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Relationship between Parenting Styles and Romantic Attachment in Adults with Gender as a Moderating Variable

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ABSTRACT Attachment is an intrinsic relational mechanism that influences individuals' perceptions, behaviours, and relationships. Extensive research has consistently linked parenting styles to attachment patterns in adulthood. This study aimed to examine the relationship between parenting styles and romantic attachment in adults and whether gender served as a moderating variable. A total of 146 students (128 females, 18 males) from Maldives National University, aged 18 to 49, who were either married or in a dating relationship completed an online survey assessing parenting styles using the Parental Authority Questionnaire (PAQ) and romantic attachment styles using the Experiences in Close Relationships (ECR) Scale. Results of correlational analyses revealed that perceived authoritarian parenting had a positive association with attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance, suggesting an insecure attachment pattern. Permissive and authoritative parenting styles negatively correlated with these attachment dimensions, reflecting a secure romantic attachment. Contrary to expectations, gender did not moderate these relationships. The study's limitations include a gender imbalance and a focus on perceived maternal parenting styles only. The results have practical implications for therapeutic interventions, parenting practices, and educational programs aimed at fostering secure attachments. Additionally, they highlight the need for future research to explore other moderating variables and longitudinal effects of parenting on attachment across diverse cultural contexts.

Keywords: adult attachment, romantic attachment, parenting style, Maldives, gender

Introduction

Attachment is an intrinsic human relational mechanism that gradually develops, beginning in early infancy. Early experiences with parents or caregivers contribute to the formation of attachment blueprints, referred to as the Internal Working Models (IWM), which play a significant role in shaping adult attachment patterns (Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1979, 1980, 1982). These models are constructed based on individuals' perceptions of their own self-worthiness of affection as well as their evaluations of others' capacity to offer care and attention (Bartholomew, 1990; Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). This model remains fairly consistent and extends into adulthood, thereby shaping the foundation of close and romantic relationships (Hazan and Shaver, 1987; Feeney and Noller, 1990; Bartholomew and Horowitz, 1991).

Parenting Styles

Parental practices conveyed through parenting styles are among the factors that influence the development and maintenance of adult romantic relationships (Fan, 2023; Darling & Steinberg, 1993; Karre, 2015; Wang & Chen, 2022). An individual's internal working model links the emotional and behavioral patterns they associate with their perceived parenting style to their understanding of romantic relationships (Gray & Steinberg, 1999). In her pioneering work on parenting styles, Baumrind (1966, 1971) classified parenting styles based on two dimensions: demandingness and responsiveness, where demandingness refers to the parents' willingness to establish boundaries and implement consequences for children's conduct, while responsiveness refers to how parents can offer warmth and support in response to the emotional and developmental needs of children. Based on these dimensions, parenting styles are classified as authoritarian, authoritative, and permissive. Authoritarian parents exhibit high levels of demandingness from their children while lacking high-quality responsiveness, while authoritative parents have a balance of both demandingness and responsiveness. Permissive parents usually show more responsiveness and acceptance of their children compared to those who show more regulation or demand for their children.

Parenting styles and romantic attachment

Previous research has indicated that having an authoritative parental figure is associated with the development of healthy and positive attitudes towards close relationships, including romantic relationships (Fan 2023; Bhalla & Cherian 2024; Chen et al., 2020; Hadiwijaya et al., 2020). Positive parenting ratings from young adults positively correlate with romantic relationship quality as well as confidence in the ability to develop close and secure connections with others (Dalton et al., 2006). Similarly, perceiving a parental figure as having qualities of an authoritative parent is associated with secure attachment patterns such as low attachment anxiety and avoidance towards their partners (Yahya et al., 2019; Kim et al., 2021; Tomsa, 2019; Di Pentima et al., 2023; Varzaneh et al., 2014).

Authoritarian parenting is correlated with high attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance (Kim et al., 2021; Tomsa, 2019; Di Pentima et al., 2023) indicative of a fearful attachment style, or high scores in attachment anxiety but not avoidance (Yahya et al., 2019), indicative of a preoccupied attachment style. High attachment anxiety implies a constant need for support and reassurance from a partner, while high attachment avoidance represents a persistent inhibition of psychological and social needs within the relationship (Brennen et al., 1998).

