

The Mediating Role of Coping Strategies in Parent-Child Attachment and Social Adjustment

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this study was to assess the mediation analysis of coping strategies in parent-child attachment and social adjustment. A sample of 209 were collected using purposive sampling technique. The present study used correlational research design. The Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment (IPPA), The Social Adaptation Self-Evaluation Scale (SASS) and The Brief COPE Inventory inventories were used to assess parent-child attachment, social adjustment and coping strategies respectively. Descriptive statistics, Spearman Correlation and Mediation analysis were used to analyze the data. The findings indicated coping strategies - emotion focused coping, problem focused coping and avoidant coping did not mediate the parent-child attachment for both father and mother, and social adjustment relationship. The findings also revealed that attachment with mother is positively correlated with attachment with father and problem focused coping. Attachment with father is positively correlated with problem focused coping and negatively correlated with avoidant coping.

Keywords: *Parent-Child Attachment, Coping Strategies, Social Adjustment, Mediation, College Students*

College students are challenged with having to meet all the high expectations and demands to thrive in the university and to meet these demands they must be able to work well under pressure. Adjusting to the new environment (i.e., moving to college) and support from their parents would help them navigate the complexities of the external world and thrive within the complex web of social relationships, norms, and expectations.

Parent-Child Attachment:

Attachment is a universal human need that leads to the formation of close bonds of affection according to Bowlby (1988). In Bowlby's terms (1969) attachment refers to the state and quality of individuals' emotional bond, in terms of their reliance and independence, to early caregiving figures.

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Social Adjustment:

Adjustment is defined as the process of changing oneself to fit into a given environment (Bum et al., 2021). In that case social adjustment or social adaptation is the extent to which a person engages in a proper social exertion and adjusts to his or her current social surroundings (Kayani et al., 2022). The students have to develop the capability for adaptation, which allows them to develop into responsible members of society.

How parent-child attachment can impact social adjustment?

How exactly parental involvement or attachment impact a student's social adjustment is explained in terms of findings of a review done by Sax and Wartman (2010): Separation-individuation, which is the process of acquiring autonomy and separating from parents and attachment, leads to positive emotional adjustment. Students who acquire autonomy are better able to meet the demands of being a college student such as waking up on time, attending classes, choosing courses, and navigating the social atmosphere at college. Although according to attachment theory, rather than needing a defined break from parents, students would benefit from regular parental contact and support as it could help in student's development of competency of autonomy. Secure attachment leads students to feel more comfortable about the process of separation-individuation and maintaining contact with parents rather than severing completely is a central component of separation-individuation. Both attachment and separation-individuation work together to have combined effects on student adjustment to college.

Coping Strategies:

Lazarus (1993) claims that according to the basic concept of coping, we're in a constant, two-way interaction with our environment. Coping is an assessment process designed to respond to external and internal challenges. These strategies can be categorized into various types such as problem-focused coping, emotion-focused coping and avoidant coping.

How parent-child attachment can impact coping mechanisms?

There is consensus evidence that depending on the parent-child attachment a person has can affect the coping mechanism used by them in stressful situations. Coping mechanisms are said to be affected by a sense of personal security to deal with difficulties, perceptions of self-competence, and discernments of the value of others as assets when confronting personal problems or distress (Cabral, et al., 2012). Mikulincer & Florian (1998) in their research found that adult attachment style is a predictor of the way in which people cope with stressful events. They also found findings that indicated the adaptive advantage of security in attachment, which is that secure attachment persons are more resistant to the detrimental effects of personal failure. Avoidant attachment and anxious-ambivalent people, even though they showed no cognitive reactions to failure still exhibited problems in functioning after failure.

Mediation analysis assumes a sequential relationship where the independent variable affects a mediating variable, which then affects the dependent variable. Although an association has been established between parent-attachment and social adjustment, and parent-attachment and coping mechanism, there is not much empirical evidence addressing associations between all the three variables. A similar research conducted by Bishop et al., (2019) on the topic Parental attachment and adjustment to college: the mediating role of avoidant coping, found in their result that a secure attachment is related to a positive adjustment to college. Avoidant coping proclivities play a mediating role in the parental attachment and college adjustment relationship.] They also found that avoidant coping mediates the attachment and

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adjustment relationship for both attachment with mothers and fathers. In relation to attachment with mother, the mediating role is full, whereas in relation to attachment with father, the mediating role is partial. Thus, the first step of the study is to assess the relationship between parent-child attachment and coping strategies, second step is to assess the relationship between coping strategies and social adjustment, and the third step and final step is to assess the mediating effect of coping strategies on parent-child attachment and social adjustment.

