating these variations would reveal the features of emotional regulation connected to each attachment style. This paper's research topic examines how people with anxious and avoidant attachment styles differ in the dimensions of emotion regulation. Examining these variations helps us comprehend how attachment patterns affect emotional regulation and identifies potential intervention tailored for individuals needs.

Method

Participants

Participants consisted of a convenience sample of 133 first year students at the University of Groningen. They were recruited through the SONA system, where they were compensated by research credits. The sample included 101 females and 29 males (and 3 labeled as "other"). Of the participants, 50,4% were between the ages of sixteen and twenty, 47,4% were between the ages of twenty and twenty-five, and the rest 2,3% were above twenty-five years old.

Materials and Procedure

All the information about the study, including goals, methods, potential risks, and rewards was given to the participants via Qualtrics. Upon consent, the participants provided

responses to the surveys. The Repair Mood Question, to describe a recent positive memory, was another section of the survey and was used to help the participants to restore their mood after the more stressful parts of the questionnaire. Additionally, participants received a thorough explanation of the research hypotheses under examination in a more detailed manner, as no deception was used. Participants received confirmation of confidentiality and contact information for psychological help in case they needed psychological support due to potentially distressing content of the study. The study was approved by the Ethical Committee of the Psychology Department at the University of Groningen and complied with ethical standards.

Measures

Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale (DERS)

The DERS is a self-report assessment for adults, which consists of 36 questions, using a 5-point Likert Scale, (1 = "almost never", 5 = "almost always") (Gratz & Roemer, 2004). This Scale makes a distinction between six subscales: non-acceptance of emotional responses, difficulties engaging in goal-directed behaviors, impulse control difficulties, lack of emotional awareness, limited access to emotion regulation strategies, and lack of emotional clarity. Two examples of this type of questions are "I am confused about how I feel", and "When I am upset, I start feeling very bad about myself". In this study, the total score, and the scores for each subscale were computed by adding them up and taking the average. Moreover, eleven items were reversed from this scale. High internal consistency was observed by Gratz and Roemer (2004) and Hallion et al. (2018), with Cronbach's alpha values of 0.93 ($\alpha = .93$) and subscale alphas above 0.80 ($\alpha > .80$). These results show that the items have high internal consistency. The DERS has also been shown in previous research to have psychometric validity (Gratz & Roemer, 2004; Hallion et al., 2018). According to Gratz and Roemer (2004), who reported a correlation coefficient of 0.88 ($\rho = .88$, $p < .01$) in their study,

the DERS also exhibits strong test-retest reliability. Additionally, the DERS has been shown

to be predictive of treatment outcomes by Hallion et al. (2018). Therefore, the Cronbach's

alpha coefficient of 0.95 which was found in the current sample is consistent with the findings

of previous research (Gratz & Roemer, 2004; Hallion et al., 2018).

Experience in Close Relationship-Revised Scale (ECR-R)

The self-report assessment called the ECR-R uses a 7-point Likert scale (from 1 for

"strongly agree" to 7 for "strongly disagree") to assess insecure attachment in romantic

relationships. Based on the original, more thorough but redundant ECR, Fraley et al. created

the revised version presented here in 2000. The two subdomains of the scale, anxious

attachment, and avoidant attachment, both have 18 items. While answering questions like "I

worry that romantic partners won't care about me as much as I care about them" from anxious

attachment style items, and "I prefer not to be too close to romantic partners" from avoidant

attachment style items, participants were required to reflect on their most recent or ongoing

romantic relationship, or if without a past relationship, they could imagine such connection.

The relevant 18 items were averaged to produce the ratings for attachment anxiety and

avoidance (Fraley et al., 2000). Of these, fourteen scores were reversed. According to

Fairchild and Finney (2006), the internal consistency of the avoidance subscale is equal to

0.93 (α =.927) and 0.92 (α =.917) for anxious attachment subscale. Cronbach's alpha in the

current sample was equal to 0.96, which is consistent with other findings (Fairchild & Finney,

2006; Fraley et al., 2000). This suggests that the ECR-R scale has a high level of general

reliability.

