

**Attachment as Correlated to Emotional Problems and Romantic Relationships**

Rev. Father Greer Godsey

Psychology Department, University of South Carolina Aiken

### **Attachment as Correlated to Emotional Problems and Romantic Relationships**

John Bowlby developed the social-emotional developmental theory of attachment to explain an infant's connections with their caregiver/parent (Delgado et al., 2022). Social-emotional development says that a child's development shaped by their social and emotional connections (Coleman & Cross, 2000). Subsequent studies conducted by Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, and Wall (2015) found that children could be classified into attachment styles by their reaction to caregiver separation. One such classification is the secure attachment where a child's needs are met and they are shown the emotional connection that is most needed during this time of development (Ainsworth et al., 2015). When their emotional needs are not met or the parental figure may be inattentive or disconnected, they may fall into one of two categories: insecure ambivalent or insecure avoidant attachment (Delgado et al., 2022). A fourth group emerged who were difficult to classify and were later called disorganized (typically called Dismissive Avoidance) (Delgado et al., 2022). Because of their difficulty processing information on an interpersonal level, they tend to have the opposite results of those with secure attachment (Venta & Sharp, 2015). Many studies over the years have examined the connection between parental/caregiver attachment as a future predictor of the success or satisfaction in romantic and peer relationships (Delgado et al., 2022; Ainsworth et al., 2015). These studies show that there is a strong correlation between individuals with emotional symptoms (i.e., depression or anxiety) and attachment issues (Delgado et al., 2022) which we believe will also equate to dissatisfaction in their love life. Individuals with insecure attachment style of any subtype are at a higher risk of developing depression and anxiety (Delgado et al., 2022). In addition, early attachment relationships are predictive of later dissatisfaction in their love life (Nascimento et al., 2021).

### **Attachment Styles and Emotional Symptoms**

A wealth of evidence suggests that children with difficult attachment relationships develop emotional problems (Peterson et al., 2017; Bretherton & Munholland, 2008; Delgado et al., 2022; Marganska et al., 2013; Pflieger, 2009; Vollmann et al., 2019). These emotional issues can range from depression to feelings of worthlessness to fear of abandonment (Peterson et al., 2017). People who have secure attachment styles are most likely to have a positive outlook on themselves as well as be emotionally stable (Marganska et al., 2013).

Individuals with preoccupied attachment (anxious/ambivalent) style tend to feel like they do not deserve love, but seek the attention of others as a form of validation (Marganska et al., 2013). They also tend to become isolated and self-sufficient as well as they are not as likely to develop positive relationships with their peers later in life (Delgado et al., 2022). Those with preoccupied avoidance (avoidant) attachment style tend to feel unworthy of love and expect others to not love them either (Marganska et al., 2013). Dismissive avoidance (called disorganized by Delgado) attachment style tends to feel positively about themselves but think negatively about everyone else (Marganska et al., 2013). These distinctive styles tend to be caused by how they are treated earlier in life by their parent/caregiver (Marganska et al., 2013). Because of this treatment as a child, these individuals are more likely to also exhibit symptoms of depression and generalized anxiety disorder (Marganska et al., 2013).

### **Attachment Styles and Romantic Relationship Satisfaction**

The current literature on attachment styles and love life satisfaction show a link between people with preoccupied attachment style and dismissive avoidance attachment style that leads to dissatisfaction in their love life. People with preoccupied attachment style would be more likely to be anxious about being rejected or abandoned by their partner (Nascimento et al., 2021). These individuals would likely expect their partner to become disinterested and betray them

(Nascimento et al., 2021). Those with fearful avoidance style tend to isolate themselves from others as a way to comfort themselves (Nascimento et al., 2021). These individuals tend to also be less aggressive and expect little to nothing from their partners (Nascimento et al., 2021). They also tend to be less invested in their relationships and thus are less open to their partner's needs (Nascimento et al., 2021).

