

Differentiation of Self and Attachment Style of Young Adults

Ms. Vishnu Durga K^{1*}, Ms. Shruthi Rose²

ABSTRACT

The objective of this study was to assess the influence of Attachment Style on Differentiation of Self among young adults. A sample of 82 including both genders were collected using purposive sampling technique. The present study used correlational research design. Differentiation of Self Inventory - Revised (DSI-R) and Experiences in Close Relationships - Revised (ECR-R) inventories were used to assess Differentiation of Self and Attachment Style respectively. Descriptive statistics, Pearson Correlation and Regression were used to analyze the data. The findings indicated that there was a significant correlation between Anxiety Attachment and Emotional Reactivity, I-Position and Emotional Cutoff. Also, a significant relationship between Avoidant Attachment and Emotional Cutoff. The findings indicate that Differentiation of Self is influenced by Attachment Style a person has therefore proper measures have to be taken in order to maintain a healthy attachment style and relationship.

Keywords: Attachment Style, Differentiation of Self

The concepts of differentiating the self as well as attachment types has been the subject of a variety of studies within the area of psychology. Both concepts are linked to a variety of aspects of mental wellbeing and health and understanding their interaction can help to understand the development of healthy relationships as well as the management of emotional distress. Differentiation of self, an essential concept of Bowen's Family Systems Theory, is the degree to which a person is able to balance their (a) emotional and intellectual functioning and (b) intimacy and autonomy in relationships (Bowen, 1978). On an intrapsychic level, Differentiation of Self is the ability to distinguish one's thoughts and feelings to choose between them as a guide to make choices. Greater differentiated people are able to experience a strong affect or shift to calm and logically reason under stressful situations. On the other hand, poorly differentiated people are Emotionally Reactive and find it difficult to remain calm in response to the emotionality of others. On an interpersonal level, Differentiation of Self is the ability to experience intimacy with and independence from others (Bowen, 1978; Skowron & Friedlander, 1998). More differentiated people are able to take I Position in their relationships and maintain their sense of identity when pressured by others to do otherwise, and have flexible boundaries without the fear of connection. When overwhelmed by emotionality in their family relationships, poorly differentiated people tend to either engage in Fusion with Others or Emotional Cutoff (Kerr

¹MSc Clinical Psychology, Dept. of Psychology, Kristu Jayanti College, Bangalore

²Assistant Professor, Dept. of Psychology, Kristu Jayanti College, Bangalore

*Corresponding Author

Received: May 26, 2023; Revision Received: July 17, 2023; Accepted: July 20, 2023

Differentiation of Self and Attachment Style of Young Adults

& Bowen, 1998). Highly fused people remain emotionally “stuck” in the position they had held in their family of origin, have few firmly held convictions and beliefs, are either dogmatic or compliant, and seek acceptance and approval above all else (Bowen, 1976, 1978; Skowron & Friedlander, 1998; Peleg-Popko, 2002). Whereas emotionally cutoff individuals often tend to isolate themselves from others and from their emotions, to deny the importance of family, and to display an exaggerated facade of independence (Peleg-Popko, 2002). Fused individuals tend to experience separation as overwhelming, whereas emotionally cutoff individuals find intimacy profoundly threatening. Both poorly differentiated and basing self-esteem largely on the approval of others and generally conforming to those around them (Skowron & Friedlander, 1998).

The APA definition for Attachment Style is the characteristic way people relate to others in the context of intimate relationships, which is heavily influenced by self-worth and interpersonal trust. Theoretically, the degree of attachment security in adults is related to how well they bonded to others as children. Attachment is where the child uses the primary caregiver as a secure base, a source of comfort and a foundation from which they explore relationships (Benoit, 2004). In broad terms, attachment styles can be described as secure and insecure attachment styles. Repeated interactions with emotionally accessible and responsive attachment figures encourage the development of a secure attachment style which is characterized by positive internal working models and effective coping mechanisms. On the other hand, repeated interactions with unresponsive or neglecting figures results in the development of an insecure attachment style which is characterized by a negative internal working model and poor coping mechanism and emotion regulation (Mikulincer and Shaver, 2007; Sheinbaum et al., 2015).

