

Correlations among interpersonal attachment style, ambivalence over emotional expression, and depressive tendencies in Taiwanese university students

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to explore correlations among various interpersonal attachment styles, dimensions of ambivalence over emotional expression, and depressive tendencies in first-to-fourth-year Taiwanese university students. The study included a total of 925 research subjects. The research tools used included a scale measuring interpersonal attachment styles, a questionnaire addressing ambivalence over emotional expressiveness, and a scale measuring depressive tendencies.

The results revealed that (1) higher levels of insecure attachment were associated with more ambivalence over emotional expression, (2) higher levels of insecure attachment were associated with higher scores for depressive tendencies, and (3) higher levels of ambivalence over emotional expression were associated with higher scores for depressive tendencies.

Keywords: Interpersonal Attachment Style, Ambivalence over Emotional Expression, Depressive Tendencies

1. RESEARCH MOTIVATION

Depression is a natural emotional state that almost everyone has experienced, and different degrees of depression have different effects on the lives of individuals. According to a 2008 survey conducted by the John Tung Foundation among 5,655 university students, 22.2% of the students suffered from significant depression, and almost one in four was troubled by it and required professional help (John Tung Foundation, 2008).

Additionally, the John Tung Foundation in Taiwan surveyed the reasons for depression and found that 51.3% of depressed people were depressed due to "interpersonal interactions." However, those with a greater sensitivity and sense of loneliness in interpersonal relationships were more depressed (John Tung Foundation, 1999/2001). This indicates that the quality of interpersonal interactions affects the emotions of individuals. University students are more mature and stable than are those in secondary school, and they are able to engage in more nuanced cognitive processing. One of the important developmental tasks facing university students, who are entering a new social context, involves establishing good interpersonal relationships. Indeed, these students encounter more diverse and complex interpersonal relationships while studying at a university. Thus, emotional expression by Taiwanese university students in the context of interpersonal interactions needs to be explored.

Considerable research has shown that those who suffer from depression have a higher likelihood of insecure attachment. Vivona (2000) found that university students with insecure attachment reported more anxiety, depression, and worry compared with those with secure attachment. Robert, Gotlib, and Kassel (1996) observed a positive correlation between the anxiety dimensions of adult attachment and depression, indicating that insecure attachment affects personal adaptation. These researchers also pointed out that insecure attachment is related to dysfunctional attitudes, resulting in lower self-esteem and higher levels of depression. Insecure attachment seems to cause depressive symptoms through its impact on self-esteem and self-worth.

Ambivalence about emotional expression (AEE), which occurs when an individual experiences a conflict between the desire to express and the desire not to express his or her feelings under emotionally arousing conditions (King, 1993), can be divided into the dimensions of emotional rumination and emotional suppression (Chen et al., 2005). These involve excessive concern about the outcomes of emotional expression and an individual's conscious control over his or her own emotional experience, respectively. The study conducted by King and Emmons (1990) showed that ambivalence over emotional expression is related to several psychological stress indicators, including depression. King (1993) pointed out that these conflicts involving emotional expression may become important

mediators that influence the types of emotional expression and mental and physical health, and Emmons and Colby (1995) suggested that ambivalence over emotional expression may cause individuals to engage in less effective and precise communication with others, thereby reducing their social support and, in turn, affecting their physical and mental health.

Thus, the present researcher examined the correlations among personal attachment styles, ambivalence over emotionally expressive behaviors, and depressive tendencies in university students to improve our understanding of these relationships.

2. RESEARCH DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION

2.1 Research subjects

The sample for this study consisted of first-to-fourth-year university students in Taiwan and included students from 161 public and private Taiwanese universities, with a total of about 1,032,000 students, located throughout country.

The study relied on random sampling, and the Google Docs system was used to design an online questionnaire for testing and data collection. Questionnaires were posted on Facebook pages and on club and department boards. Questionnaires were also delivered via the PTT bulletin board system (BBS) of Taiwan. After board moderators agreed, questionnaires were also posted on university boards and academic questionnaire boards to increase the response rate.

The survey was conducted from March 12, 2013 to April 10, 2013. A total of 930 individuals participated, and 925 valid questionnaires were collected.

To thank respondents for their participation, after all the questionnaires were collected. The researcher held raffles in which the computer randomly selected winners. Additionally, an effort was made to make certain that the research subjects could fill out questionnaires effectively such that interpersonal attachment styles, ambivalence over emotional expression behaviors, and depressive tendencies of university students could be observed clearly. To ensure that raffle winners could be contacted, the researcher asked participants to provide an email address on the online questionnaire.

2.2 Research Tools

2.2.1 Interpersonal Attachment Styles Scale

This scale was developed based on the theoretical framework of the four interpersonal attachment styles proposed by Bartholomew and Horowitz and is used to test adult interpersonal attachment styles. It is divided into four factors and includes 18 questions.

The validity of this scale was tested by factor analysis, and the total variance explained by the four aspects was 59.773%. The eigenvalue of "anxious attachment" was 3.319, and the factor-explained variance was 18.439%; the eigenvalue of "dismissive attachment" was 3.039, and the factor-explained variance was 16.881%; the eigenvalue of "avoidant attachment" was 2.611, and the factor-explained variance was 14.503%; and the eigenvalue of "secure attachment" was 1.791, and its factor-explained variance was 9.949%.

2.2.2 Ambivalence over Emotional Expressiveness Scale

This scale was designed in accordance with King and Emmons's (1990) Ambivalence over Emotional Expressiveness Questionnaire. The original scale measures the broad experience of ambivalence about emotional expression experienced by individuals in their daily lives. Cheung et al. (2005) analyzed such expression in a Chinese cultural context and proposed the two major factors of emotional rumination and emotional suppression.