METHOD

Research Design

Correlational Research Design

Statement of the Problem

This research aims to explore how various coping strategies used by college students may mediate the relationship between attachment to parents and their social adjustment

Objectives of The Study

- To examine the relationship between Parent-child attachment and Coping strategies in college students.
- To examine the relationship between Coping strategies and Social adjustment in college students.
- To assess the mediating effect of Coping Strategies on Parent-Attachment and Social Adjustment.

Hypothesis

- H1: There is a significant relationship between parent-child attachment and coping strategies in college students
- H2: There is a significant relationship between coping strategies and social adjustment in college students
- H3: Emotion Focused Coping mediate the relationship between attachment with mother and social adjustment in college students
- H4: Problem Focused Coping mediate the relationship between attachment with mother and social adjustment in college students
- H5: Avoidant Coping mediate the relationship between attachment with mother and social adjustment in college students
- H6: Emotion Focused Coping mediate the relationship between attachment with father and social adjustment in college students
- H7: Problem Focused Coping mediate the relationship between attachment with father and social adjustment in college students
- H8: Avoidant Coping mediate the relationship between attachment with father and social adjustment in college students

Operational Definition

- **Parent-child attachment:** Attachment refers to a specific and defined aspect of the relationship between a child and caregiver that is concerned with ensuring the child's safety, security, and protection (Bowlby, 1984).
- **Social adjustment:** Social adjustment is characterized as the extent to which an individual exhibits competent social behavior and adapts to their immediate social surroundings (Crick and Dodge, 1994).

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- **Coping strategies:** Coping is characterized as the mental and behavioral efforts employed to handle both internal and external stressors. It can involve either avoidance or approach strategies (Canton et al., 2010).

Variable

- **Independent variable:** Parent-child attachment - attachment with mother and attachment with father
- **Dependent variable:** Social adjustment
- **Mediating variable:** Coping strategies - emotion focused coping, problem focused coping, and avoidant coping

Sample

209 college students between the ages of 18 and 25 from colleges in and around Bangalore, out of which 25 are male and the rest are female.

Inclusion criteria:

Participants who grew up with both their parents

Participants who give consent to the study

Sampling Technique: Purposive sampling

Research ethics followed

- **Informed consent:** All participants will provide informed consent, which will clearly outline the study's objectives, their rights, and what their participation involves.
- **Anonymity and Confidentiality:** The identities of the participants will be safeguarded using initials as identifiers, and their responses would remain confidential.
- **Voluntary participation:** Participation in the study is voluntary, and participants are allowed to withdraw at any time without facing any repercussions. If the participants choose to withdraw, their data will be excluded from the study.

Tools for the study

1. Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment

The Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment (IPPA) (Armsden & Greenberg, 1987). The IPPA assesses an individual's perceptions of the current degree of mutual trust, communication, and alienation in their relationships with their parents and peers. Attachment quality is measured along a continuous scale with scores indicating a level of perceived attachment quality rather than an attachment style classification. The inventory has 3 questionnaires: Attachment to mother (25 items), attachment to father (25 items) and attachment to peers (25 items). The current study will only administer attachment to mother and father to assess the parent-child attachment. Higher scores reflect a greater perceived attachment quality with the parents. The scale has good internal reliability (Pearson & Child, 2007). The test has good internal consistency with a Cronbach's alpha value of .87 for attachment with mother and .89 for attachment with father. (Armsden & Greenberg, 1987). Construct validity is evidenced by scores on the IPPA relating to other measures of family environment (Armsden & Greenberg, 1987) (Glazebrook et al., 2015)

2. Social Adaptation Self-Evaluation Scale

The Social Adaptation Self-Evaluation Scale (SASS) includes 21 items exploring patient motivation and behavior in the areas of work and leisure, family and extra-family

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relationships, intellectual interests, satisfaction with roles and self perception of his ability to manage and control his environment. It is a 4 point Likert scale ranging from 0 to 3 with a total score ranging from 0 to 60. The scale has Cronbach's alpha equals 0.74 and Test retest reliability are 41.9 and 42.2. The scale exhibited a strong degree of reliability when both its internal consistency and test-retest reliability (Bosc et al., 1997).