Skowron and Dendy (2004) in their research found that the 4 aspects of self-differentiation predicted 40% of the variability in attachment anxiety and 62% of the variance in attachment avoidance. Specifically, attachment anxiety was closely associated with Emotional Reactivity and attachment avoidance was closely associated with Emotional Cutoff. Adults who reported less attachment anxiety and avoidance were highly differentiated i.e less emotionally reactive and cutoff or fused with others and were able to take I position in relationships better which enabled them to achieve effortful attentional and behavioral control (Skowron & Dendy, 2004). When it comes to individuals with anxiety disorders, socio-demographic factors play a major role in the Emotional Reactivity component of Differentiation of Self. Lower levels of Differentiation of Self pose a risk for stress and anxiety due to emotional dysregulation and poor coping mechanisms, which may lead to impaired interpersonal relationships, thus increasing the vulnerability and susceptibility to greater levels of anxiety or an anxiety disorder in an individual who is not diagnosed already (Ying Xue et al., 2016). Attachment provides the foundation for the establishment and maintenance of relationships of an individual and emotional regulation. Differentiation of Self might stem from attachment patterns and styles which in turn helps us understand how an individual thinks, behaves and manages their emotions and conflicts in a relationship. Rodríguez-González and his colleagues (2023) in their cross-sectional and longitudinal study found a positive relationship between Differentiation of Self and relationship quality in married couples. They also found that an increase in Differentiation of Self led to decreased anxious and avoidant attachment patterns and increased stability in the relationship. Increasing Differentiation of Self through clinical interventions could help enhance relationship satisfaction of couples. In another study conducted by Allsop and his colleagues found that husbands' emotional cutoff predicted decreased husbands' sexual desire and wives' emotional reactivity predicted decreased wives' sexual desire. Whereas

Differentiation of Self and Attachment Style of Young Adults

wives' emotional cutoff predicted increased wives' avoidant attachment and husbands' avoidant attachment predicted decreased wives' emotional cutoff.

Differences in attachment styles and their willingness to commit to a relationship were also studied by many. The anxious attached people reported being eager to be committed and be in love with their love interest, whereas those who are avoidant attached were cautious about committing and being in love (Schindler et al., 2010). Also, anxious men had much shorter relationships than avoidant men (Senchak & Leonard, 1992).

The literature indicates that Differentiation of Self and Attachment Styles are closely linked and could influence the mental health of people. Understanding the interaction with these ideas in young adults can offer insight into the formation of healthy relationships as well as prevent emotional distress. This study will study the interaction between Differentiation of Self and Attachment Style in young adults. This study will also be studying the interaction between Attachment Style and the type of relationship they are in i.e., Committed Relationship or Non-Committed Relationship. Committed Relationship is where two or more people continue to be in a relationship, growing their relationship together and continuing nurturing their relationship. They may choose to use labels like boyfriend, girlfriend or partner to validate their relationship. Non-Committed Relationship involves casual sex and casual relationship like Hookups, One-Night Stand, Booty Call, Fuck Buddies, Friend with Benefits, and dating without any expectations for the relationship to last in the future.

METHOD

Research design

Correlational Research Design

Objectives

- To examine the relationship between Attachment Style and Differentiation of Self among young adults.
- To examine the influence of Attachment Style on Differentiation of Self among young adults.

Hypothesis

- H0: There is no significant relationship between Attachment Style and Differentiation of Self among young adults
- H1: There is a significant influence of Attachment Style on Differentiation of Self among young adults
- H2: There is a significant difference between Relationship Type, Differentiation of Self and Attachment Style
- H3: There is an association between Attachment Security and Relationship Type

Participants

The participants in this study were young adults between the age of 18 and 25. The sample consisted of both committed and non-committed relationships.

Inclusion criteria

- The participants are between the ages of 18 and 25.
- The participants had sufficient English language proficiency to complete the survey.

Differentiation of Self and Attachment Style of Young Adults

- The participants were in a relationship or were dating someone.
- Those who provided consent to participate in the study.

The data collection was primarily done through the means of a Google Form which was circulated from March to April 2023. A few of the data was collected through traditional paper pencil test mode. Informed consent was provided in both the modes and efforts were made to ensure the privacy and confidentiality of the participants.

Sample

A total of 82 individual responses were collected using purposive sampling method out of which 53 were female and 29 were male. 20 of them were not college students and were working people. 66 of them were in committed relationships and 16 of them were in non committed relationships.

