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Attachment Style and Trait Mindfulness in Adults: Contrasting Role of Secure and Ambivalent Insecure Attachment

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ABSTRACT

Background: The concept of mindfulness is deeply rooted in Buddhist tradition, whereas attachment theory, originally developed by John Bowlby, emphasizes how emotional warmth and comfort from caregivers shape human life experiences. Secure and insecure attachment styles follow distinct developmental and emotion regulation pathways. **Objectives:** Drawing on various theoretical frameworks that highlight the role of early experiences in regulating present awareness, this study sought to investigate the contrasting roles of secure and ambivalent insecure attachment styles in mindfulness. **Methodology:** The study was conducted on a sample of 130 adult students. Data were analysed using regression analysis to examine the relationships between the specific attachment styles and mindfulness. **Results:** The regression analysis demonstrated that ambivalent and secure attachment styles have contrasting effects on an individual's present-moment awareness. Specifically, ambivalent attachment negatively predicts present-moment awareness, while secure attachment positively predicts it. **Conclusion:** These observations imply that integrating mindfulness-based interventions with attachment-informed therapeutic approaches can help lessen the detrimental effects of attachment anxiety.

Keywords: Mindfulness, Attachment, Secure, Ambivalent-insecure attachment, Present awareness, Emotion regulation

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Introduction

Mindfulness has emerged as a crucial psychological factor associated with wellbeing, emotion regulation, attentional control, resilience, and coping.[1–5] Consequently, researchers have sought to understand the developmental experiences driving individual differences in this trait. Rooted in Buddhist contemplative traditions, mindfulness has gained immense scientific attention and is defined as the tendency to intentionally attend to present-moment experiences with acceptance and openness.[6] Brown and Ryan (2003)[1] suggested that individuals vary in their natural or dispositional capacity for this state, commonly termed trait mindfulness the ability to remain aware of present experiences without becoming entangled in emotional reactions or external distractions.[7]

Beyond identifying the antecedents of mindfulness, researchers are increasingly interested in how it fits within social contexts. Attachment theory provides a robust conceptual framework for this intersection.[8] Originally developed by Bowlby (1969/1982, 1973),[9–11] attachment theory posits that the emotional warmth and responsiveness received from primary caregivers shape internal working models of the self and others, fundamentally influencing social, emotional, and cognitive functioning. Caregivers who are physically and emotionally available foster a secure attachment style, which instills positive expectations regarding oneself and others. Conversely, ambivalent attachment is fostered by inconsistent, unpredictable, or insensitive caregiving, and is characterized by heightened emotional dysregulation, dependency, and fear.[12]

The relationship between attachment and mindfulness is grounded in theoretical frameworks detailing how early relational experiences shape emotional and attentional processes. Secure attachment provides the flexible, emotionally balanced foundation necessary to support mindfulness. In contrast, individuals with anxious/ambivalent attachment utilize hyperactivating strategies, which intensify emotional monitoring, threat vigilance, and reassurance-seeking.[13] Thus, mindfulness is differentially influenced by secure and insecure attachment through mechanisms of attentional control and emotion regulation.[14]

These theoretical propositions are well-supported by correlational and empirical literature. For instance, Melen et al. (2017)[15] experimentally induced attachment insecurity in a between-group design, demonstrating that relationship anxiety impairs emotion regulation, thereby hindering state mindfulness. Notably, avoidant attachment did not yield the same disruptive effects in their study. Broadly, literature confirms that secure attachment correlates positively with dispositional mindfulness, while anxious-ambivalent styles display negative associations.[16–19] A synthesis of thirty studies by Stevenson et al. (2019)[18] confirmed that attachment insecurity significantly relates to lower trait mindfulness. Similarly, Caldwell and Shaver (2013)[14] observed that securely attached individuals exhibit enhanced emotional awareness and healthy coping, whereas anxiously attached individuals experience cognitive preoccupation and dysregulation that disrupt non-judgmental awareness.[12]

Despite these insights, critical gaps remain. Because individual mindfulness facets represent distinct psychological skills, evaluating them independently can offer a more nuanced understanding of attachment dynamics.[7] Furthermore, while avoidant and anxious dimensions are widely researched, less attention has been paid specifically to ambivalent attachment and its distinct hyperactivating pathways.