### **Emotional Symptoms and Romantic Relationship Satisfaction**

Studies conducted by Peterson, Delgado, and their colleagues into the link between the emotional symptoms and romantic relationship satisfaction had varying results. They showed that childhood emotional maltreatment (i.e., “a repeated pattern of caregiver behavior or extreme incident(s) that convey to children that they are worthless, flawed, unloved, unwanted, endangered, or of value only in meeting another's needs” (American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children, 1995)) survivors have less relationship satisfaction overall (Peterson et al., 2017). Individuals who experienced emotional symptoms tied to their childhood maltreatment tend to use avoidance techniques in their relationships (Peterson et al., 2017). In Delgado and colleagues (2022) review of the data on peer relationships and early childhood attachment styles, they found that those with secure attachment tend to have more well-rounded attachment to their peers and they were more accepted by their peer group. It would make sense that because of these they would find less satisfaction in their relationships than individuals who had secure attachment styles. This attachment with their peers makes it much easier for them to

### **Current Study**

The current study will attempt to replicate the previous findings (viz., Peterson et al., 2017; Bretherton & Munholland, 2008; Delgado et al., 2022; Marganska et al., 2013; Pflieger, 2009; Vollmann et al., 2019) in a sample of young adults. We hypothesize that certain

attachment styles will equate to more emotional symptoms. We also hypothesize that certain attachment styles will equate to less romantic relationship satisfaction and that more emotional symptoms will equate to less romantic relationship satisfaction.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Participants ( $N=103$ , socio-demographics not tracked) were asked to complete an online survey for this study. Of those that started the survey (134), 103 completed this online survey. There were 31 incomplete surveys returned.

### **Procedure**

This study relied on posting of the survey on Discord, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat as well as request for friends and family members to fill out the survey. Our survey was included in a larger survey being conducted by other students in the Psychology Department at the University of South Carolina Aiken. In addition to our survey questions, participants answered a series of questions concerning the dark triad as well as questions about anxiety. Participants were excluded if they were under the age of 18 or did not complete the full survey. All participants voluntarily participated in this study. No participants were compensated. Informed consent was not required as this study was exempt from IRB approval and from the informed consent process. Instead, we completed a Letter of Invitation since this study was exempt from IRB approval.

### **Measures**

#### ***Adult Attachment and Relationship Satisfaction***

Participants of this study were asked to answer 17 questions from the Adult Attachment Questionnaire (AAQ, Simpson et al., 1996) which uses a seven-point Likert scale to assess the

participants attachment to those individuals they are dating or in a close relationship with. The questions asked center on how they view their own attachment to other people in their lives (e.g., “*I find it difficult to trust others completely*”). This survey’s answers ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Responses were composited across the 17 questions asked with the lower score on the questions meaning a greater attachment security (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .859$ ).

### ***Emotional Symptoms as related to Attachment and Relationship Satisfaction***

Participants were asked to answer 5 questions from the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ, Goodman et al., 1998) using the three-point scale to rate their emotional symptoms and peer attachment. For this study, we only focused on the questions linked to emotional symptoms (e.g., “*I get a lot of headaches, stomach-aches or sickness*”). Answers to this survey were 1 (*not true*), 2 (*somewhat true*), and 3 (*certainly true*). Responses were composited across the 5 questions asked with the higher score on the questions meaning a greater emotional symptom (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .841$ ).

### ***Romantic Relationship Dissatisfaction***

Participants were asked to answer 5 questions from the Satisfaction with Love Life Scale (SWLLS, Neto, 2005) which uses a seven-point Likert scale to assess the participants attachment to those individuals they are dating or in a close relationship with. The question gives a general overview of the respondent’s satisfaction with their overall romantic relationship (e.g., “*In most ways my love life is close to my ideal*”). This survey’s answers ranged from 1 (*strongly agree*) to 7 (*strongly disagree*). Responses were composited across the 5 questions asked with the higher score on the questions meaning they are dissatisfied with their love life (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .954$ ).

