The Relationship between Childhood Attachment and Adult Coping Moderated by

Parental Divorce or Separation

Julie van der Velden

2036532

Tilburg School of Social and Behavioral Sciences

Forensic Psychology, Department of Medical and Clinical Psychology, Tilburg University

Dr. A. Chasiotis

Dr. I. Frowijn

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Abstract

Parental attachment in childhood can have adverse effects on the behavior and interpersonal relations of the child. Therefore, its relationship with coping strategies used to confront overwhelmingly distressing emotions is examined in this study. Furthermore, the moderation effect of parental divorce or separation on the mentioned relationship was investigated. If coping styles related significantly to either gender or age, it was controlled for. A total of 241 individuals (186 females, 55 males) completed online the ASPA-SF measuring childhood attachment, the COPE scale assessing adult coping usage, and a question on divorce or separation. Secure (e.g. safe, dependent, and parentified) and insecure attachment styles (e.g. fearful and distant) were included together with problem-focused, emotion-focused, socially supported, and avoidant coping styles. Results indicated that securely attached individuals are more likely to use socially supported, problem-focused, and emotion-focused coping and less avoidant coping. Furthermore, when distressed, fearfully attached individuals used more socially supported, emotion-focused and avoidant coping. Distant attachment, on the other hand, only related to using more avoidant coping. Experiencing divorce or separation did not lead to different coping style usage. However, being safely or fearfully attached and experiencing divorce or separation led to using different amounts of socially supported coping. Nevertheless, when investigating if it would result in more or less of this coping style, the relation was not significant anymore. All in all, these results can be beneficial in counseling situations to understand why individuals with certain attachment styles apply particular coping strategies when confronted with stressful situations.

Keywords: childhood attachment, adult coping, divorce, separation

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Parental attachment styles developed in early childhood have a lasting effect on the development in personal and public life domains throughout the lifespan (Michael, 2014; Bowlby, 1973; Ke & Barlas, 2020). These attachment styles form the foundation for one's representation of others and themselves, referred to as internal working models or interpersonal schemas (Bowlby, 1973). Maladaptive interpersonal schemas encourage dysfunctional behavior by producing distressing emotions, which can lead to interpersonal difficulties (Sutton, 2019; Calabrese et al., 2005; Ke & Barlas, 2020; Perris & Andersson, 2000). These difficulties involve interpersonal feelings, cognitions, expectations, and behaviors. Coping styles and related behavioral coping responses are consequently developed to avoid experiencing these overwhelming distressing emotions (Ke & Barlas, 2020). The attachment styles underlying these maladaptive interpersonal schemas are likely to stay stable over time, due to attachment experiences throughout life reinforcing it (Michael, 2014).

John Bowlby (1973) emphasized the importance of these attachment experiences in early childhood. His attachment theory (1988) focused on the availability of an attachment figure, often the primary caregiver, in infancy or early childhood (Levy et al., 2011). These attachment figures are then used as a 'secure base' from which the child can openly explore the world when not in distress and as a 'safe haven' for protection, comfort, and support when distressed. However, since these caregivers can differ in their responsiveness and availability, children who have unresponsive and/or unavailable caregivers will become insecurely attached (Sutton, 2019). Snow et al. (2005) identified five attachment styles, which Michael (2014) clustered as either secure or insecure by how they were positioned on the secure-insecure continuum. Of the five attachment styles, safe, dependent, and parentified attachment were located on the secure dimension, and fearful and distant attachment on the

insecure dimension. These three secure attachment styles are characterized by confidence in parental support, need for parental availability, and feeling responsible for their parents, respectively. Individuals with these attachment styles are more comfortable with intimacy and autonomy and will therefore feel secure in intimate relationships. Insecurely attached individuals, however, have a negative view of themselves and/or others, resulting in interpersonal difficulties. Of these insecure attachments, fearful attachment is the product of fear of abandonment, and distant attachment involves distancing from and feeling anger towards parents. The internal working models based on these attachment styles, not only become the default method of processing intimate interactions in adulthood but also of processing stress (Sutton, 2019).