Data Analysis

To test the hypotheses of this study, a multiple regression analysis and a bivariate

correlation with a Bonferroni correction were conducted. To garantee unbiased results, the

assumptions for the multiple regression analysis in this thesis were performed on SPSS. A

linear relationship between the independent and dependent variables was found by applying a scatterplot to the variables. The independent variables' multicollinearity, based on the variance inflation factor (*VIF*), was examined. The variables were found unproblematic, with values below the reccomended cut-off score of four (*VIF* = 1,22; tolerance = 0,82). It was discovered that the residuals lacked any patterns or relationships and were independent. The residuals' variability was checked with a scatterplot and was found to be consistent across all levels of the independent variables, proving that the assumption of constant variance was met. The residuals' normality was also examined, and it was shown that they very closely matched a normal distribution. In the end, outliers were investigated, but none were found. Overall, these data support the reliability and validity of the multiple regression analysis conducted in this study.

Results

Of the 143 participants who took part in the present study, 10 participants failed to complete it, resulting in a final total of 133 participants. The descriptive statistics of all the participants are listed in Table 1.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics

	Mean	*SD*	Min	Max	*n*
ECR_ total	125,04	36,47	46	213	132
Anxious Attachment	64,95	22,46	23	115	132
Avoidant Attachment	59,95	20,77	23	114	133
DERS	91,94	23,71	52	158	130

Non-acceptance	15,27	6,48	6	30	132
Goals	16,87	4,71	5	25	132
Impulse	12,70	5,12	6	30	133
Awareness	14,85	4,97	6	29	133
Strategies	19,78	6,92	9	37	132
Clarity	13,45	1,74	9	18	133

Additionally, a bivariate correlation was run, to check for the multicollinearity of the variables. We used a Bonferroni correction to decrease Type I error. The results are showed below, in Table 2.

Table 2

Bivariate Correlations between DERS and Attachment Styles

	Non-Acceptance	Goals	Impulse	Awareness	Strategies	Clarity	n
Anxious	.51	.32	.47	.16	.53	.35	132
	(< .01*)	(< .01*)	(<.01*)	(.06)	(<.01*)	(<.01*)	
Avoidant	.48	-.03	.21	.57	.34	.58	133
	(<.01*)	(.71)	(.02)	(<.01*)	(<.01*)	(<.01*)	

Note. * $p < .008$

Since none of the correlation coefficients are above .80, the assumption of multicollinearity is met. Moreover, the small value of *VIF* (1.21) indicates lack of multicollinearity problems with the study.

To understand the differences between anxious and avoidant attachment regarding the dimensions of emotion regulation, multiple regression analyses were run. The associations between emotion regulation and anxious and avoidant attachment styles were examined using the provided data. The Non-Acceptance dimension showed a significant association with strong effect sizes with both avoidant ($R^2 = 0.22$, $\beta = 0.45$, $p < .01$) and anxious attachment ($R^2 = 0.26$, $\beta = 0.44$, $p < .01$). The Goals dimension was significantly related to anxious attachment with weak effect sizes ($R^2 = 0.11$, $\beta = 0.24$, $p < .01$), but this association was not significant for avoidant attachment ($R^2 < .001$, $\beta = -0.03$, $p = .71$). The impulse dimension showed significant association for both avoidant and anxious attachment. However, avoidant attachment style had a weaker association with this subscale ($R^2 = 0.45$, $\beta = 0.16$, $p < .01$), compared to anxious attachment ($R^2 = 0.22$, $\beta = 0.32$, $p < .01$). The Awareness dimension was positively and significantly related to avoidant attachment with strong effect size ($R^2 = 0.33$, $\beta = 0.41$, $p < .01$), but this association was not significant for anxious attachment ($R^2 = 0.03$, $\beta = 0.12$, $p < .06$). The Strategies dimension showed significant association with both avoidant and anxious attachment. However, the association was stronger for anxious attachment ($R^2 = 0.28$, $\beta = 0.37$, $p < .01$) than avoidant attachment ($R^2 = 0.12$, $\beta = 0.26$, $p < .01$). Finally, the clarity dimension showed significant association with both avoidant and anxious attachment. However, this association was stronger for avoidant attachment ($R^2 = 0.33$, $\beta = 0.40$, $p < .01$) than for anxious attachment ($R^2 = 0.12$, $\beta = 0.23$, $p < .01$).