The literature on permissive parenting style is less consistent compared to that of authoritarian and authoritative parenting. There is some existing research that indicates that high parental warmth is positively related to socialisation outcomes such as well-being and social competence, regardless of the level of control, similar to that of a permissive parenting style (Stafford et al., 2016; García et al.,

2018; García et al., 2020). A positive association between permissive parenting and secure attachment in romantic relationships has also been found in previous research (Zeinali et al., 2011). Other studies indicated that permissive parenting styles contribute to high attachment anxiety and avoidance indicative of a fearful attachment style (Doinita & Maria, 2015; Di Pentima et al., 2023).

The influence of gender

There is some evidence of differences between men and women in how they respond to perceived parental care and control, which can contribute to differences in their adult attachment patterns. A longitudinal study by Wilhelm et al. (2016) assessed how perceived parenting style can predict adult attachment 35 years later. They concluded that gender is a moderating factor in the relationship between parenting style and adult attachment: high levels of control may have a negative impact on the romantic attachment of women but may be beneficial to the attachment style of men, if in combination with high warmth. Specifically, among women, permissive parenting was a better predictor of the development of secure attachment compared to authoritative parenting, while authoritarian qualities predicted a preoccupied attachment style. In contrast, for men, permissive parenting qualities were linked to dismissive attachment styles (high avoidance, low anxiety), and authoritative parenting was associated with a lower likelihood of a dismissive attachment style. Another study by Ripardo & Lordelo (2022) found that maternal control played a predictive role in insecure attachment in women, whereas both paternal care and control were relevant factors. Evidence also suggests that across cultures, men are more likely to exhibit a dismissing-avoidant attachment style, while women are more prone to an anxious-preoccupied style (Scharfe, 2016; Del Giudice, 2015).

The current study

While previous research has established differences between authoritative, authoritarian, and permissive parenting styles and adult romantic attachment, the impact of a specific parenting style can differ based on culture (Hoenicker et al., 2017; García-Mendoza et al., 2021) as well as gender (Wilhelm et al., 2016). Therefore, the main objective of this research is to find out if there is a significant relationship between perceived parenting style and adult romantic attachment styles in a Maldivian sample. The research also aims to determine if gender moderates this relationship. Drawing from the attachment theory of John Bowlby (1982), Hazan and Shaver (1987), and the examined literature, we postulated that:

1. *there is a significant relationship between perceived parenting styles and adult romantic attachment styles.*
2. *gender will moderate the relationship between perceived parenting styles and adult romantic attachment styles.*

Method

Design

The study utilized a quantitative approach, specifically a correlational research design. The population for this study were the students of the Maldives National University (MNU). A sample size of 194 was calculated using sample size calculation for correlation research (Hulley et al., 2023) using a two sided test, 5% significance level ($\alpha = 0.05$) with power 80% ($\beta = 0.2$) and expected correlation coefficient of 0.2. Data was collected using an online survey questionnaire. The link of the questionnaire was distributed via email and across social media platforms, and participation was voluntary based. A total of 251 participants filled out the survey form; however, after considering the inclusion criteria, forms of 146 participants were used for the analysis of the study.

Participants

A total of 146 students at Maldives National University who were between the ages of 18 and 49 (Mean Age = 24.65, SD = 6.2) participated in the study. Only students who were in a relationship, that is, either married or in a dating relationship at the time of data collection, were eligible to participate in the study. Participants who did not fit these criteria were excluded from the study. There was a total of 128 (87.7%) females and 18 (12.3%) males, out of which 60 (41.1%) were married and 86 (58.9%) were in a dating relationship.