3. Brief Cope Inventory

The Brief COPE Inventory was used to measure coping strategies. The Brief Cope is a shortened version of COPE Inventory (Carver, 1997). It includes 28 items with a 4-point Likert-type scale ranging from 0 to 3 and each item involves a description of a coping strategy. The inventory measures 14 coping strategies: active coping, planning, positive reframing, acceptance, humor, religion, using emotional support, using instrumental support, self-distraction, denial, venting, substance use, behavioral disengagement, and self-blame. The present study will divide all the coping strategies into two main categories: adaptive coping and maladaptive coping based on research done by Blomgren et al., (2016). Adaptive coping includes a sum of active coping, planning, positive reframing, acceptance, humor, religion, using emotional support and using instrumental support. Maladaptive coping includes a sum of self-distraction, denial, venting, substance use, behavioral disengagement and self-blame (Blomgren et al., 2016). The convergent validity for all items were greater than .50 indicating good validity.

Statistical Analysis

The data gathered in this survey are analyzed with SPSS version 25.0 software. Descriptive statistics, including standard deviations, mean values, and frequency, are utilized to describe the sample and the variables. Inferential statistics, like correlation, are employed to study the relationship between the variables. The Process Macro for SPSS is used to conduct the mediation analysis of coping strategies on the relationship between parent-child attachment and social adjustment.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 Showing the descriptive statistics for the variables

Variables	Mean	SD
Attachment with Mother	94.49	16.58
Attachment with Father	92.34	17.76
Emotion-Focused Coping	31.86	6.29
Problem-Focused Coping	23.26	4.96
Avoidant Coping	19.16	4.53
Social Adjustment	40.41	8.30

Table 1 shows the median and standard deviation for all the variables.

Normality Test

Table 2 Test of normality using Shapiro-Wilk's Test

Variables	Statistic	df	Sig
Attachment with Mother	0.98	209	0.01
Attachment with Father	0.98	209	0.00
Emotion-Focused Coping	0.99	209	0.27
Problem-Focused Coping	0.98	209	0.01
Avoidant Coping	0.98	209	0.00
Social Adjustment	0.97	209	0.00

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Table 2 shows shapiro-wilk test results for the test of normality for all the variables. The results revealed that only the Emotion-Focused Coping is normally distributed (statistic = 0.99, $p > 0.05$). Hence for the statistical analysis non parametric tests are used in this research.

Spearman Correlation

- **H1: There is a significant relationship between parent-child attachment and coping strategies in college students**
- **H2: There is a significant relationship between coping strategies and social adjustment in college students**

Table 3 Showing the correlation between

Variable	1	2	3	4	5
1. Attachment with Mother	-	-	-	-	-
2. Attachment with Father	0.69**	-	-	-	-
3. Emotion Focused Coping	-0.05	-0.14	-	-	-
4. Problem Focused Coping	0.31**	0.17**	0.55**	-	-
5. Avoidant Coping	-0.04	-0.16**	0.55**	0.43**	-
6. Social Adjustment	0.27**	0.24**	0.09	0.21**	0.01

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

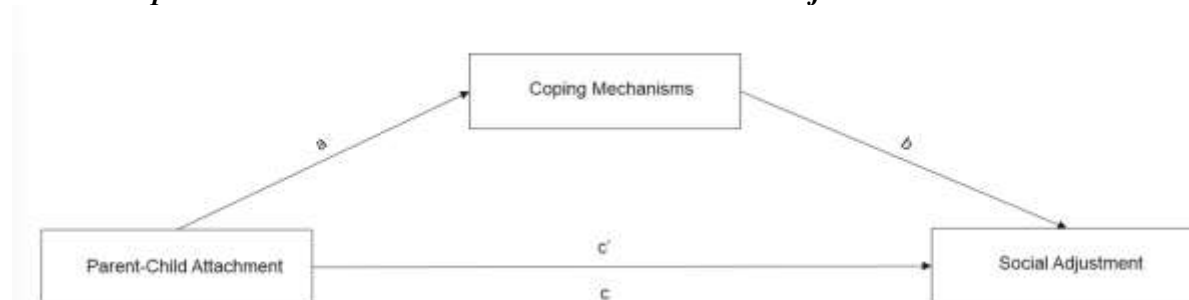
**. Correlation is significant at the level of 0.05 level (2-tailed)*

Table 3 indicates the correlation between Parent-Child Attachment, Coping Strategies, and Social Adjustment. Attachment with father ($r = .69$) and problem-focused coping ($r = .31$) are positively correlated with attachment with mother. Problem-focused coping ($r = .17$) is positively correlated with attachment with father and avoidant coping ($r = .24$) is negatively correlated with attachment with father. Social adjustment shows a positive correlation with both attachment with mother ($r = .27$) and attachment with father ($r = .24$).