To address this, the current study aims to explore the contrasting roles of secure and ambivalent attachment in predicting facet-specific mindfulness among adults. Investigating these pathways will clarify how early relational histories serve as antecedents to dispositional mindfulness, ultimately aiding the design of targeted, attachment-informed mindfulness interventions to improve psychological well-being.

Methodology

Study Design: By using convenience sampling, this study was performed on 130 participants (69 females and 61 males) aged between 18 to 26 years. Most of the participants were college-going adults pursuing graduation or post-graduation.

Study Tools:

1. ***Measure of Attachment Style*[20].** This is a self-reported 27-item questionnaire that measures secure, avoidant-insecure and ambivalent-insecure attachment styles. The responses are recorded on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), with higher scores reflecting a stronger presence of the specific attachment pattern. The Cronbach's alpha ranged from 0.80 to 0.81 across the three subscales.
2. ***Five Facets of Mindfulness Questionnaire*[14].** This 39-item self-reported instrument measures mindfulness in multifactor dimensions such as observing, describing, aware action, non-judging of inner experience, and non-reactivity to inner experience. Participants rate each item on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (never or very rarely true) to 5 (very often or always true), with a higher score indicating greater levels of mindfulness in each facet. This scale has been effectively used in Indian studies. [21-24]

Procedure: After receiving informed consent from the participants, the questionnaires were administered to them along with a personal data sheet. The data were scored as per the standard procedure presented in the manual.

Results

The regression analysis (step-wise) was performed taking various dimensions of attachment style as predictors and various dimensions of mindfulness as criterion. The findings depicted in the table above suggested that secure attachment was the only predictor of observation and it contributed 4.1% variance. Further, ambivalent insecure attachment and secure attachment both predicted descriptions where ambivalent insecure attachment predicted the variance of 14.9%, indicating a negative relationship. However, 5% of variance was also explained by secure attachment, while predicting description, indicating a positive association with the criterion (beta=0.226). This explains that the increase in secure attachment leads to an increase in Description. Ambivalent insecure attachment and secure attachment both predicted aware action, however ambivalent insecure attachment emerged as the best predictor of it, accounting for 9.4% variance. The examination of beta weight (-0.306) suggested a negative association with criterion indicating higher ambivalent attachment will lead to less aware action. While predicting aware action, secure attachment explained 3.4% of the total variance. The beta weight (0.186) indicated a positive association with the criterion, suggesting greater secure attachment is related to increased aware action. Similarly, ambivalent insecure attachment and secure attachment both predicted non-judgemental inner critic. Among these, ambivalent insecure attachment predicted non-judgemental inner critic with a variance of 15.3%, indicating a negative relationship with the criterion (-0.392). This suggests higher ambivalent insecure attachment leads to a lower non-judgemental inner critic. Whereas secure attachment emerged as the best predictor of non-judgemental inner critic, with 21.9% of variance, indicating a positive relationship with the criterion (0.259). This explains that greater secure attachment leads to an increased non-judgemental inner critic.

Table-1: Results of multiple regression analysis (stepwise) attachment styles as predictors and mindfulness as criterion

Predictors		R	R Square	R Square Change	F Change	Sig. of F Change	Beta	t	Sign
Dependent Variable: Non-judgmental inner critic	Secure attachment	0.203	0.041	0.041	5.483	0.021	0.203	2.342	0.021
Dependent Variable: Description	Ambivalent insecure attachment	0.386	0.149	0.149	22.369	0.000	-0.386	-4.730	0.000
	Secure attachment	0.446	0.199	0.050	7.956	0.006	0.226	2.821	0.006
Dependent Variable: Action Awareness	Ambivalent insecure attachment	0.306	0.094	0.094	13.216	0.000	-0.306	-3.635	0.000
	Secure attachment	0.357	0.127	0.034	4.914	0.028	0.186	2.217	0.028
Dependent Variable: Non-judgmental inner critic	Ambivalent insecure attachment	0.392	0.153	0.153	23.205	0.000	-0.392	-4.817	0.000
	Secure attachment	0.468	0.219	0.219	10.670	0.001	0.259	3.267	0.001
Dependent Variable: Total score (mindfulness)	Ambivalent insecure attachment	0.477	0.228	0.228	37.739	0.000	-0.477	-6.143	0.000
	Secure attachment	0.513	0.263	0.036	6.134	0.015	0.191	2.477	.015

Discussion

This study intended to examine the contrasting role of secure and ambivalent attachment styles in mindfulness. The current observations are noteworthy as ambivalent attachment significantly predicted several dimensions of mindfulness, which suggests that attachment insecurities not only affect overall mindfulness but also the specific skills related to mindfulness. In a meta-analysis, synthesized over 30 studies conducted by Stevenson et al. (2019)[17] confirmed that both attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance were significantly and negatively related to overall trait mindfulness. The effect sizes were moderate ($r \approx -0.25$ to -0.35), with attachment anxiety often demonstrating slightly stronger relationships with specific facets of mindfulness.