Discussion

The present study aimed to investigate the differences in emotional regulation dimensions between individuals with anxious and avoidant attachment styles. The findings provide valuable insights into how attachment patterns are related to various aspects of emotional regulation.

Consistent with prior studies (Stevens, 2014; Wei et al., 2018), our results revealed significant associations between emotion regulation dimensions and both anxious and avoidant attachment styles. This supports the notion that attachment patterns play a role in shaping individuals' emotional regulation strategies and capabilities.

Comparing our findings to the study by Stevens (2014), similar patterns emerged. In the previous study, avoidant attachment had a stronger association with awareness and clarity of emotions compared to anxious attachment. Our study replicates this finding, as individuals with avoidant attachment demonstrated a strong association with the Awareness and Clarity dimensions. This suggests that individuals with avoidant attachment may possess a heightened ability to recognize, understand, and articulate their emotions, potentially due to their reliance on detachment and self-reliance as coping strategies (Wei et al., 2018). In contrast, individuals with anxious attachment did not show a significant association with the Awareness dimension, indicating potential challenges in accessing and understanding their emotions (Wei et al., 2018).

In terms of the impulse dimension, our results are consistent with previous findings (Stevens, 2014; Wei et al., 2018). Both anxious and avoidant attachment styles exhibited a significant association, indicating difficulties in regulating impulsive behaviors. However, our study revealed a stronger association between the impulse dimension and anxious attachment compared to avoidant attachment. This finding suggests that individuals with anxious attachment may face greater challenges in managing impulsive tendencies, which is in line with their tendency to experience heightened emotional reactivity and distress in interpersonal relationships (Wei et al., 2018). Interventions targeting impulse control strategies, emotional regulation skills, and coping mechanisms may be particularly relevant for individuals with anxious attachment patterns.

Regarding the Goals dimension, our results are in line with previous research. Stevens (2014) found that individuals with anxious attachment experienced difficulties in goal-directed behaviors, which is consistent with our findings of a weak but significant association between anxious attachment and the Goals dimension. This suggests that individuals with anxious attachment may encounter obstacles in setting and pursuing goals due to their heightened levels of anxiety and worry. Interventions focused on goal setting, planning, and self-efficacy enhancement may be particularly beneficial for individuals with anxious attachment styles (Wei et al., 2018).

Comparing our findings to a previous study, Stevens (2014) also found a significant association between non-acceptance of emotions and both anxious and avoidant attachment styles. Our study replicates this finding, indicating that individuals with anxious and avoidant attachment patterns face challenges in accepting their emotions. These difficulties may stem from different underlying processes for each attachment style. For individuals with anxious attachment, the fear of rejection and abandonment may lead to a tendency to suppress or avoid acknowledging their emotions, as they perceive their emotions as overwhelming or unwarranted (Wei et al., 2018). Conversely, individuals with avoidant attachment may struggle with accepting and embracing their emotions due to their inclination towards emotional detachment and self-reliance to protect themselves from vulnerability (Wei et al., 2018).

Another finding of the current study was significant associations between the Strategies dimension and both anxious and avoidant attachment styles, supporting previous research (Stevens, 2014; Wei et al., 2018). However, the association was stronger for individuals with anxious attachment, indicating a broader range of emotion regulation strategies employed by this attachment style. This might be due to individuals with anxious attachment needing to cope with their heightened emotional reactivity and sensitivity. These

findings emphasize the importance of exploring and addressing the effectiveness and adaptiveness of various strategies used by individuals with different attachment styles, as interventions may need to be tailored accordingly (Wei et al., 2018).