Mediation

Mediation analysis is a statistical technique used to measure the causal chain in which a precursor variable leads to a mediating variable that subsequently affects the outcome variable. In this study, the causal sequence is such that parent-child attachment leads to a coping mechanism, which then impacts social adjustment. The mediation model is represented as shown (refer to figure 7).

Figure 7. Simple mediation using the mediating effect of Coping Strategies on the relationship between Parent-Child attachment and Social Adjustment.



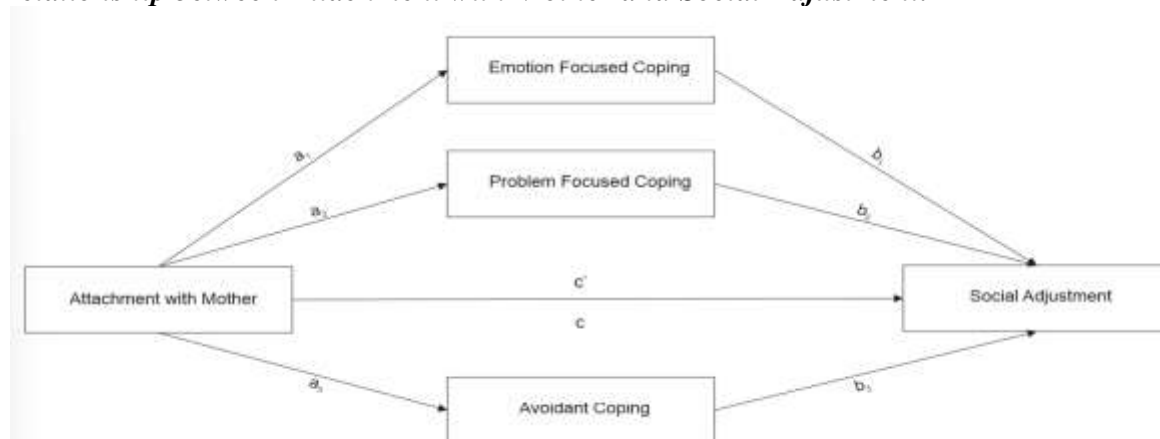
Note. ‘a’ represents the impact of parent-child attachment on the coping mechanism; ‘b’ signifies the influence of the coping mechanism on social adjustment; ‘c’ is the direct impact of parent-child attachment on social adjustment when the mediator is present; ‘c’ is the total

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effect, the combined influence of direct effect and indirect effect that flows through the mediator ($c = c' + a*b$).

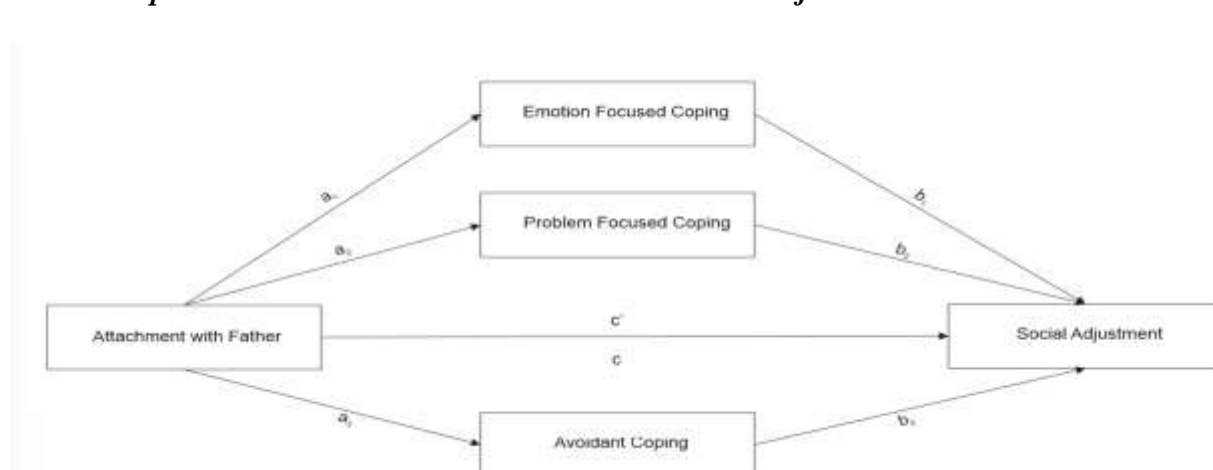
Parent-child attachment is evaluated independently for attachment with the mother and attachment with the father. The coping strategy has three dimensions: emotion-focused coping strategy, problem-focused coping strategy, and avoidant coping strategy. Given that all three dimensions are assessed in a single questionnaire and there's no theoretical basis to assume that one dimension would lead to another, parallel mediation is deemed suitable. The model for parallel mediation appears as shown (refer to figures 8 and 9).

