

Research Paper

Acculturation, Adult Attachment Style and Psychological Distress in Indian International Students

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the relationship between acculturation, adult attachment style and psychological distress. Acculturation refers to a process of individuals adapting to a new culture while attachment style refers to the pattern of interpersonal interactions. Psychological distress encompasses negative stress responses, when an individual is overwhelmed by various demands. 73 Indian students studying in foreign countries were participants for this study through purposive sampling. SL-ASIA, AAS-R, and K10 was used to assess acculturation, adult attachment style and psychological distress respectively through a google form. Through correlation analysis, attachment anxiety and psychological distress were found to be significantly correlated. Linear regression also found attachment anxiety to be a significant predictor of psychological distress. Acculturation and attachment avoidance were also significantly correlated with each other. Attachment avoidance also significantly predicted acculturation. Results also found out that there was no significant correlation between acculturation and psychological distress, attachment avoidance and psychological distress, acculturation and attachment anxiety.

Keywords: *Acculturation, Psychological Distress, Indian International Student, Adult Attachment Style*

Every year in India, thousands of people migrate to another country, in search of education and job opportunities. According to the Ministry of External Affairs, India, the highest migration of Indian students was to the US, with a population of four lakh students. Students also travel to countries like UK, US, Canada, Australia and many other countries, for higher studies. When moving to another country, they are shifting from their secure base in India, to an uncertain environment. This may come with certain challenges or changes in the individual, in terms of behaviours, values or identity.

Acculturation is a term, that encompasses all these variables. In ‘Memorandum for the study of acculturation’, Redfield, Linton and Herskovits, say that “Acculturation comprehends those phenomena which result when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact, with subsequent changes in the original cultural patterns of either or both groups.” Berry proposed a model of acculturation, which talks about

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moderating factors like host country's attitude towards cultural pluralism, type of acculturating group, mode of acculturation which involved the four acculturating strategies; integration, assimilation, separation and marginalization. Integrated people, tend to maintain their own culture, but at the same time interact with others. Assimilated people, do not wish to keep following their own culture and try to interact with members of the other culture. Separation strategy involves, holding on to the original culture and marginalization refers to showing little interest in maintaining their own culture or interacting with the new culture. The fourth moderating factor is the demographic and social characteristics of the acculturating group and the fifth factor is the psychological characteristic of the individual.

One such psychological characteristic, can be an individual's attachment style. Attachment style, according to Hazen and Shaver (1987) is "the habitual pattern of expectations, needs, emotions and behaviour in interpersonal interactions in close relationships." Bowlby (1988), said that the attachment system is active throughout our lifespan and it manifests itself in our thoughts and behaviours related to seeking proximity in times of need. This led researchers to delve more into the field of adult attachment. Hazan and Shaver (1987), applied Bowlby and Ainsworth's findings and in their study of adolescent and adult romantic relationships and found that adult attachment styles paralleled child attachment styles. The categories were secure, avoidant and anxious. Over time, researchers decided that attachment was best understood as two dimensions, the first one is attachment related avoidance and the second is attachment related anxiety. Brennan, et.al (1998), put forth, two dimensions of adult attachment style. The first one is attachment anxiety and the second one is attachment avoidance. With respect to attachment style, people who have a negative working model of the self as in the case of attachment anxiety, or a negative model of others as in the case of attachment avoidance, can have acculturation related psychological difficulties (Wang C.D.C. et.al., 2020).

Psychological distress can be defined as the "unique discomfoting, emotional state experienced by an individual in response to a specific stressor or demand that results in harm, either temporary or permanent to the person" (Sheila, H., 2003). A lot of studies are being conducted in relation to psychological distress and international student community.

A cognitive perspective on psychological distress suggests that an individual's appraisal of a stressful life event and their coping style, influences how it might affect their mental health (Jokela, M., 2022). A person with attachment anxiety might develop a negative perception of themselves in a stressful situation, while a person with attachment avoidance might perceive that nobody might be there when they are in need. Thus, there might be an association between attachment style and a person's mental health.

An acculturative stress related theory, is the stress coping framework. It assumes that the characteristics related to the migrant's society of origin and those of the society of settlement, influences an individual's experience of intercultural contact, which takes place in a socio-political and economic framework. Changes brought on by these encounters are thought to lead to stress, which prompts coping mechanisms that are affective, behavioural, and cognitive. As a result, stress and coping, both are found to be mediated by the characteristics of the individual and situational characteristics, which in turn affects adjustments.