When experiencing stress in a situation, the regulation of emotions, especially distress, is strongly related to coping as mentioned earlier (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004; Ke & Barlas, 2020). These stressful situations are the result of an interaction between the individual and the environment involving, often intense, negative emotions (Bring et al., 2013; Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). What is anticipated as stressful, depends on the personal appraisal of the situation. According to the transaction model of stress and coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), this appraisal of the situation can be divided into the primary and secondary appraisal. The primary appraisal is concerned with how the situation is judged depending on its meaning and significance to the individual. This involves the potential harm, loss, or threat the situation produces and if it is seen as a challenge. Secondary appraisal, on the other hand, involves the evaluation of the ability to control the situation together with the capacity to cope with it.

In efforts to deal with a stressful situation and its adverse consequences, coping strategies are used. Coping strategies can be divided in different ways, for example by differentiating between problem-focused and emotion-focused coping (Bring et al., 2013;

Carver et al., 1989). In this division, problem-focused coping involves problem-solving and altering the source of stress, used when individuals feel that the situation can be reconstructed by their actions (Carver et al., 1989). Emotion-focused coping, on the other hand, is mostly put to use when the situation is seen as needed to be endured and is therefore aimed at managing or reducing the distress evoked by the situation. Other coping styles that can be identified are socially supported coping, consisting of seeking both emotional and instrumental support, and avoidant coping involving withdrawal from or ignorance of the stressor (Litman, 2006).

Coping styles like problem-focused coping or seeking social support are sometimes associated with good and sometimes with poor mental health outcomes (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). However, according to the contextual approach to coping, strategies of coping are not inherently good or bad (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Instead, the applied coping style should be evaluated in the specific stressful context they are used. Whether the coping style chosen is effective can depend, for example on the extent to which the situation can be controlled, judged by the secondary appraisal (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). Furthermore, since the context of the situation is dynamic, the coping used might be seen as effective in the moment, however, deemed ineffective later on (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004; Folkman et al., 1986). Some coping styles that can therefore be seen as maladaptive in hindsight are avoidant coping, emotion-focused coping, and the use of drugs and alcohol (Carver et al., 1989). Problem-focused coping, on the contrary, can be seen as an adaptive coping style. In line with this, Compas et al. (2001) showed that engaged coping (e.g. seeking social support or problem-solving) is associated with fewer mental health problems, whereas disengaged coping (e.g. avoidance or withdrawal) is related to more mental health problems.

Concerning the aforementioned coping styles, the most influential context in which the development of these styles takes place is that of the direct family (Vélez et al., 2011).

When childred receives warmth and positivity from their mothers, these children are more likely to use problem-focused than avoidant coping (Meesters & Muris, 2004). Warmth, support, and acceptance from parents are also related to engaged instead of disengaged coping by the child (Vélez et al., 2011). Paternal hostility, on the other hand, predicts drug and alcohol use together with emotional outbursts in adolescence (Johnson & Pandina, 1991). When experiencing rejection by both parents, adolescents are more likely to use emotion-focused coping (Meesters & Muris, 2004). These findings show the importance of parental behavior on the development of coping styles used by their children. However, it does not specify how the attachment style the child has to its parents relates to the coping styles it uses later in life. Furthermore, research into the relation between coping and the attachment styles identified by Snow et al. (2005) is scarce. However, other attachment styles, such as secure, anxious, and avoidant attachment have been studied more extensively. Therefore, fearful and anxious attachment are assumed to be alike since they are both characterized by fear of abandonment. Furthermore, avoidant and distant attachment are considered similar since individuals with both attachment styles distance themselves from others and their parents. Previous research into the relation between anxious and avoidant attachment and different coping styles revealed that child molesters with such attachments to the mother used less problem-focused and more emotion-focused coping (Marshall et al., 2000). However, child molesters were also found to use emotion-focused coping more frequently than non-sexual offenders or non-offenders, which could influence the relation found. Another study focusing on coping specifically with trauma revealed that securely attached individuals seek more support (Mikulincer et al., 1993). However, these results can only be generalized to post-traumatic distress and not day-to-day distress. Nevertheless, Simpson et al. (1992) also revealed that female students with securely nonparental attachment engaged more in both instrumental and emotional support seeking than students with avoidant attachment.