The present findings indicated that ambivalent individuals, as compared to securely attached individuals, find it difficult to stay in present as their attention is pulled towards their attachment issues, making them poorly mindful. People with ambivalent attachment often experience crises of deep emotions, and they feel worried about their relationships[25]. Due to this, their attention is focused on relationship issues instead of what is happening in the present moment, causing their behaviour to be more guided by emotional reactions than present awareness for a review. [18]

Preliminary studies have demonstrated that attachment insecurities are negatively associated with mindfulness and this relationship is needed to be understood from the perspective of Attachment System Theory (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2020)[26] which state that anxious/ambivalent individuals use hyperactive strategies for example, monitoring of emotions excessively, heightened sensitivity to threat or constant need for reassurance (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007)[12], greater emotional instability, intense emotional reactions and difficulties in regulating negative emotions (Deshpande & Pawar, 2025)[27] while mindfulness requires observing and accepting one's own thought and feelings without getting involved in it. A lower level of mindfulness may indicate problems in regulating negative emotions in ambivalent insecurely attached individuals (Stevenson et al., 2017) [17] for a review.

Bowlby's (1969/1982) [9, 11] Internal Working Model theory also provides a useful explanation for the obtained findings. Ambivalent insecure people receive inconsistent and neglectful caregiving, which in turn leads to developing a model of themselves as unworthy, incompetent, or unlovable. Due to this, they experience heightened emotional reactivity, which is inconsistent with the fundamental principles of mindfulness, such as observing internal experiences with openness, acceptance without judgement etc. Therefore, maladaptive internal working models related to insecure attachment may impede the cultivation of mindfulness. Apart from internal working models, developmental theories also suggest that both attachment and mindfulness share the common component of developmental origin. For instance, children who experience inconsistent care giving may learn that the environment is unpredictable and the presence of people may be occasional, which in turn results in mistrust and issues in relationships. Hence, early attachment insecurity may be a deterrent in the development of mindful awareness later in life.

The preceding observations indicate that at one hand, attachment insecurities interfere with mindfulness, while, on others secure attachment facilitates mindfulness positively. In this study, secure attachment has emerged as a second-best predictor after ambivalent insecure attachment style, predicting observation, description, action awareness, and non-judgmental inner critic. This observation is in sync with the previous research. Because of the type of attachment secure individuals receive, they perceive themselves as worthy and others as reliable[28]. In addition, securely attached people are open to their emotions and sensations, which makes them emotionally safe[16]. Caldwell and Shaver (2013) [14] have mentioned that secure attachment predicted more attentiveness and openness towards emotions and sensations. When children are small and are nurtured by responsive caregivers, their emotional vocabulary is more developed, and they reflect their feelings with emotional awareness. As supported by mentalization theory (Fonagy & Target, 1997)[29], secure attachment fosters mentalization, which helps people not only to understand their own but also others' mental states, resulting in improved ability to describe experiences and awareness. Furthermore, the attachment security hypothesis (Latty-Mann & Davis, 1996) [30] states that secure individuals have a greater secure base in life, which directs them to be in present. Walsh et al. (2009) [31] have mentioned that attachment security was associated to increased attention regulation and conscious awareness.

Conclusion

Taken together, these all suggest that attachment style is based on a major developmental foundation for mindfulness. Mindfulness is a cognitive skill that is acquired in adulthood, but it may also reflect relational experiences that have long been established in early childhood. The contrasting predictive roles of secure and ambivalent attachment indicate that attachment-related emotional security influences not only one's development but also mindful experiences. Thus, mindfulness can be a protective factor against the negative consequences of ambivalent attachment. The results suggest that integration of mindfulness-based intervention with attachment-informed therapeutic approaches may help reduce the detrimental effects of attachment anxiety.

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