## Results

All data was normally distributed ( $skew_{AAQ}=.100$ ,  $skew_{SDQ}=.168$ ,  $skew_{SWLLS}=.456$ ;  $kurtosis_{AAQ}=-.271$ ,  $kurtosis_{SDQ}=-1.224$ ,  $kurtosis_{SWLLS}=-1.084$ ; see Figure 1, 2, and 3). Because of the kurtosis above an absolute value of 1, we checked for outliers by tripling the standard deviation and then adding and subtracting that value from the mean. The upper limit for the SDQ was 3.622 and the lower limit was .064. The upper limit for the SWLLS was 9.555 and the lower limit was -2.433. A review of the data using this process found no outliers. Analyses of the data was conducted using JASP (Love et al., 2019). Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations are reported in Table 1 and 2.

### Pearson's Correlations

Pearson's Correlations (see Table 2) revealed a significant positive correlation of association related to attachment issues on emotional maladjustment (i.e., depression and/or anxiety). That is, when an adult has come from a maladjusted family life where attachment was insecure, the individual tends to suffer from depression and/or anxiety. The same correlations exist between attachment issues and dissatisfaction in love life. We also see the same correlation between emotional issues and dissatisfaction in their love life.

### Mediation Analysis

Mediation analyses revealed a significant indirect effect on attachment issues that leads to dissatisfaction in love life through emotional issues (see Table 3 and Figure 4). That is, adults who have issues with attachment from their childhood tend to be more emotionally maladjusted which leads to dissatisfaction in their love lives.

### **Discussion**

The results of this study provided significant information about how attachment issues that are linked to emotional symptoms which has a significant bearing on dissatisfaction with love life. The present study showed that our hypothesis that individuals who had attachment issues as children would likely develop emotional symptoms that would lead to dissatisfaction in their love life later in life was true. Mediation results established a clear link between attachment, emotional symptoms, and love life dissatisfaction as shown in previous studies (Delgado et al., 2022; Marganska et al., 2013; Nascimento et al., 2021; Peterson et al., 2017; Pflieger, 2009; Simpson et al., 1996; Vollmann et al., 2019).

Our findings support the findings of previous studies that attachment issues in childhood can aid in the development of emotional symptoms later in life (Marganska et al., 2013). These emotional issues that are tied to their attachment issues will result in dissatisfaction in their love life as previously noted in past studies (Nascimento et al., 2021; Peterson et al., 2017; Vollmann et al., 2019). This study attempted to replicate the findings of previous studies. Our data shows that the previous studies' findings still hold true.

### **Limitations**

The following paragraphs will look at the limitations that were found to exist in our study.

The Love Life Satisfaction Scale used for this study is a scale that had love life questions added which may not have been the best way to measure this scale. Some people answering this questionnaire may not have been in a relationship and may have been answering those questions hypothetically which would also tend to skew the results.



Our study did not have a wide variety of age groups represented, thus not giving us a broad range of people with long-term relationships to evaluate. It could be that people who are older have less issues with anxiety and depression and thus have more satisfaction in their love lives.

This study did not consider the gender or race of the respondent. Having a larger group of people from diverse backgrounds answering this study may have changed the results of this study given that more people in long-term relationships may have more satisfaction in those relationships. Diversifying the participants when it comes to race or ethnicity might yield very different results. The fact that some ethnicities view love life differently may also have a bearing on the study. Females may have a different view than males when it comes to attachment, anxiety and depression, and their overall love life satisfaction.

The study was extremely limited in the number of participants. A larger number of participants would have given a better understanding of the impact of attachment styles and love life dissatisfaction.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

This study reinforces previous studies findings which show that the issues experienced in attachment styles coupled with emotional issues and their effect on dissatisfaction in love life are the same as before COVID-19. This study shows that a fair amount of people continue to deal with love life dissatisfaction and emotional issues likely stemming from their past attachment issues. I would like to see more people seek therapy before they get into relationships so that they can confront their attachment issues as well as emotional issues. My hope would be that by confronting these issues they would find more satisfaction in their love lives. Many states have started offering discounts on marriage licenses if the couple shows proof of pre-marital

counseling (National Healthy Marriage Resource Center, 2007). This is a great idea and other states should join this movement.