Variables

Independent Variable - Attachment Style

Dependent Variable - Differentiation of Self

Demographic variable

Tools

- 1. Differentiation of Self Inventory - Revised (DSI-R)** - Comprising 4 subscales: ER, IP, EC and FO. ER and IP measure the intrapsychic levels of Differentiation of Self. Whereas EC and FO measure the interpersonal levels of Differentiation of Self. Each subscale is computed by summing item scores and dividing the result by the number of items in the subscale. Scores on each subscale thus range from 1 to 6, with higher scores reflecting a greater level in that dimension. On the other hand, because IP is directly related to DoS and the other four subscales are inversely related to DoS, to compute the DSS-full scale score, the IP score and the reversed ER, FO, DO, and EC scores must be summed ($IP + (7-ER) + (7-FO) + (7-DO) + (7-EC)$), and the result must be divided by 5. Scores on DSS-full scale score thus range from 1 to 6, with higher scores reflecting a greater level of differentiation. The internal consistency indices (Cronbach's alpha) of the scale and its subscales were high: DSS = .93, IP = .86, ER = .89, FO = .90, DO = .89, and EC = .90 (Oliver et al., 2022).
- 2. Experiences in Close Relationships - Revised (ECR-R)** - The ECR-R consists of 36 items, with each individual item ranging from 1 (disagree strongly) to 7 (agree strongly) (Cronbach's alpha = .86 in this sample). It contains two dimensions: (a) attachment-anxiety, defined by a fear of interpersonal abandonment/rejection, an exaggerated need for approval, and distress when a significant other is unavailable, and (b) attachment-avoidance, defined by a fear of dependence and intimacy, difficulty in self-disclosure, and an exaggerated need for self-reliance. These two dimensions describe the four different attachment types, including security, preoccupation, dismissing, and fearful (Sibley et al., 2005; Ying Xue et al., 2016)

Data Analysis

The data collected during this survey are analyzed by using SPSS software. Descriptive statistics standard deviations, mean values and frequency will be used to explain the sample as well as the variables. Inferential statistics, such as correlation, regression and independent sample t-test are used to identify the connection between Differentiation of Self and

Differentiation of Self and Attachment Style of Young Adults

Attachment Styles. Chi square test is used to identify the connection between Attachment Security and Relationship Style.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 Showing the descriptive statistics for the variables

Variables	Mean	SD	Variance
Emotional Reactivity	3.07	0.71	0.51
I-Position	4.02	0.86	0.74
Emotional Cutoff	3.76	0.74	0.56
Fusion with Others	2.87	0.68	0.46
Anxiety Attachment	3.32	1.47	2.15
Avoidant Attachment	2.57	1.13	1.28

Table 1 shows the mean Emotional Reactivity has a mean score of 3.07 with the standard deviation is .716 and a variance of .513. This means that the majority of people scored just a bit higher than the average mark on this test however there isn't any significant variation between the results. I-Position has a mean score of 4.02 with a standard deviation of .860 and a variance of .740. This indicates that the majority of people were able to score fairly high in this test with an average amount of variation in the scores. The Emotional Cutoff has a mean score of 3.76 with a standard deviation of .746 and a variance of .557. This indicates that the respondents were slightly higher than average on this test. There is some variation in scores. Fusion with Others has a mean of 2.87 with a standard deviation of .681 and a variance of .463. This indicates that the respondents scored a little below average in this test but there's no significant variation between the results. Anxiety Attachment has a mean of 3.32 with the standard deviation 1.466 and a variance of 2.149. The individuals scored a little above average on this scale however there is plenty of variation among the data. Avoidant Attachment has a mean of 2.57 and the standard deviation 1.131 and a variance of 1.280. This indicates that, on average, respondents scored slightly lower than average in this assessment however there is a small amount of variation between the results.

Correlation

H0: There is no significant relationship between Attachment Style and Differentiation of Self among young adults

Table 2 Showing the correlation between Attachment Style and Differentiation of Self sub scales

Variable	Attachment Style		
	Anxiety Attachment	Avoidant Attachment	
Differentiation of Self	1. Emotional Reactivity	-0.32**	0.12
	2. I-Position	-0.31**	-0.11
	3. Emotional Cutoff	-0.26*	-0.25**
	4. Fusion with Others	-0.09	0.21
	5. Global	-0.31**	-0.05

** . Correlation is significant at the level of 0.01 level (2-tailed)

* . Correlation is significant at the level of 0.05 level (2-tailed)

Table 2 denotes whether there is a correlation between Differentiation of Self and Attachment Style. After analysis it is indicated that there is a significant relationship

Differentiation of Self and Attachment Style of Young Adults

between Anxiety Attachment has a strong negative correlation with Emotional Reactivity ($r=-.32$), a strong negative correlation with I-position ($r=-.31$) and a weak negative correlation with Emotional Cutoff ($r=-.26$). Avoidant Attachment has a weak negative correlation with Emotional Cutoff ($r=-.25$). A study by Skowron and Dendy (2004) have also found that Attachment Anxiety was most closely associated with Emotional Reactivity while Attachment Avoidance with Emotional Cutoff. There is also a significant correlation between Anxiety Attachment and Differentiation of Self global.