Taken together, acculturation, attachment style and psychological distress can have a relation with each other in an international student's life.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research Design

It is a non-experimental correlational research study. It examines the relationship between acculturation, adult attachment style and psychological distress.

Statement of the problem

A large number of students migrate to foreign countries, especially from India, in pursuit of higher education. When these students move from a secure base in India, they are likely to encounter certain problems. Various factors associated with the individual or the society can influence the occurrence of such problems. Attachment style becomes one such important factor. The problems a person faces, can have an effect on their mental health or health in general and also cause problems with academic performance. This makes it a need to study and understand the experience of Indian students in foreign countries. Therefore, the aim of this study was to understand and study the relationship between acculturation, adult attachment style and psychological distress in Indian international students. Further, it also focused on how the variables were influencing each other.

Objectives

1. To study if there is a significant relationship between acculturation and psychological distress.
2. To study if there is a significant relationship between anxious attachment style and psychological distress.
3. To study if there is a significant relationship between avoidant attachment style and psychological distress.
4. To study if there is a significant relationship between acculturation and anxious attachment style.
5. To study if there is a significant relationship between acculturation and avoidant attachment style.
6. To study if there is an influence of acculturation on psychological distress
7. To study if there is an influence of anxious attachment style on psychological distress
8. To study if there is an influence of avoidant attachment style on psychological distress
9. To study if there is an influence of anxious attachment style on acculturation.
10. To study if there is an influence of avoidant attachment style on acculturation.

Hypotheses

H₀₁ - There is no significant relationship between acculturation and psychological distress

H₀₂ - There is no significant relationship between anxious attachment style and psychological distress

H₀₃ - There is no significant relationship between avoidant attachment style and psychological distress

H₀₄ - There is no significant relationship between acculturation and anxious attachment style

H₀₅ - There is no significant relationship between acculturation and avoidant attachment style.

H₀₆ - There is no significant influence of acculturation on psychological distress.

H₀₇ - There is no significant influence of anxious attachment style on psychological distress.'

H₀₈ - There is no significant influence of avoidant attachment style on psychological distress.

H₀₉ - There is no significant influence of anxious attachment style on acculturation

H₀₁₀ - There is no significant influence of avoidant attachment style on acculturation

Operational Definition

- **Acculturation –**
Acculturation is defined as the process that occurs when there is an interaction between two or more cultures. The outcome of this process can be assimilation, multiculturalism. This process can lead to either adopting the host culture's values and behavioural competencies or resisting the change to an individual's own values and behavioural competencies. In this study, the level of acculturation was measured on a 5 point Likert scale of SL-ASIA.
- **Adult attachment style –**
Adult attachment style was measured using AAS-R. It was scored using two attachment style dimensions; attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance. Attachment style is an attachment behavioural system that tends to activate during stressful events and serves to promote our survival and security. Attachment anxiety focuses on the persons fears on being abandoned or unloved. Attachment avoidance focuses on the fear of others not being there when you need them.
- **Psychological distress-**
It can be defined as an emotional state experienced by a person, which is discomforting in response to a stressor that can lead to harm. The level of psychological distress in this study was indicated using the K10 scale.

Variables

Demographic Variables

Participants were asked to fill in information regarding their age, sex, the host country, length of time in the host country, place of residence in India, English proficiency, educational qualification, area of education being pursued in the host country, marital or relationship status and food preferences in the google form.

Universe of the study

Indian students studying abroad between the age group of 18 to 35

Geographical Area

Indian citizens who were currently pursuing their higher education from countries other than India participated in this study.

Sample distribution

Inclusion Criteria

- Age (18 to 35 years)
- Studying in a country other than India
- Living in a country other than India
- Indian citizen (born and raised in India)

Exclusion Criteria

- Distance education
- Less than 6 months duration of stay in host country

Sample and technique

- **Population –** Indians who are currently pursuing their higher education abroad.
- **Sample size –** 73 Indian International students.

- **Sampling Technique-** Purposive Sampling was used in this study. Participants who met the inclusion and exclusion criteria were included in the study.

Research ethics followed

Informed consent was taken from the participant through google form and they were not subjected to any harm. Privacy and confidentiality of participant's identity and responses were maintained and the participants were assured of the same. Data analysis and discussion were done with complete objectivity and no biases were made.