Measures

The authoritarian control, authoritative control, and permissive control dimensions of parenting behaviors and attitudes were evaluated using the Parental Authority Questionnaire (PAQ) developed by Buri (1991). It is a Likert scale, with 1 representing “strongly disagree” and 5 representing “strongly agree”. The PAQ is a 30-item scale made up of questions that evaluate parental support and warmth, communication techniques, and methods of discipline, and comprises three subscales: authoritarian, authoritative and permissive. Each subscale consists of 10 questions and scores for each subscale ranges from 10-50. Sample questions for authoritarian subscale include “Whenever my mother told me to do something as I was growing up, she expected me to do it immediately without asking any questions”, for authoritative subscale include “As the children in my family were growing up, my mother consistently gave us direction and guidance in rational and objective ways.” and for permissive subscale include “As I was growing up, my mother seldom gave me expectations and guidelines for my behavior.”

The Experiences in Close Relationships (ECR) Scale was used to evaluate the attachment styles of adults. The ECR Scale was established in 1987 by Phillip Shaver

and Cindy Hazan. It comprises attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance subscales. The purpose of these subscales is to assess individuals' emotions and actions concerning intimacy, dependence, and trust. There are 36 items in total: 18 measures of attachment avoidance and 18 measures of attachment anxiety. Using a Likert scale, participants indicated their level of agreement or disagreement with each statement about attachment in romantic relationships presented in each item. There were seven response options: 1 for strongly disagreeing and 7 for strongly agreeing. Some items in the attachment anxiety subscale include "I'm afraid that I will lose my partner's love", "I often worry that my partner will not want to stay with me". Items on the attachment avoidance subscale include "I find it difficult to allow myself to depend on romantic partners", "I don't feel comfortable opening up to romantic partners."

Each subscale's responses (attachment avoidance and attachment anxiety) were summed together. Higher scores for each subscale correspond to higher levels of attachment avoidance or anxiety. The attachment anxiety score ranges from 18 to 126, while the attachment avoidance score ranges from 18 to 126.

Results

The collected data was analysed using IBM SPSS version 26. Descriptive statistics indicated that the participants on average had a higher attachment anxiety ($M = 63.7$, $SD = 27.2$) compared to attachment avoidance ($M = 47.8$, $SD = 22.5$). Authoritarian parenting style had the highest mean across the participants ($M = 34.1$, $SD = 9.79$) followed by authoritative ($M = 30.0$, $SD = 9.33$) and permissive parenting style ($M = 25.0$, $SD = 7.05$).

To test for hypothesis 1 which suggests a significant relationship between parenting styles and romantic attachment, Pearson's correlation tests were run. Results showed that authoritarian parenting style has a significant weak positive correlation with attachment anxiety ($r = .334$, $p < .001$) and attachment avoidance ($r = .269$, $p = .001$). Permissive parenting had a significant weak negative correlation with attachment anxiety ($r = -.254$, $p = .002$) and attachment avoidance ($r = -.234$, $p = .005$). Significant weak negative correlation was also found for authoritative parenting style and attachment anxiety ($r = -.293$, $p < .001$) and attachment avoidance ($r = -.179$, $p = .031$).

To test for the second hypothesis whether gender moderates the relationship between perceived parenting styles and adult romantic attachment styles, two separate hierarchical regressions were conducted. The predictor variables were the three parenting styles (authoritarian, authoritative and permissive), and outcome variables were attachment anxiety for the first regression analysis and attachment avoidance for the second regression analysis. To test for assumptions of heteroscedasticity and linearity, a plot of standardized predicted values against standardized residuals of both outcome variables was run. The plot indicated that the data was randomly scattered, which shows independence of observation and

is a pattern indicative of a situation in which the assumptions of linearity and homoscedasticity have been met (Field, 2018). Multicollinearity assumption was tested using VIF, all VIF values were below 3.4 (<10) and the tolerance statistics were above 0.2, indicating that there was no multicollinearity between predictor variables (Field, 2018)