Avoidantly and anxiously attached children were found to use more distraction and avoidance actions (Camisasca et al., 2017). However, only anxious attachment to the partner resulted in more emotion-focused coping (Shechory, 2012). Since most existing literature is on secure, avoidant and anxious attachment that is non-parental and current, research into the relationship between childhood parental attachment identified by Snow et al. (2005) and adult coping with stressful situations is scarce. This research could reveal which coping styles are most likely to be used by individuals with these certain attachment styles, which could be taken into account when designing interventions to help people cope more effectively with life's stresses (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). Furthermore, these studies could replenish the limited literature on the attachment styles of Snow et al. (2005).

Parental divorce before the age of 18 decreases the probability to develop a secure parental attachment, increases the likelihood of having preoccupied attachment, and may alter internal schemas for close relationships (Beckwith et al., 1999). Furthermore, children exposed to prolonged destructive marital conflict display greater emotional distress (Davies & Cummings, 1994; Davies & Forman, 2002) and cope less effectively (Grych et al., 2000), regardless of if they are securely, avoidantly, or anxiously attached (Camisasca et al., 2017). This is since divorced parents are in a continuing state of conflict, have less financial income, and spend less time with the child if they did not obtain custody (Amato, 2000). It has been found that children at the pre-school age are more negatively influenced by divorce than children at school age (Sirvanli-Ozen, 2005). These pre-school children, before the age of six, are more emotionally disturbed, have more behavioral and adjustment problems, and have lower self-esteem when experiencing parental separation or divorce than those at older ages (Clarke-Stewart et al., 2000; Sirvanli-Ozen, 2005). They become more anxious, oppositional, and hyperactive when they get into middle childhood. Even though these behavioral disturbances can also be caused by the parental conflict occurring before the divorce or

separation, these occurrences themselves have negative consequences for both the child and the parent-child relations.

The current study investigates the relationship between parental attachment styles in childhood and coping styles in adulthood. Since divorce or separation has been found to have especially adverse effects on the child before the age of six, it is included as a moderator in this study. This research contains the attachment styles identified by Snow et al. (2005), namely safe, dependent, parentified, fearful, and distant attachment, clustered as either secure or insecure by Michael (2014). The following hypotheses were stated for this research: All three secure attachment styles, namely safe, dependent, and parentified, are expected to relate positively to problem-focused and socially supported coping and negatively to emotion-focused and avoidant coping. Next to that, fearful attachment is expected to relate positively to emotion-focused and avoidant coping and negatively to problem-focused and socially supported coping since it is characterized similarly to anxious attachment. Furthermore, distant attachment is expected to relate positively to avoidant coping and negatively to problem-focused, emotion-focused, and socially supported coping considering that it shares characteristics with avoidant attachment. For parental divorce or separation, it is hypothesized that adults that experienced it before the age of six will use more emotion-focused and avoidant coping and less problem-focused and socially supported coping than adults without the experience of divorce or separation. Within the group of individuals whose parents divorced or separated before the age of six, those with any attachment styles are expected to employ more emotion-focused and avoidant coping and less problem-focused and socially supported coping. Since past studies have controlled for either age (Berry & Kingswell, 2012) or gender (Suar et al., 2017) when investigating the relationship between attachment and coping, this study will control for these covariates if they related significantly to the coping styles.

Method

Participants

A total of 353 adults, mostly university students of the Netherlands, participated in this study, of which 110 were excluded because they did not fill out the survey fully. Furthermore, since the non-binary group was too small to investigate, these two participants were also excluded. The final sample of 241 participants included 186 female (77.2%) and 55 male (22.8%) participants between the ages of 18 and 67 ($M = 24.5$, $SD = 9.6$, see Table 1). To get a medium effect size of .3, a power level of 80%, and .05 as a significance level in a multiple hierarchical regression, a sample size of at least 204 participants was necessary. Before recruitment began, Ethical approval from the Ethical Review Board (ERB) of Tilburg School of Social and Behavioral Sciences was obtained. Participants were recruited online through Research Participation System PSY (uvt-Psy Sona-System; https://uvt-psy.sona-systems.com) where students at Tilburg University could complete the survey in exchange for credits needed to pass a first-year course. Additionally, the survey was distributed to friends and family of the researchers. Therefore, the sample is a convenience sample. Lastly, participants were only requested to fill out the survey if they were 18 years or older.