Tools of the study

- **Demographic Questionnaire –**
This form collected all the basic demographic details of the participant, which includes age, sex, English proficiency, Length of residence, Religion, Food preference or eating habits (veg/non-veg), country of origin, place of residence in country of origin, host country where the person studies and education being pursued in the host country.
- **The Suinn-Lew Asian Self-Identity Acculturation (SL-ASIA) –**
SL-ASIA scale is used for assessing the level of acculturation. It was given by Suinn, Ahuna, Khoo (1992) and is a self-report instrument. It has 21 items and is measured on a 5-point Likert scale. The score on each item is summed and is divided by 21. A score of 1 indicates low acculturation, 3 indicates bicultural and 5 implies high acculturation. The scale focuses on the changes or the resistance to change in an individual with respect to values, behavioural competencies. It also focuses on their self-reported self-identification. An additional 5 questions have been added to the original SL-ASIA scale to focus specifically on these components. The Cronbach's Alpha ranges between 0.62 to 0.96. The scale assesses acculturation and its components by focusing on their language, movie and music preference, self-identity, people that they associate with, participation in the holidays of their culture of origin, the pride in being a member of the culture of origin and some other factors.
- **Adult Attachment Style – Revised (AAS-R).**
AAS-R scale is used to assess the attachment style of the individual. The analysis has been done based on two categories; anxious and avoidant attachment style. People with anxiety attachment tend to have a negative model of self, while individuals with avoidance attachment tend to have a negative model of others, The scale assesses the attachment style by focusing on an individual's comfort or distress associated with getting close to people. It was developed by Collins (1996) and has 18 items. It is measured on a 5 point Likert scale. The options range from 1 (not at all characteristic of me) to 5 (very characteristic of me). The Cronbach's alpha ranges between 0.67 to 0.72.
- **K10 (Kessler 10)**
K10 is used for assessing Psychological distress. It was developed by Ronald S. It has 10 items and is measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 5 (all of the time) to 1 (none of the time). It is a self-report instrument or it can also be read out to the patient or the participant. It assesses the psychological distress, by looking at the emotional states and how often an individual was feeling restless, worthless or nervous during a period of last four weeks. The items are related to the level of anxiety and depression symptoms. The Cronbach's alpha is 0.914.

Statistical Analysis

Descriptive Statistics

Mean and Standard deviations of Acculturation, Adult attachment style and Psychological distress were analysed using SPSS.

Inferential Statistics

Correlation was used to understand the relationship between the variables. Linear regression was used to find out the influence of one variable on another.

Procedure

The research questionnaire was made on google forms and the questionnaires of SL-ASIA scale, Adult Attachment style-revised scale and Kessler’s Psychological distress (K10) scale, were included in it. Demographic details regarding the participant’s age, sex, the host country, length of time in the host country, place of residence in India, English proficiency, educational qualification, area of education being pursued in the host country, marital or relationship status and food preferences, were also added in the research form. The form was sent to participants above the age of 18, who are Indian citizens studying in foreign countries. The collected data was analysed using SPSS. Analysis regarding descriptive statistics was done. Under inferential statistics, correlation was done to understand the relationship between the variables and linear regression was done to understand if there was an influence of one variable on another.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>4</i>
1.Acculturation	2.31	.298				
2.Attachment anxiety	3.24	.541	.111			
3.Attachment avoidance	3.13	.431	-.230			
4.Psychological distress	26.19	10.89	-.042	-.316**	-.156	

* $p \leq 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$

According to the results the mean score of Acculturation is 2.31 with a standard deviation .298. For anxiety attachment the mean score is 3.24 with a standard deviation of .541. The mean score of avoidance attachment style is 3.13 and the standard deviation is .431. For Psychological distress, the mean score is 26.19 and standard deviation is 10.89.

From the table it can be interpreted that there is no significant negative correlation ($r = -.042$, $p = .722$) between acculturation and psychological distress. Therefore, the null hypothesis (H_{01}) is retained. Since there was no significant relation between acculturation and psychological distress, regression analysis could not be done to test the hypothesis (H_{06}), which suggests that there is no significant influence of acculturation on psychological distress.

Results also show that there is a significant negative correlation ($r = -.316$, $p = 0.006$) between attachment anxiety and psychological distress. Therefore, the null hypothesis (H_{02}) is rejected. This is consistent with the results of Miao, et. al., (2020), where attachment anxiety, was found to be a significant negative predictor of psychological adaptation.