I would like to see more studies into emotional issues and attachment styles and how they affect love life satisfaction that take into account the differences in the data between genders and races. Do African-Americans or Asian-Americans experience dissatisfaction in their love life if they have a history of emotional issues stemming from childhood attachment issues? Future studies could focus on this and the gender of the individual respondents to find if these results are universal or if gender and ethnicity affect the results.

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**Table 1***Descriptive Statistics of Attachment, Emotional Issues, and Love Life Dissatisfaction***Descriptive Statistics**

	<b>Attachment</b>	<b>Emotional</b>	<b>Love Life</b>
Mean	3.603	1.843	3.561
Std. Deviation	0.981	0.593	1.998
Minimum	1.118	1.000	1.000
Maximum	6.176	3.000	7.000

**Table 2***Correlation between Attachment, Emotional Issues, and Love Life Dissatisfaction***Pearson's Correlations**

<b>Variable</b>		<b>Attachment</b>	<b>Emotional</b>	<b>Love Life</b>
1. Attachment	Pearson's r	—		
2. Emotional	Pearson's r	0.571***	—	
3. Love Life	Pearson's r	0.200*	0.289**	—

\* p &lt; .05, \*\* p &lt; .01, \*\*\* p &lt; .001

**Table 3***Indirect effect of attachment on Love Life Dissatisfaction via Emotional Issues*

Indirect effect of attachment on Love Life Dissatisfaction via Emotional Problems						
	95% CI					
Effect	B	SE	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
AAQ -> SDQ	0.345	0.049	6.988	<.001**	0.247	0.443
SDQ-> SWLLS	0.871	0.393	2.219	0.029**	0.092	1.651
AAQ-> SWLLS (direct)	0.108	0.234	0.454	0.645	-0.350	0.566
AAQ->SDQ->SWLLS (indirect)	0.300	0.147		0.320	0.036	0.612
$R^2 = .085$						

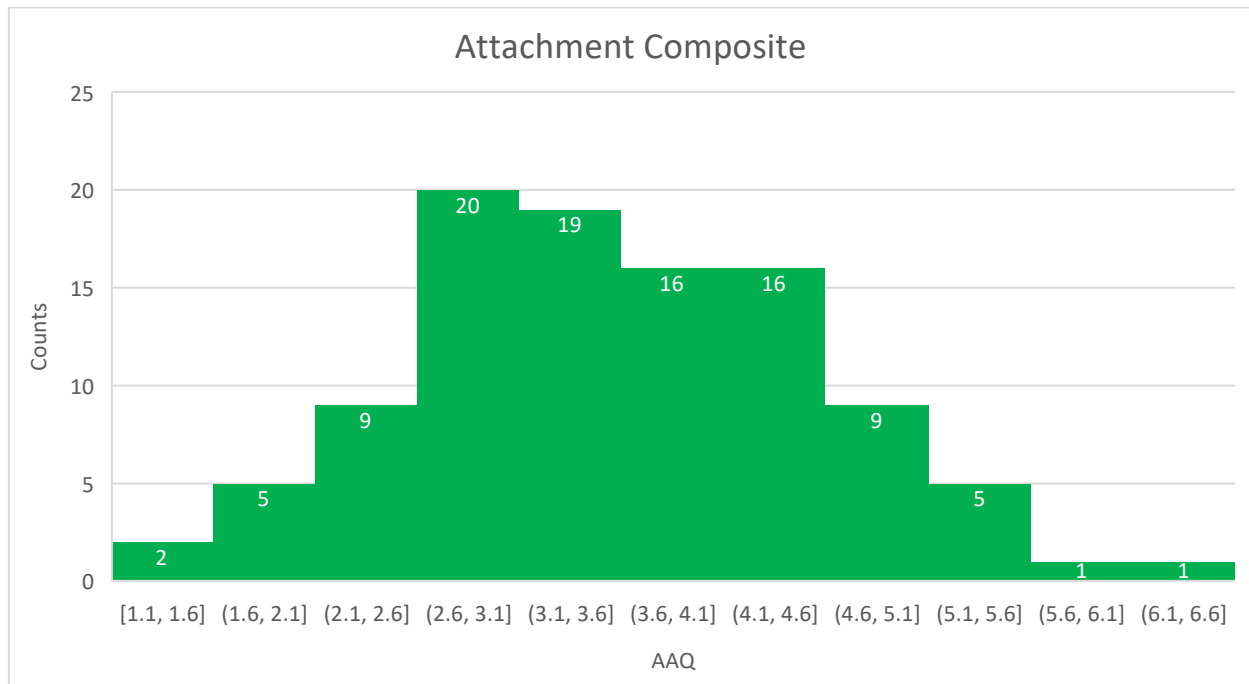
*Note:* AAQ is the Adult Attachment Questionnaire. SDQ is the Strength and Difficulties Questionnaire. SWLLS is the Satisfaction with Love Life Scale Questionnaire.