Measures

In this study, attachment styles were the predictors and coping styles were the outcome variables. Attachment refers to the type of attachment in childhood to both parents while coping styles represent the way of managing stressful situations in adulthood. Divorce or separation of parents was the moderator included to investigate its effect on the relationship between childhood attachment and adult coping styles.

Childhood Attachment

Childhood attachment was measured using the Adult Scale of Parental Attachment-Short Form (ASPA-SF; Michael & Snow, 2019). This is a short form of the ASPA (Snow et

al. 2005). This scale has five 'patterns of relating', namely safe, dependent, parentified, fearful, and distant. Safe, dependent, and parentified patterns of relating were regarded as secure attachment and fearful and distant patterns of relating as insecure by Michael (2014). The safe pattern of relating is about the child experiencing comfort and security from the parents. The child feels confident in the support and availability of the parent. In the dependent pattern of relating, the child experiences uncertainty and helplessness when the parents are not available. Parental availability is always needed for the child. A child with a parentified pattern of relating feels responsible to meet the needs of the parents and will feel happy when being helpful. Children with fearful patterns of relating fear abandonment and show no confidence in their parents' availability for support. The child feels anger and frustration towards the parents. When a child has a distant pattern of relating, it is disappointed in the support and availability of the parents and is distant towards and angry at them. Of the 40 items in this questionnaire, 20 focused on patterns of relating to the father and 20 on patterns of relating to the mother. There were per pattern of relating four items about the mother and four items about the father. The items were answered on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 'never' to 'constantly'. An example question of fearful attachment is 'I got frustrated when my mother left me alone' and of safe attachment is 'I talk things over with my father'. This questionnaire showed an acceptable internal consistency level of $\geq .7$ (Michael and Snow, 2019). The current study even found internal consistencies ranging from .78 for fearful to .87 for safe attachment (Table 2).

Coping Styles

Coping styles in adulthood were assessed using the Coping Orientation to Problems Experienced scale (COPE; Carver et al., 1989). This questionnaire has 15 subscales, each including four items, resulting in a total of 60 items. The items were rated on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 'I usually do not do this at all' to 'I usually do this a lot'. Participants

completed the measures concerning a situation where they were under a lot of stress. Litman (2006) used exploratory factor analysis to group different subscales together that relate most to each other. His analysis resulted in four types of coping styles, namely problem-focused, emotion-focused, avoidant, and socially supported coping. Problem-focused coping comprised of the subscales planning, active coping, and suppression of competing activities. Avoidant coping included behavioral disengagement, denial, substance abuse, and mental disengagement. Socially supported coping combined the use of emotional and instrumental social support together with the focus on and venting of emotions. Emotion-focused coping consisted of restraint, positive reinterpretation and growth, acceptance, humor, and religious coping. Religious coping was the only subscale that did not have a high enough loading on any of the factors. However, it showed the highest relation to the emotion-focused coping scale and was therefore included in this coping type. An example item of avoidant coping is 'I pretend that it has not really happened' and of problem-focused coping is 'I concentrate my efforts on doing something about it'. The internal consistency of all subscales together was .73. This study found even higher internal consistencies, ranging from .77 for avoidant to .89 for socially supported coping (Table 2).

Divorce or Separation

Divorce or separation was evaluated with the question: 'Did your parents divorce/separate when you were a child?' This question had three answer options, namely 'no', 'yes, before the age of six' and 'yes, after the age of six'.

Procedure

Participants were provided with the survey online through Qualtrics (www.qualtrics.com). This survey included questionnaires on childhood attachment, substance abuse, aggression, and coping styles with additional questions on the participant's characteristics. The current study only included data on childhood attachment, coping styles,

and the participant's characteristics. First, participants received a text explaining the purpose of the survey, the time it would take to fill it out (15 minutes), and the age restriction of 18 years or older. If the topics of the survey would potentially be triggering to the participants (e.g. when they were abused as a child), they were advised to not fill out this survey. Then participants were informed that the survey had been approved by the ERB of the Tilburg School of Social and Behavioral Sciences, that the data would be kept anonymous and solely used for this study. Lastly, if they had any questions, they could contact the emails provided.