Figure 8. Parallel mediation using the mediating effect of Coping Strategies on the relationship between Attachment with Mother and Social Adjustment.



Note. a_1 is effect of attachment with mother on emotion focused coping; a_2 is effect of attachment with mother on problem focused coping; a_3 is effect of attachment with mother on avoidant coping; b_1 is effect of emotion focused coping on social adjustment; b_2 is effect of problem focused coping on social adjustment; b_3 is effect of avoidant coping on social adjustment; c' is direct effect of attachment with mother on social adjustment in the presence of the mediator; c is the total effect is the combined influence of the direct effect and the indirect effect flowing through the mediator, represented as $(c = (c') + a_1*b_1 + a_2*b_2 + a_3*b_3)$.

Figure 9. Parallel mediation using the mediating effect of Coping Strategies on the relationship between Attachment with Father and Social Adjustment.



Note. a_1 is effect of attachment with father on emotion focused coping; a_2 is effect of attachment with father on problem focused coping; a_3 is effect of attachment with father on

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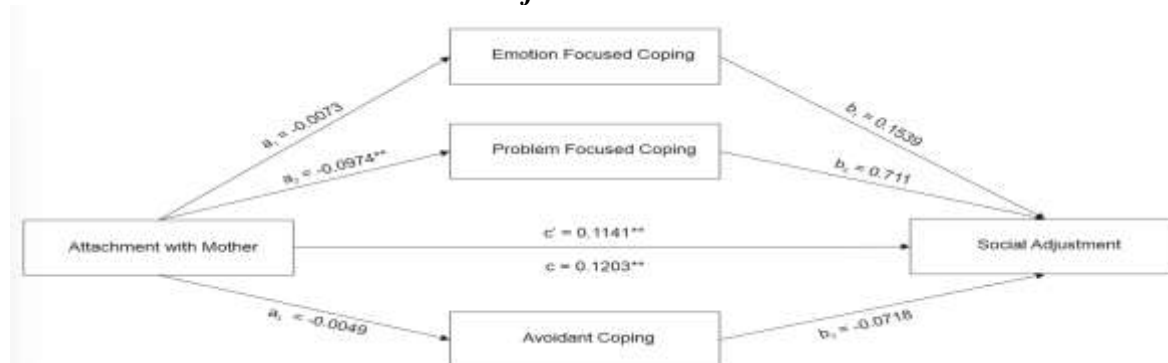
avoidant coping; b_1 is effect of emotion focused coping on social adjustment; b_2 is effect of problem focused coping on social adjustment; b_3 is effect of avoidant coping on social adjustment; c' is direct effect of attachment with father on social adjustment in the presence of the mediator; c is the total effect, the combined influence of the direct effect and the indirect effect flowing through the mediator, represented as $(c = (c') + a_1*b_1+a_2*b_2+a_3*b_3)$.

- **H3: Emotion Focused Coping mediate the relationship between attachment with mother and social adjustment in college students**
- **H4: Problem Focused Coping mediate the relationship between attachment with mother and social adjustment in college students**
- **H5: Avoidant Coping mediate the relationship between attachment with mother and social adjustment in college students**

Table 4 Mediation effect of Coping Strategies on the relationship between Attachment with Mother and Social Adjustment

Total Effect	Direct Effect	Relationship	Indirect Effect	Confidence interval		t-statistics	Conclusion
				LB	UB		
0.120 (0.001)	0.114 (0.003)	H3: Attachment with mother -> Emotion focused coping -> Social adjustment	-0.001	-0.018	0.008	-0.180	Direct only (No mediation)
		H4: Attachment with mother -> Problem focused coping -> Social adjustment	0.007	-0.026	0.039	0.431	Direct only (No mediation)
		H5: Attachment with mother -> Avoidant coping -> Social adjustment	0.000	-0.006	0.007	0.097	Direct only (No mediation)

Figure 10. The mediating effect of three Coping Strategies on the relationship between Attachment with Mother and Social Adjustment.



Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$; All presented effects are unstandardized.

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The results for the mediating role of emotion focused coping, problem focused coping and avoidant coping on the relationship between attachment with mother and social adjustment are seen in table 4 and the sequence of relationship can be seen in figure 10. The results revealed an insignificant indirect effect of the impact of attachment with mother on social adjustment through emotion focused coping ($b = -0.0011$, $t = -0.180$), rejecting H3. The study found an insignificant indirect effect of the impact of attachment with mother on problem focused coping through social adjustment ($b = 0.007$, $t = 0.431$), rejecting H4. The study also found an insignificant indirect effect of the impact of attachment with mother on avoidant coping through social adjustment ($b = 0.000$, $t = 0.097$), rejecting H5. However, the direct effect of attachment with mother on social adjustment in presence of the mediators was found significant ($b = 0.114$, $p < 0.001$). Hence, there is no mediating effect of coping strategies on the relationship between attachment with mother and social adjustment. There only exists a direct effect on attachment with mother on social adjustment.

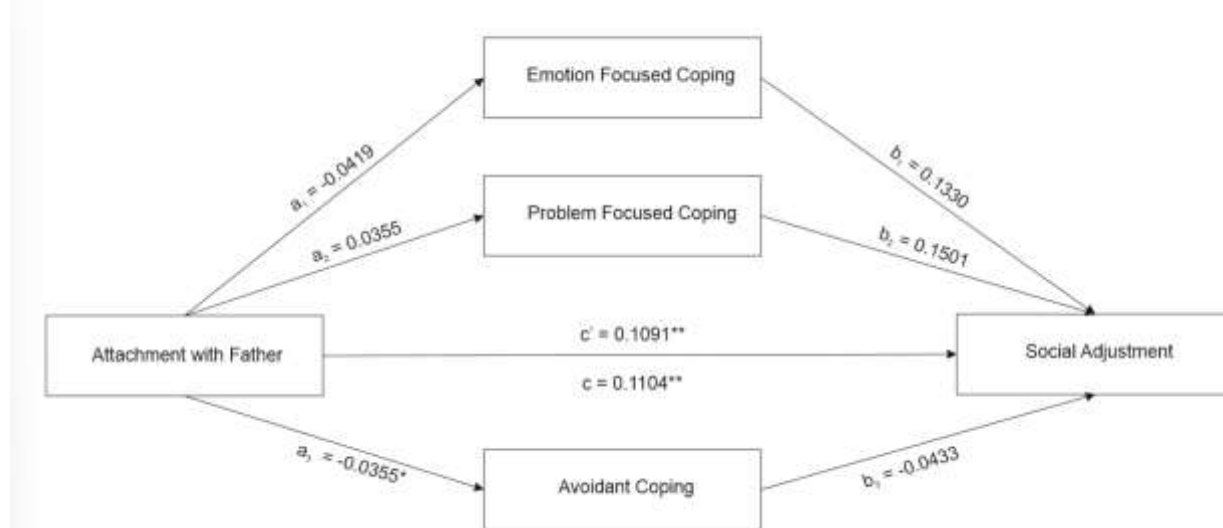
- **H6: Emotion Focused Coping mediate the relationship between attachment with father and social adjustment in college students**
- **H7: Problem Focused Coping mediate the relationship between attachment with father and social adjustment in college students**
- **H8: Avoidant Coping mediate the relationship between attachment with father and social adjustment in college students**

Table 5 Mediation effect of Coping Strategies on the relationship between Attachment with Father and Social Adjustment

Total Effect	Direct Effect	Relationship	Indirect Effect	Confidence interval		t-statistics	Conclusion
				LB	UB		
0.110 (0.001)	0.109 (0.001)	H6: Attachment with father -> Emotion focused coping -> Social adjustment	-0.006	-0.022	0.005	-0.811	Direct only (No mediation)
		H7: Attachment with father -> Problem focused coping -> Social adjustment	-0.005	-0.007	0.021	0.768	Direct only (No mediation)
		H8: Attachment with father -> Avoidant coping -> Social adjustment	0.002	-0.010	0.015	0.242	Direct only (No mediation)

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Figure 11. The mediating effect of three Coping Strategies in the relationship between Attachment with Father and Social Adjustment.