It is important to acknowledge the limited availability of research papers specifically addressing the associations between attachment styles and emotion regulation dimensions, which indicates a gap in the existing literature. This scarcity of research can be attributed to the complexity and multidimensionality of both attachment and emotion regulation constructs, making it challenging to disentangle their unique contributions (see e.g., Thompson, 1994; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2019). The limited research on this specific topic highlights the innovation of the present study and the need for further research to explore the complex associations between attachment styles and emotion regulation dimensions. Future studies addressing this gap would facilitate a more comprehensive understanding of the topic, providing a stronger foundation for interventions and clinical applications tailored to individuals' attachment-related needs.

Based on the findings related to these distinct attachment patterns, it becomes crucial for psychologists to employ different approaches when addressing emotions, depending on the client's attachment style. Individuals with an avoidant attachment pattern could potentially benefit more from therapeutic techniques that emphasize enhancing emotional awareness. Conversely, clients exhibiting an anxious attachment pattern may benefit from therapeutic advantages from acquiring emotion control techniques, which help them effectively manage their intense emotions. Given that individuals with anxious attachment are inherently more focused on their feelings compared to others, learning strategies to regulate their emotions and avoid harmful behaviors can be highly adaptive for them.

Limitations and Future Directions

There are several limitations to consider regarding the sample, study design and measures employed in this research. Firstly, the sample used in the study primarily consisted of university students, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other populations. University students may possess unique characteristics and experiences that differ from individuals in other age groups or life stages, thus potentially impacting the external validity of the results. Future studies should aim to include more diverse samples encompassing different age ranges and socioeconomic backgrounds to enhance the generalizability of the findings.

Secondly, the study design employed was cross-sectional, which restricts the ability to establish causal relationships between variables. Cross-sectional studies provide a snapshot of data collected at a specific point in time, preventing the examination of how variables may change over time or influence one another. Longitudinal designs could offer a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamic associations between attachment styles and emotion regulation. Future research should consider employing such designs to provide more robust evidence on the causal relationships between these constructs.

Another limitation pertains to the measures used, which relied on self-report assessments. Self-report measures are subject to various biases, including social desirability and recall biases (see e.g., Robins et al., 2009; Schwarz, 2007). Participants may provide responses based on their perception of what is expected or may have difficulty accurately recalling their emotional experiences. Additionally, self-report measures rely on participants' subjective interpretations and may not fully capture the complexity of emotions or the nuances of attachment styles and emotion regulation. Future studies could incorporate multiple assessment methods, such as behavioral observations, to provide a more comprehensive and objective assessment of these constructs.

Another drawback of the current study is that fearful attachment style, as indicated by high scores on both anxious and avoidant attachment dimensions, was not measured. These people might use both hyper-activating and deactivating emotion regulation techniques. Therefore future research should be directed into examining the relationship between fearful attachment and emotion regulation dimensions.

Conclusion

Our early experiences can have a big impact on how we interact with others later in life. Relationships that are healthier and more enjoyable frequently result from a secure attachment type. In conclusion, using data from first-year psychology students at the University of Groningen, a multiple regression analysis discovered a significant relationship between insecure attachment styles and emotion regulation, and it also investigated the strength of these associations for each dimension of DERS, compared across avoidant and anxious attachment: awareness resulted having a strong association only with avoidant attachment style. Clarity resulted in a strong association with avoidant attachment style, and a weak association with anxious attachment style. Impulse control resulted in a weak association with avoidant attachment style and a strong association with anxious attachment style. Goals resulted having a weak association only with anxious attachment style. Non-Acceptance resulted having strong association with both anxious and avoidant attachment style. Strategies resulted in a weak association with avoidant attachment style and a strong association with anxious attachment style. These findings are consistent with Stevens' (2014) earlier study and fill a research gap in this field of inquiry, as there is limited evidence. Our findings emphasize the need for personalized psychological interventions that take into account each person's unique emotional needs and attachment styles. More research in this area will provide a more comprehensive understanding of the relationships between attachment styles and emotion regulation, allowing for designing more effective interventions.

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