Statistical Analysis

Of the 353 adults participating in this study, 110 were excluded due to missing data and two since the non-binary group was not large enough. Preliminary analysis of the remaining 241 participants was reported using the statistical software SPSS version 27. This included descriptive statistics of the mean and standard deviation of age and sample size of gender (Table 1). Furthermore, the internal consistency, mean and standard deviation were assessed of all styles of attachment and of coping (Table 2). A Mann-Whitney U test was performed to assess whether participants that experienced divorce or separation before the age of six ($N = 27$) differed significantly in coping styles usage from those experiencing it after six ($N = 45$). A t-test could not be performed due to the data of both groups not being normally distributed, determined by inspecting the Shapiro-Wilk significance level of the normality. The distributions of the two divorce or separation groups were roughly the same and both groups were independent of each other being that no participant belong to both groups. Since divorce or separation was ordinal and all coping styles were continuous, none of the assumptions of the Mann-Whitney U test were violated. Results showed no significant difference between the two groups in coping style usage, with a significance level of .05. Therefore, the two groups were combined into the 'divorce or separation' group. A dummy variable was created with the 'no divorce or separation' group as the reference group.

Afterwards another Mann-Whitney U test was performed to investigate the mean difference between these two groups for each coping style. The distributions of these groups were also roughly the same and the two groups were independent meaning none of the assumptions were in violation. If controlling for either gender or age was needed, the residuals of a multiple regression with the covariate as the predictor and the coping as the outcome variable was used in the Mann-Whitney U test.

For the correlational hypotheses of this study, the relationship between levels of attachment in childhood as the independent variable and levels of coping in adulthood as the dependent variable was assessed using a 2-tailed correlation analysis with a significance level of .05. By inspecting the Shapiro-Wilk significance level of the normality it was determined that only data of problem-focused coping was normally distributed. Therefore, a nonparametric correlation was used, namely Spearman's rho. To test its assumptions, the plots of the relations between each attachment style with each coping style were inspected to detect monotonicity, which was also found. Since the variables were continuous, no assumptions were violated. Therefore, Spearman's rho correlation was used. First, the correlations between coping and gender or age were assessed to inspect if these variables needed to be controlled for. If that was the case, a partial Spearman correlation was used.

To test the moderating effect of parental divorce or separation on the relationship between attachment styles and coping styles, a multiple hierarchical regression was performed. Before executing this analysis, its assumptions were tested. The multicollinearity assumption was not violated since all Pearson correlations were below 0.7, Tolerance values were above 0.2 and VIF values were below 10. Next to that, all values of the residuals were independent since all Durbin-Watson statistic values were close to two. By inspecting the scatterplots of the standardized predicted values against the standardized residuals for funnel shapes, it was established that the homoscedasticity assumption was not violated.

Furthermore, the P-P plot of regression standardized residuals revealed the normal distribution of the residuals. Scatterplots between each attachment and coping style for both groups of divorce or separation also unveiled linear relations, implying no violation of that assumption. Based on Cook's Distance statistics and Casewise Diagnostics, one extreme standardized value of emotion-focused coping, two for avoidant coping, and one for problem-focused coping were identified and excluded before performing the analysis. Therefore, none of the assumptions were violated. Before starting the analysis, all predictors and interaction terms were mean centered. Afterwards, a multiple hierarchical regression was performed for each of the four coping styles. The five attachment styles were added in the second block of the regression and the third block comprised of the interactions between each attachment style and parental divorce or separation. The first block included the controlling variables, namely gender and age. A stepwise forward procedure was utilized so only those variables that relate significantly to the dependent variable were included as possible covariates. If either gender or age did not relate significantly to the coping style, it was excluded from further regression analyses of that coping style. Lastly, if interactions showed significant relations to coping styles, PROCESS was used to reveal the direction thereof.

Results

Descriptive statistics such as the sample size, mean, and standard deviation of gender, age, attachment, and coping styles can be found in Table 1 and Table 2. Both tables show these descriptive statistics for the whole sample and each divorce or separation group. Additionally, Table 2 also includes the Cronbach's alpha of all coping and attachment styles.