Regression

H1: There is a significant influence of Attachment Style on Differentiation of Self among young adults

Table 3 Showing the scores of regression of Differentiation of Self and Attachment Style

Variables	R	R ²	Adjusted R ²	F	B	t	Sig.
Anxiety Attachment	0.31	0.10	0.09	8.71	-0.31	-2.95	.004

a. Dependent Variable: Differentiation of Self Global

b. Predictors: (Constant), Anxiety Attachment

Table 3 shows the results of multiple linear regression between Differentiation of Self and Anxiety Attachment Style. The table shows ($r=.031$, $R^2=.010$). The F value of 8.71 suggests that the model is statistically significant. The B for Anxiety Attachment was found to be ($b=-0.31$, $t=-2.95$), this suggests that there is a significant influence of Anxiety Attachment on Differentiation of Self. As Anxiety Attachment increases, the level of Differentiation of Self (global) decreases.

Independent Samples t-test

H2: There is a significant difference between Relationship Type, Differentiation of Self and Attachment Style.

Table 4 Showing the scores of Independent Sample t-test of Relationship Type for Differentiation of Self and Attachment Style

Variables	Committed Relationship		Non-Committed Relationship		Sig. (2-tailed)	95% C.I of the Difference	
	M	SD	M	SD		Lower	Upper
Emotional Reactivity	3.05	0.71	3.19	0.75	0.480	-0.54	0.26
I-Position	4.06	0.87	3.88	0.81	0.442	-0.29	0.66
Emotional Cutoff	3.73	0.76	3.88	0.72	0.481	-0.56	0.27
Fusion with Others	2.76	0.66	3.31	0.60	0.003	-0.91	-0.19
Global	3.42	0.53	3.56	0.51	0.348	-0.43	0.15
Anxiety Attachment	3.14	1.39	4.07	1.57	0.022	-1.72	-0.14
Avoidant Attachment	2.40	1.04	3.29	1.23	0.004	-1.49	-0.29

Differentiation of Self and Attachment Style of Young Adults

Table 4 shows the results of the Independent Sample t-test of Relationship Type for Differentiation of Self and Attachment Style. For Differentiation of Self, there was no significant difference between individuals in Committed and Non-Committed relationships for Emotional Reactivity, I-Position, Emotional Cutoff and Global. However, for Fusion with Others, there was a significant difference, with those in Non-Committed relationships having higher levels than those in Committed relationships. According to Bowen (1978) Highly fused individuals have more “pseudo self” than “basic self”. The “pseudo self” is a more fluid self that is composed of values and beliefs acquired within a social system and is directed to gain rewards from the relationship (Peleg-Popko, 2002). Assuming the rewards being temporary sex and emotional connection of non-committed relationships. For Attachment Style, both Anxiety and Avoidant Attachment styles were significantly different between individuals who are in Committed and Non Committed relationships, with those in Non Committed relationships having higher scores for both. Schindler et al., (2010) found in their research that Anxiety Attachment individuals may not actually get into a committed relationship even though they want to, given that their partners do not share the same sentiment. Also individuals high on Avoidance Attachment were less likely to get into a committed relationship.

Chi Square Test

H3: There is an association between Attachment Security and Relationship Type

Table 5 Showing the Chi Square Test results for Attachment Security and Relationship Type

Variable	Exact Sig (2-sided)	Attachment Security	
		Secure	Insecure
Relationship Type	0.004	Count 44	Count 22
Committed Relationship		Count 4	Count 12
Non-Committed Relationship			

The Attachment Style with the same data was also assessed in terms of Attachment Security. Low avoidance and low anxiety are Attachment Secure. Low avoidance high anxiety, high avoidance and low anxiety and high avoidance high anxiety are Attachment Insecure. Table 5 shows the results of Chi Square Test of Attachment Style on Relationship type. There is a significant association between Attachment Style and Relationship Type. The results suggest that Secure individuals tend to go for Committed Relationship and Insecure individuals tend to go for Non-Committed Relationship. However, the sample data is low to generalize this finding.