Total  $N = 103$ ; *CI* = Confidence interval; *LLCI* = lower limit confidence interval; *ULCI* = upper limit confidence interval.

\*\* means significant.

**Figure 1**

*Histogram of Attachment Composite score of questionnaire results*



**Figure 2**

*Histogram of Emotional Composite score of questionnaire results*

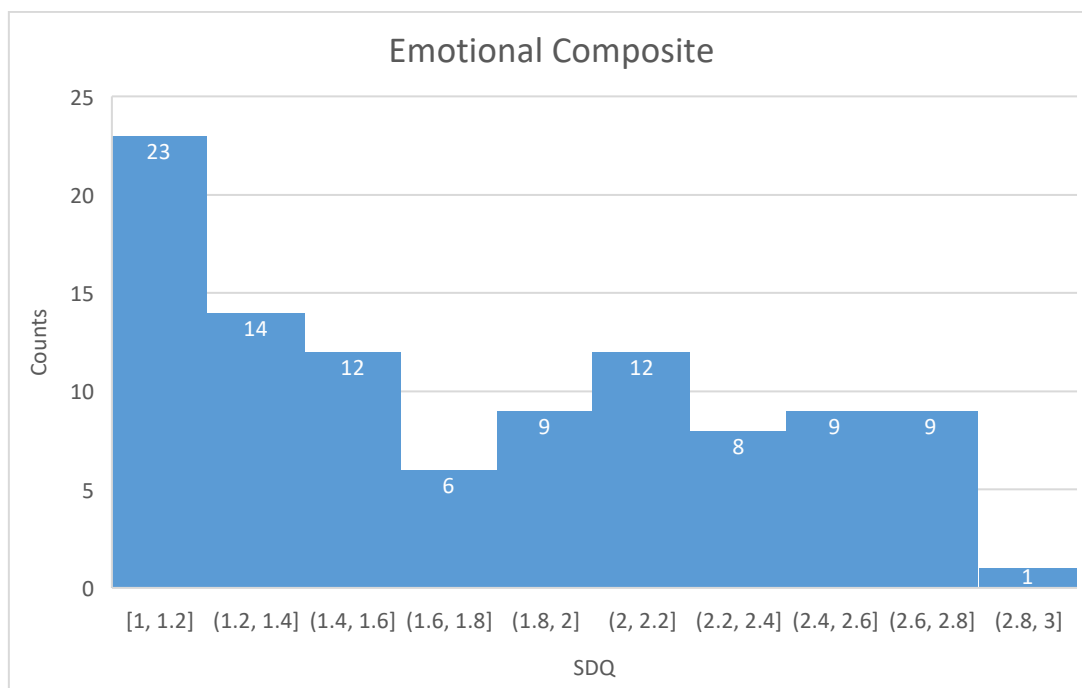




Figure 3

Histogram of Dissatisfaction in Love Life Composite score of questionnaire results