Table 1

Mean and standard deviation of age and gender of sample and divorce or separation groups

Measures	Overall		No divorce or separation		Divorce or separation	
	N	M (SD)	N	M (SD)	N	M (SD)
Age	241	24.46 (9.56)	169	24.97 (10.56)	72	23.25 (6.56)
Gender						
Male	55		35		20	
Female	186		134		52	

Table 2

Cronbach's alpha of childhood attachment and coping styles and mean and standard

deviation of sample and divorce or separation groups

Measures	Cronbach's alpha	Overall (N = 241)	No divorce or separation (n = 169)	Divorce or separation (n = 72)
		M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)
Attachment				
Safe	0.87	23.95 (6.69)	24.73 (6.81)	22.13 (6.06)
Dependent	0.78	18.54 (5.33)	19.23 (5.45)	16.93 (4.70)
Parentified	0.79	20.61 (5.64)	21.51 (5.54)	18.51 (5.33)
Fearful	0.78	13.93 (4.94)	13.60 (4.82)	14.71 (5.18)
Distant	0.83	16.85 (6.66)	16.65 (6.47)	17.35 (7.11)
Coping styles				
Problem-focused	0.87	32.74 (6.23)	32.96 (6.00)	32.21 (6.74)
Socially supported	0.89	32.68 (7.81)	33.33 (7.76)	31.15 (7.76)
Emotion-focused	0.80	47.59 (8.07)	47.93 (8.12)	46.78 (7.95)
Avoidant	0.77	28.69 (6.45)	28.89 (6.33)	28.21 (6.73)

Gender and Age as Potential Covariates

Emotion-focused and avoidant coping showed no relation to either age or gender. Problem-focused coping, on the other hand, was positively related to age (r (241) = .22, p < .001) and socially supported coping revealed a positive relation to gender (r (241) = .16, p < .05). For this reason, age was controlled for in analysis involving problem-focused coping, and gender was controlled for in analysis of socially supported coping.

Attachment, Coping, and Divorce or Separation

Table 3 shows the results of the Spearman's rho partial correlation analysis between attachment and coping styles, controlling for gender in the socially supported correlations and age in the problem-focused correlations. Safe attachment showed to have a moderate and positive relations with both problem-focused (r (241) = .22, p < .001) and socially supported coping (r (241) = .22, p < .001) and a moderate to strong negative relation with avoidant coping (r (241) = -.27, p < .001). For dependent attachment, strong positive results were found in relation to socially supported coping (r (241) = .29, p < .001) and weak positive results in relation to emotion-focused coping (r (241) = .13, p < .05). Similarly, for parentified attachment positive and weak results were found in relation to emotion-focused coping (r (241) = .13, p = .05). Next to that, fearful attachment showed weak to moderate positive relations to socially supported coping (r (241) = .17, p < .01), and weak positive correlations to both socially supported (r (241) = .13, p < .05) and avoidant coping (r (241) = .13, p < .05). Lastly, distant attachment was moderately to strongly positively related to avoidant coping (r (241) = .29, p < .001). The Mann-Whitney U test investigating the relation between the two divorce or separation groups and each coping style included the residuals of both problem-focused and socially supported coping, to control for age and gender respectively. Results indicated no significant difference in coping usage between the 'divorce or separation' and 'no divorce or separation' group using a .05 significance level.

Table 3

Spearman's Partial Correlation between Childhood Attachment and Coping Styles

controlling for Gender and Age (N = 241)

	Coping styles			
	Problem-focused	Socially supported	Emotion-focused	Avoidant
Safe attachment	0.22^{***}	0.22^{***}	0.02	$-.27^{***}$
Dependent attachment	0.08	0.29^{***}	0.13^{*}	0.04
Parentified attachment	0.07	0.12	0.12^{*}	0.07
Fearful attachment	0.11	0.17^{**}	0.13^{*}	0.13^{*}
Distant attachment	-0.08	0.07	0.04	0.29^{***}