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From the table it can be interpreted that there is no significant negative correlation ($r = -.156$, $p=.188$) between attachment avoidance and psychological distress. Therefore, the null hypothesis (H_{03}) is retained. This finding is supported by Ponciano C. et.al., (2020) as mentioned in the literature. Attachment avoidance was not found to directly have an effect on psychological distress. It was indirectly related to psychological distress through acculturative stress. Since there was no significant correlation, the null hypothesis (H_{08}) which states that there is no significant influence of avoidant attachment style on psychological distress was not tested.

From the table it can be interpreted that there is no significant positive correlation ($r=.111$, $p=.350$) between acculturation and attachment anxiety. Therefore, the null hypothesis (H_{04}) is retained. The results are supported by a finding in a study conducted on Chinese international students in Japan by Yin et. al., (2021). They found that, there is no relationship between acculturation to the host culture and attachment anxiety. Here since there is no significant correlation present, the null hypothesis (H_{09}), which states that there is no significant influence of anxiety attachment style on acculturation was not tested.

From the table it can be interpreted that there is a significant negative correlation ($r= -.230$, $p=0.050$) between acculturation and attachment avoidance. Therefore, the null hypothesis (H_{05}) is rejected.

Table 4.7 Result of Linear Regression predicting the influence of Attachment anxiety on Psychological Distress

Variable	R ²	Adjusted R2	S.E	β	F	P
Attachment anxiety	.100	.087	.006	-.316	7.873	.006

a. Dependent Variable: Psychological Distress
 $p < 0.01$

Table 4.7 shows the linear regression predicting the influence of attachment anxiety on Psychological Distress among Indian international students. The R² value is .100 revealed that the predictor variable explained 10% variance in the outcome variable with $F(1,71) = 7.873$. $p = 0.006$ ($p < 0.01$), indicating the model is good fit for data. Table 4.7 revealed that attachment anxiety negatively predicted psychological distress ($\beta = -.316$). Therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected (H_{07}). This is consistent with the results of Miao, et. al., (2020), where attachment anxiety, was found to be a significant predictor of psychological distress.

Table 4.8 Result of Linear Regression predicting the influence of Attachment avoidance on Acculturation among students

Variable	R ²	Adjusted R2	S.E	β	F	P
Attachment avoidance	.053	.040	.080	-.230	3.969	.050

a. Dependent Variable: Acculturation
 $p \leq 0.05$

The R² value is .053 revealed that the predictor variable explained 5% variance in the outcome variable with $F(1,71) = 3.969$ $p = 0.050$ ($p \leq 0.05$), indicating the model is good fit for data. Table 4.6 revealed that attachment avoidance negatively predicted acculturation ($\beta = -.230$). Therefore, the null hypothesis (H_{010}) is rejected.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of the study was to examine if there exists a relationship between acculturation, attachment style and psychological distress among Indian citizens between the age group of 18 to 35 years who are studying abroad in countries like U.S., Canada, Australia. The data collection was done online through google forms. There were 39 females and 34 males in the study. They were asked to fill socio-demographic details and the questionnaires of SL-ASIA, Adult Attachment Style-Revised (AAS-R) and K10 Psychological distress scale.

Results indicated that there was no significant correlation between acculturation and psychological distress. Therefore, further regression analysis could not be done.

The results revealed that there was a significant negative correlation between acculturation and avoidant attachment. Regression analysis revealed that attachment avoidance negatively predicted acculturation. On the other hand, results did not show any significant relationship between acculturation and anxiety attachment, therefore regression analysis was not done.

A significant negative correlation was found between psychological distress and anxiety attachment. Regression analysis found attachment anxiety to negatively predict psychological distress. Results indicated that there was no significant correlation between attachment avoidance and psychological distress, therefore further regression analysis was not done.

The findings of this study implies that a person's attachment style has an influence on their level of acculturation when moving to a host country. A large population of Indian students go abroad to pursue higher education. Knowledge about their own attachment style can help them understand themselves better, motivate them to find ways to connect with people from diverse background and from the host community. It may encourage them to get out of their comfort zone, or find the right people to help them navigate through the new atmosphere and have the best experience. This will also have a positive impact on their psychological functioning, leading to a better mental health. Keeping all this in mind, college authorities can also take the right measures, like arranging a smooth welcome process, providing counselling services and encouraging cross-cultural programs. The government can also introduce policies that cater to the needs and development of these students.

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Conflict of Interest

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