After item analysis and factor analysis were performed, 14 questions remained. Based on the construct underpinning the original scales, factor 1 was named "emotional rumination" and included seven questions; factor 2 was named "emotional suppression" and also included seven questions. The eigenvalues of these two factors were 4.103 and 3.544, respectively; the explained variances were 29.309% and 25.313%, respectively; and the accumulated explained variance was 54.622%.

2.2.3 Depressive Tendencies Scale

This scale uses Radloff's (1977) Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale (CES-D) as its reference. The original scale contains 20 questions covering four factors: "depressed affect," "positive affect," "somatic symptoms," and "interpersonal problems."

In terms of the questions in and construction of this original scale, after completing item and factor analysis, the researcher named factor 1 "lack of vitality" (six questions); factor 2 "negative feelings" (six questions); factor 3

“loss of pleasure” (three questions); and factor 4 “physical symptoms” (two questions). The eigenvalues of the four factors were 3.374, 3.241, 2.352, and 2.028, respectively; the explained variances were 19.847%, 19.064%, 13.833%, and 11.928%, respectively; and the accumulated explained variance was 64.672%.

The three aforementioned scales use a Likert five-point scale for responses. Questions that were scored positively awarded 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 points for “does not conform at all,” “somewhat conforms,” “conforms half the time,” “mostly conforms,” and “highly conforms,” respectively. Questions that were negatively scored awarded 5, 4, 3, 2, and 1 points for “does not conform at all,” “somewhat conforms,” “conforms half the time,” “mostly conforms,” and “highly conforms,” respectively.

3. RESULTS

3.1 Correlations between interpersonal attachment style and ambivalence about emotional expression in university students

Product-moment correlations were used to analyze relationships between interpersonal attachment styles and ambivalence about emotional expressions in university students. The results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Product-moment correlations between dimensions of interpersonal attachment style and ambivalence about emotional expression in university students

Dimension	Emotional rumination	Emotional suppression	Overall ambivalence about emotional expression
Secure attachment	-.427**	-.219**	-.364**
Anxious attachment	.609**	.474**	.604**
Avoidant attachment	.464**	.264**	.410**
Dismissive attachment	.227**	.173**	.224**

***p* < .01

3.2 Correlations between interpersonal attachment style and depressive tendencies in university students

Product-moment correlations were used to analyze relationships between the interpersonal attachment styles and depressive tendencies of university students; the results of these analyses are shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Product-moment correlations between dimensions of interpersonal attachment style and depressive tendencies in university students

Dimension	Lack of vitality	Negative feelings	Loss of pleasure	Physical symptoms	Overall depressive tendencies
Secure attachment	-.470**	-.497**	-.598**	-.309**	-.587**
Anxious attachment	.418**	.478**	.363**	.234**	.489**
Avoidant attachment	.352**	.384**	.340**	.271**	.423**
Dismissive attachment	.061	.060	.042	.085**	.071**

***p* < .01

3.3 Correlations between ambivalence about emotional expression and depressive tendencies in university students

Product-moment correlations were also used to analyze correlations between ambivalence over emotional expression and depressive tendencies in university students, and the results are shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Correlations between dimensions of ambivalence about emotional expression and depressive tendencies in university students

Dimension	Lack of vitality	of Negative feelings	Loss of pleasure	of Physical symptoms	Overall depressive tendencies
Emotional rumination	.412**	.412**	.363**	.206**	.457**
Emotional suppression	.290**	.253**	.220**	.110**	.294**

***p* < .01

4. DISCUSSION

The data revealed a significant correlation between interpersonal attachment style and ambivalence over emotional expression in university students (Table 2). Moreover, secure attachment had a negative correlation with each of the dimensions of ambivalence over emotional expression, which means that university students with a greater tendency toward secure attachment are less ambivalent about emotional expression. Furthermore, anxious attachment, avoidant attachment, and dismissive attachment had positive correlations with the dimensions of ambivalence over emotional expression, which indicates that university students with higher levels of anxious attachment, avoidant attachment, and dismissive attachment are more ambivalent about emotional expression.

In terms of relationships between interpersonal attachment style and depressive tendencies (Table 3), the results show that university students with secure attachment have lower levels of depressive tendencies, whereas those more inclined toward anxious attachment and avoidant attachment have higher levels of depressive tendencies. Additionally, those students who are more inclined toward dismissive attachment have more physical symptoms.

As shown in Table 4, ambivalence over emotional expression and depressive tendencies were significantly correlated, and university students who are more ambivalent about emotional expression tend to be more depressed.

CONCLUSIONS

This research reached the following conclusions.

- (1) University students tending toward insecure attachment also tend toward ambivalence about emotional expression.

Students with anxious attachment, avoidant attachment, and dismissive attachment styles scored higher in emotional rumination and emotional suppression, and those inclined toward secure attachment scored lower in emotional rumination and emotional suppression. That is, university students with a more secure attachment are less ambivalent about emotional expression, and those with a more insecure attachment are more ambivalent about emotional expression.

- (2) University students who are inclined toward an insecure attachment style have higher levels of depressive tendencies.

Students who scored higher in the anxious attachment and avoidant attachment styles also scored higher in lack of vitality, negative feelings, loss of pleasure, and physical symptoms. Higher scores for secure attachment were correlated with low scores for lack of vitality, negative feelings, loss of pleasure, and physical symptoms. Those students with higher scores for dismissive attachment also got higher scores for physical symptoms. Thus, university students with either anxious attachment or avoidant attachment have higher levels of depressive tendencies, but those with secure attachment have lower levels of depressive tendencies. Those inclined toward dismissive attachment, may report more physical symptoms. However, no significant correlations between dismissive attachment and the other dimensions were observed.

- (3) More ambivalence about emotional expression is correlated with higher levels of depressive tendencies in university students.

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