$^{*}p < 0.05.$ $^{**}p < 0.01.$ $^{***}p < 0.001.$

Moderation of Divorce or Separation

Four multiple hierarchical regressions were performed to investigate the effect of

parental divorce or separation as a moderator on the relation between childhood attachment

and coping styles (Table 4). In the first block, significant increases in predictive power were

found when adding age as covariate the regressions of problem-focused coping ($F(1, 238) =$

9.38, $p < .01$, $R^2_{adj} = .04$) and gender as covariate in the regression of socially supported

coping ($F(1, 239) = 10.71$, $p < .01$, $R^2_{adj} = .04$). Furthermore, when all attachment styles

together with divorce or separation were added, the predictive power also significantly

increased for problem-focused ($F(7, 232) = 3.77$, $p < .001$, $R^2_{adj} = .08$), socially supported

($F(7, 233) = 7.34$, $p < .01$, $R^2_{adj} = .16$), emotion-focused ($F(6, 233) = 2.20$, $p < .05$, R^2_{adj}

$= .03$), and avoidant coping ($F(6, 232) = 6.23$, $p < .001$, $R^2_{adj} = .12$). More specifically, more

safe attachment was significantly related to more problem-focused ($\beta = .28$, $t = 2.47$, $p < .05$)

and less avoidant coping ($\beta = -.33$, $t = -3.32$, $p < .001$). Furthermore, more dependent

attachment was related to more socially supported coping ($\beta = .43$, $t = 3.13$, $p < .01$). These

results were also found in the correlational analysis of this study. Lastly, adding the

interactions between the attachment styles and divorce or separation led to a significant

increase in predictive power for problem-focused ($F(12, 227) = 2.76$, $p < .01$, $R^2_{adj} = .08$),

socially supported ($F(12, 228) = 5.38$, $p < .001$, $R^2_{adj} = .18$) and avoidant coping ($F(11, 227)$

$= 3.50$, $p < .001$, $R^2_{adj} = .10$). Here, only the interactions between divorce or separation and

fearful ($\beta = .62$, $t = 2.47$, $p < .05$) and safe attachment ($\beta = .43$, $t = 3.02$, $p < .05$) were

significant predictors of socially supported coping. However, when investigating the

direction of these interactions using PROCESS, the interactions were not significant

predictors of socially supported coping anymore.

Table 4

Multiple Hierarchical Regression between Attachment and Coping styles with Divorce or

Separation as Moderator

	Problem-focused (n = 240)		Socially supported (n = 241)		Emotion-focused (n = 240)		Avoidant (n = 239)	
	B	t	B	t	B	t	B	t
Gender			2.80	2.51*				
Age	.16	3.81***						
	Adj. R^2 = .04**		Adj. R^2 = .04**					
Safe	.33	3.30**	.18	1.53	-.01	-.09	-.33	-3.32***
Dependent	-.05	-.39	.43	3.13**	.04	.28	.16	1.39
Parentified	-.03	-.31	-.14	-1.06	.19	1.29	.07	.62
Fearful	.10	.78	.07	-.45	.26	1.54	.13	1.04
Distant	.04	1.41	.24	1.90	.08	.57	.004	.04
Divorce	-.53	-.56	-2.04	-1.80	-.75	-.60	-1.47	-1.58
	Adj. R^2 = .08***		Adj. R^2 = .16**		Adj. R^2 = .03*		Adj. R^2 = .12***	
Safe*divorce	-.07	-.36	.43	2.02*	.03	.14	.11	.64
Dependent*divorce	-.15	-.69	-.50	-1.92	.31	1.09	-.06	-.28
Parentified*divorce	-.21	-1.05	-.25	-1.04	-.20	-.77	-.11	-.56
Fearful*divorce	.10	.45	.62	2.47*	-.32	-1.16	-.05	-.25
Distant*divorce	-.22	-1.20	.003	.02	-.19	-.87	.20	1.20
	Adj. R^2 = .08**		Adj. R^2 = .18***		Adj. R^2 = .03		Adj. R^2 = .10***	

$^*p$ < 0.05. $^{**}p$ < 0.01. $^{***}p$ < 0.001.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of how individuals with different attachment styles may cope differently with everyday stresses. Furthermore, it was of interest if experiencing parental divorce or separation would influence the coping style used and the relation between the attachment and coping style. Since the groups that experienced divorce or separation before and after the age of six did not differ in coping usage, they were merged. Furthermore, similar to previous research, this study needed to control for gender and age, however only concerning socially supported and problem-focused coping respectively.