The three predictor variables were standardised and interaction terms with the moderator variable (gender) were computed as separate variables before running the regression analyses. The first regression was run in two steps to determine the moderating effects of gender on the relationship between parenting styles and attachment anxiety. In the first step, authoritarian, authoritative, permissive parenting styles and gender were entered as predictor variables and attachment anxiety was entered as the outcome variable. The regression model in step 1 significantly explained 13.7% of the variance, $R^2 = .137$, $F(4, 141) = 5.614$, $p < .001$. In the second step, the interaction variables were entered. The regression model in step 2 explained an additional 1.7% of variance $\Delta R^2 = .17$, however, the F change was not statistically significant ($p = .418$). The results of the moderation analysis are shown in Table 1, and indicates that only authoritarian parenting was a significant predictor of attachment anxiety ($p = .019$). There was no significant interaction effect of gender and any of the parenting styles on attachment anxiety, indicating that gender is not a moderating variable.

*Table 1
Results of Regression Analysis for Gender Moderation of Parenting Styles and Attachment Anxiety*

	Beta	β	SE	t	p
Model 1					
Authoritarian	.247	6.86	2.90	2.37	.019*
Authoritative	-.144	-4.00	2.94	-1.36	.176
Permissive	-.013	-0.365	3.23	-.113	.910
Model 2					
Authoritarian x gender	-.012	-.902	10.0	-.090	.928
Authoritative x gender	.157	12.2	9.36	1.306	.194
Permissive x gender	-.035	-2.44	10.1	-.243	.809

* $p < .05$

A second multiple regression was run in following the same steps as the first, with attachment avoidance as the outcome variable. The regression model in step 1 significantly explained 7.9% of the variance, $R^2 = .079$, $F(4, 141) = 3.013$, $p = .02$. The second model with the addition of interaction terms explained an additional 0.54% of variance $\Delta R^2 = .054$, however, the F change was not statistically significant ($p = .356$). The results of the moderation analysis are shown

in Table 2, and indicates that there were no significant main effects of any of the parenting styles on attachment avoidance. There was also no significant interaction effect of gender and any of the parenting styles on attachment anxiety, indicating that gender is not a moderating variable.

Table 2
Results of Regression Analysis for Gender Moderation of Parenting Styles and Attachment Avoidance

	Beta	β	SE	t	p
Model 1					
Authoritarian	.201	4.52	2.42	-.196	.845
Authoritative	-.004	-.080	2.47	1.135	.258
Permissive	-.103	-2.32	2.71	-.008	.993
Model 2					
Authoritarian x gender	-.026	-1.638	8.37	1.135	.258
Authoritative x gender	1.14	8.89	7.83	-.008	.993
Permissive x gender	-.001	-.071	8.42	-.196	.845

Discussion

The study examined whether perceived parenting style is associated with adult romantic attachment style and whether gender moderates this relationship. Results revealed that perceived authoritarian parenting was positively correlated with attachment anxiety and avoidance, while perceived permissive and authoritative parenting styles were negatively correlated with attachment anxiety and avoidance in adult romantic relationships. However, contrary to the hypothesis, results showed that there was no moderating effect of gender on these associations.

The results for the relationship between authoritative and authoritarian parenting styles on adult attachment styles are consistent with previous research (Yahya et al., 2019; Kim et al., 2021; Tomsa, 2019; Di Pentima et al. 2023). This indicates that adults who perceive having an authoritative parental figure are less likely to be anxiously or avoidantly attached to their romantic partner; while adults who perceive having an authoritarian parental figure are more likely to be anxiously or avoidantly attached to their romantic partner. This finding supports Brennan et al (1998)'s framework, which suggests that secure individuals exhibit a low attachment-related anxiety and low attachment-related avoidance. Since authoritative parenting is linked with secure attachment (Wang, 2023; Doinita & Maria, 2015; Dalton et al., 2022) authoritative parenting is likely to be associated with low anxiety and anxiousness in adult relationships. On the other hand, authoritarian parenting is linked with insecure attachment (Zeinali et al., 2011), and a high anxiety and avoidance score as observed in this current study indicates that authoritarian parenting is linked to the development of a fearful attachment style in romantic relationships.