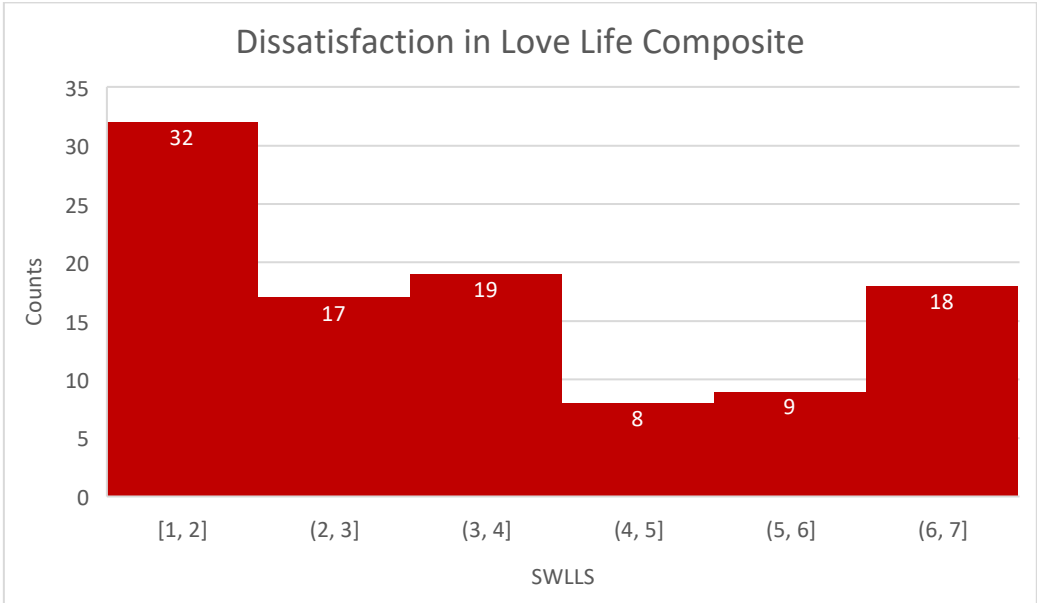
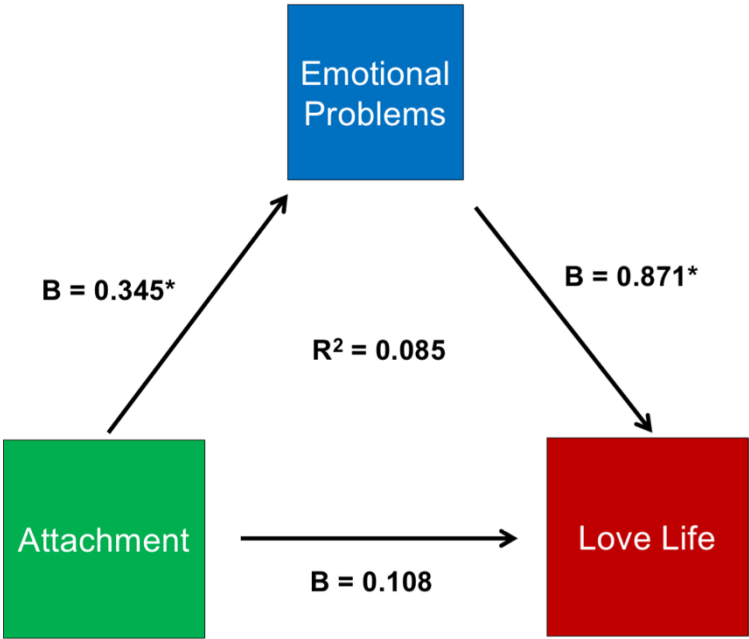


Figure 4

Diagram of mediation results



\* Indicates a significant correlation.