Limitations

- The study only focuses on young adults between the age of 18-25 years and the results cannot be generalized to other age groups.
- The study relies on self-reported data, which can be biased due to participants' social desirability and recall bias.
- The study's small sample size may not provide enough statistical strength to detect a strong significant relationship between Differentiation of Self and Attachment Style.

Implications

- The study provides insight into the relationship between Differentiation of Self and Attachment Style which can help mental health professionals in developing appropriate interventions to address this issue.
- The study highlights the importance of early intervention to improve Differentiation of Self and Attachment Styles, which could prevent emotional distress and promote healthy relationships.
- The study emphasizes the need for future research to explore in this area to improve generalizability and understanding the underlying mechanisms.

REFERENCES

- Allsop, David B., Price, Amber A., Hanna-Walker, Veronica., Leavitt, Chelom E., Milius, Emily H., & Driggs, Shayla M. (2021) Longitudinal associations between attachment, differentiation of self, and couple sexual and relational outcomes. *Sexual and Relationship Therapy*, Routledge, 1-20. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14681994.2021.2003320>
- Benoit D. (2004). Infant-parent attachment: Definition, types, antecedents, measurement and outcome. *Paediatrics & child health*, 9(8), 541–545. <https://doi.org/10.1093/pch/9.8.541>
- Bowen, M. (1976). Theory in the practice of psychotherapy. In P. J. Guerin Jr. (Ed.), *Family therapy: Theory and practice* (pp. 42–90). New York: Garner Press
- Bowen, M. (1978). *Family therapy in clinical practice*. Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, Inc.
- Kerr, M., & Bowen, M. (1988). *Family evaluation*. New York: Norton
- Mikulincer, M., and Shaver, P. R. (2007). *Attachment in Adulthood: Structure, Dynamics, and Change*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- Oliver, J., Jódar, R., Berástegui, A. et al. Psychometric study of the differentiation of self-scale-revised in a sample of Spanish adults. *Curr Psychol* (2022). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-022-02929-y>
- Rodríguez-González, M., Bell, C. A., Pereyra, S. B., Martínez-Díaz, M. P., Schweer-Collins, M., & Bean, R. A. (2023). Differentiation of self and relationship attachment, quality, and stability: A path analysis of dyadic and longitudinal data from Spanish and U.S. couples. *PloS one*, 18(3), e0282482. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0282482>
- Schindler I., Fagundes P. C., & Murdock W K. (2010). Predictors of Romantic Relationship Formation: Attachment Style, Prior Relationships, and Dating Goals. *Personal Relationships*, 17(1). <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-6811.2010.01255.x>
- Senchak, M., & Leonard, K. E. (1992). Attachment Styles and Marital Adjustment Among Newly Wed Couples. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 9, 51-64. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0265407592091003>
- Sheinbaum, T., Kwapil, T. R., Balleespí, S., Mitjavila, M., Chun, C. A., Silvia, P. J., & Barrantes-Vidal, N. (2015). Attachment style predicts affect, cognitive appraisals, and social functioning in daily life. *Frontiers in psychology*, 6, 296. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2015.00296>
- Skowron, Elizabeth & Dendy, Anna. (2004). Differentiation of Self and Attachment in Adulthood: Relational Correlates of Effortful Control. *Contemporary Family Therapy*. 26.337-357. <https://doi.org/10.1023/B:COFT.0000037919.63750.9d>
- Xue, Y., Xu, Z. Y., Zaroff, C., Chi, P., Du, H., Ungvari, G. S., Chiu, H. F. K., Yang, Y. P., & Xiang, Y. T. (2018). Associations of Differentiation of Self and Adult Attachment

Differentiation of Self and Attachment Style of Young Adults

in Individuals with Anxiety-Related Disorders. Perspectives in psychiatric care, 54(1), 54–63. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ppc.12200>

Acknowledgement

The author(s) appreciates all those who participated in the study and helped to facilitate the research process.

Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

How to cite this article: Vishnu, D. K. & Rose, S. (2023). Differentiation of Self and Attachment Style of Young Adults. *International Journal of Indian Psychology*, 11(3), 782-790. DIP:18.01.074.20231103, DOI:10.25215/1103.074