The results for permissive parenting is consistent with the existing literature that

suggest that permissive parenting contributes to positive socialization outcomes in adult relationships (Stafford et al., 2016; García et al., 2018; García et al., 2020), and is contradictory to the findings that establish a link between permissive parenting style and high levels of attachment anxiety and avoidance (Doinita & Maria, 2015; Di Pentima et al. 2023; Yahya et al., 2019). Hence, current study's findings support the evidence that higher parental warmth, irrespective of control, is associated with secure attachment patterns rather than insecure attachment. Both permissive and authoritative parenting styles are characterized by a high degree of responsiveness, which can contribute to a secure attachment, which results in individuals developing a positive working model of self and others (Cassidy and Shaver, 1999; Rholes, 2004). This link was demonstrated in a previous study by Zeinali et al. (2011), where positive correlations were established between authoritative parenting and secure attachment, as well as permissive parenting and secure attachment. These findings can explain the current study's results where individuals with perceived permissive parenting and authoritative parenting exhibited low scores in attachment avoidance and anxiety.

The moderating effects of gender on the associations between each parenting style and attachment style was not supported in this study. One possible reason is the imbalance in the sample, with a disproportionately lower number of males compared to females, which may have limited the ability to effectively compare the effects across genders. This disproportion can further explain the positive effects of permissive parenting found in the current study, as previous research has indicated that permissive parenting styles are predictive of secure attachment in females and not in males (Wilhelm et al., 2016). This could indicate that the current study findings may be more applicable to females compared to males.

There are several limitations of this study. Firstly, the study did not meet the calculated sample size requirements after consideration of inclusion criteria, potentially implicating the generalisability of the findings. Future research can be conducted with a larger sample. Despite sharing the survey link through various platforms, the study was majorly limited to a disproportionately large number of females. Several of the males who gave initial consent were excluded due to not being in a relationship. Hence, future research can strive to include a more balanced sample of males and females. Another limitation is that the study only measured perceived maternal parental styles. Previous studies have indicated differences in the impact of paternal and maternal parenting styles on adulthood (Zeinali et al., 2011; Tani et al. 2017), and hence, further research needs to incorporate both maternal and paternal parenting styles for a more comprehensive understanding of their impact on adult romantic attachment. There may also be possible confounding factors such as influence of relationship duration and relationship status (married vs unmarried) which can potentially affect the adult attachment styles (Freeman et al., 2023; Candle et al. 2019). Other limitations inherent to correlational designs such as failure to establish causal inferences, self-

report bias and recall bias also need to be considered. Future studies can also classify the avoidance and attachment anxiety subscales into specific attachment categories of secure, preoccupied, dismissive and fearful, and examine their impact on parenting styles. Additionally, future research can be conducted across other Maldivian demographics, as the current study's scope was within students of the Maldives National University. Comparisons can be made between age groups (such as younger vs older adults) and differences between those who are married and in unmarried relationships can be considered. It is also important to examine the longitudinal effects of parenting on attachment across diverse cultural contexts.

The findings of this study offer important implications. This study might be the first to assess associations between parenting styles and adult attachment in a Maldivian population. Additionally, research on these associations are limited in the existing literature, hence the findings will add to the existing body of knowledge on parenting styles and adult attachment. The observed correlations between perceived authoritarian parenting and increased anxiety and avoidance in adult romantic relationships in this study underscore the need for interventions targeting parenting practices and educational programs aimed at cultivating secure attachments. Specifically, enhancing awareness and practices related to authoritative parenting could potentially foster more secure adult attachments and reduce attachment-related anxiety and avoidance in adult relationship with their romantic partner.

Conclusion

The current study provides support to the relationship between parenting styles and adult romantic attachment with their partner. The study established the importance of warmth and responsiveness in parenting, as authoritative and permissive parenting were linked to low anxiety and avoidance in adult romantic relationships as opposed to authoritarian parenting. Findings of this study provides basis for further research with larger and gender-balanced samples to establish the influence of gender differences in the association between parenting styles and adult attachments. Study also highlights the importance of examining the influence of other variables such as relationship duration and marital status on the link between parenting styles and adult attachments.

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