Note. $*p < .05$, $**p < .01$; All presented effects are unstandardized.

The results for the mediating role of emotion focused coping, problem focused coping and avoidant coping on the relationship between attachment with father and social adjustment are seen in table 5 and the sequence of relationship can be seen in figure 11. The results revealed an insignificant indirect effect of the impact of attachment with father on social adjustment through emotion focused coping ($b = -0.006$, $t = -0.811$), rejecting H6. The study found an insignificant indirect effect of the impact of attachment with father on problem focused coping through social adjustment ($b = -0.005$, $t = 0.768$), rejecting H7. The study also found an insignificant indirect effect of the impact of attachment with father on avoidant coping through social adjustment ($b = 0.002$, $t = 0.242$), rejecting H8. However, the direct effect of attachment with father on social adjustment in presence of the mediators was found significant ($b = 0.109$, $p < 0.001$). Hence, there is no mediating effect of coping strategies on the relationship between attachment with father and social adjustment. There only exists a direct effect on attachment with father on social adjustment.

The study was designed to explore the mediation role of coping mechanisms in the connection between parent-child bonding and social adaptation. However, contrary to hypothesis, the results showed no mediation effect of coping strategies in the relationship between either parent's attachment and social adjustment. Instead, a direct correlation was found between parent-child attachment and social adjustment. Despite the absence of a mediation effect, the study did reveal significant relationships between the variables. A positive correlation was found between mother-child attachment and problem-focused coping, and father-child attachment has a positive correlation with problem-focused coping and negative correlation with avoidant coping. Additionally, social adjustment was positively correlated with attachment to both parents.

It's important to interpret these findings with caution. The absence of a significant mediation effect suggests that other factors that are not examined in this study may play a role in mediation in the relationship between parent-child attachment and social adjustment. Subsequent studies are needed to investigate these potential factors and further our understanding of these complex dynamics.

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In conclusion, the study enhances our understanding of the complex interplay between parent-child attachment, coping strategies, and social adjustment. It highlights the importance of secure parent-child attachment in fostering social adjustment and highlights the need for further findings in this area.

Limitations

- The insignificant mediation effect in this study indicates that the mediation role of coping strategies in the relationship between parent-child attachment and social adjustment may not be as straightforward as hypothesized. This suggests that maybe the theoretical framework for the mediation model used to guide the study needs to be revised or expanded.
- The parenting style used by Indian parents is different compared to the parenting style used by foreigners using which most of the measures are developed. Not accounting for this cultural difference could have impacted the results of the study.
- The study relied on self-report measures, which can lead to various biases including social desirability bias, recall bias and information bias. Subsequent studies could benefit from using a multi-method approach by incorporating other types of measures such as observational or interview measures.
- The study was conducted within a specific cultural context, i.e India and its findings may not be generalizable to other cultural contexts. Within the Indian context, students only from Tamilnadu and Bangalore were selected as samples which makes the result not generalizable to the whole of the Indian population. This highlights the need for cross-cultural research to examine the effects the observed relationship holds in different cultures.
- The gender distribution of this research is vast. The male sample accounts for only 25 respondents in the total of 209 respondents data collected. This makes the research findings not generalizable for the gender due to the differences in number.

Implications

- The direct effect of parent-child attachment and social adjustment implies the importance of fostering strong and secure parent-child attachment for better adjustment for college students. This finding could particularly be relevant for educators, counselors, and policy makers who are in position to develop programs or interventions aimed at enhancing parent-child relationships or social adjustment of students.
- The positive correlation between parent-child attachment and problem focused coping strategies suggest parental attachment may promote healthier coping mechanisms. The negative correlation between attachment with father and avoidant coping also implies the same. This could have great implications for mental health interventions. Intervention programs could be developed to educate parents about the importance of their relationship with their children in fostering effective coping strategies in their children.
- The absence of mediation effect of coping strategies on the relationship between parent-child attachment and social adjustment suggests that other factors that are not considered in the study might be at play. This opens up new avenues for research to explore what these factors might be and how they mediate or interact with parent-child attachment and social adjustment. In the future, research can also make use of tools that are standardized for the Indian population to further strengthen the study in relation to application in India.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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