Individuals with safe, dependent, and parentified attachment were expected to seek more social support, as found in this study except for parentified attachment. Previous research also indicated that securely attached persons used more of both emotional and instrumental social support when confronted with stressful situations (Simpson et al., 1992; Mikulincer et al., 1993; Camisasca et al., 2017). Of these three attachment styles, only safely attached participants used more problem-focused and less avoidant coping, inconsistent with the hypothesis expecting to find this relation for all three secure attachment styles. Furthermore, dependent and parentified attached individuals used more emotion-focused coping, going against the hypothesis expecting less usage of this coping style. These inconsistent findings could be explained by the clustering method Michael (2014) used to group the attachment styles in which safe attachment was located further on the secure dimension than both dependent and parentified. Therefore, dependent and parentified attachment may be more similar to insecure attachment than safe attachment. This would justify the insignificant relation with problem-focused coping and the positive association with emotion-focused coping these two attachment styles display in the current study. A different explanation involves that emotional coping seems to be adaptive in the short term

and becomes maladaptive over time through rumination (Stanton et al., 2000). Therefore, securely attached individuals may use emotional coping only shortly before engaging in problem-solving and/or seeking social support. Consequently, emotion-focused coping would relate positively to secure attachment. However, such relation has not been identified in past literature (Mikulincer et al., 1993; Marshall et al., 2000). Therefore, future research into the short-term and long-term effectiveness of coping strategies could be considered in intervention programs targeting how to manage life's stresses.

Of the insecure attachments, fearfully attached individuals used more emotion-focused and avoidant coping, as the hypothesis stated. Since fearful attachment is similar to anxious attachment, these results are consistent with previous research showing that anxiously attached individuals are more likely to use emotional and avoidant coping (Camisasca et al., 2017; Shechory, 2012; Mikulincer et al., 1993; Marshall et al., 2000). Fearful attachment was also expected to relate to less problem-focused coping which was not found in this study. Previous literature was contradictive regarding this relation, assuming either negative (Marshall et al., 2000) or no relation (Shechory, 2012) between anxious attachment and problem-focused coping, explaining the inconsistent results of this study. Furthermore, the positive relation between fearful attachment and socially supported coping contradicts the hypothesis. These findings could be the result of the both positive and negative overtone of seeking social support noted by Carver et al. (1989). They mentioned that seeking social support was related to active coping and planning which are subgroups of problem-focused coping, but also to strategies such as denial and disengagement which are parts of avoidant coping. Therefore, whether seeking social support is good or bad, depends on other coping processes that may co-occur. Moreover, seeking emotional support is regarded as emotion-focused coping by Folkman and Moskowitz (2004), yet grouped into socially supported coping by Litman (2006). This could clarify the co-occurrence of positive

relations of socially supported and emotion-focused coping to different attachment styles in this study. However, this gives no justification for why this co-occurrence has not been found in previous studies (Camisasca et al., 2017; Mikulincer et al., 1993). Therefore, the positive and negative aspects of seeking social support and its relation with emotion-focused coping should be researched more thoroughly, possibly revealing under which circumstances these coping styles may be adaptive and maladaptive.

Since distant attachment can be regarded as similar to avoidant attachment, its positive relation with avoidant coping is consistent with the hypothesis and previous research (Camisasca et al., 2017). Distant attachment was also expected to relate negatively to problem-focused (Marshall et al., 2000; Shechory, 2012) and emotional coping (Shechory, 2012) and seeking social support (Simpson et al., 1992). However, this study did not reveal such relations. A possible explanation is that distant and avoidant coping cannot fully be regarded as the same. Both attachment styles are characterized by either rejecting interaction with, or distancing from caregivers, and parenting behaviors that show rejection and lack of support and availability (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Michael, 2014). However, parents of avoidantly attached children can also show behaviors that are insensitively intrusive according to Ainsworth et al. (1978). This may have a different influence on the child than only the parenting behaviors displayed by the parents of distantly attached children. Future research could reveal the difference between avoidant and distant attachment and the coping styles individuals with each attachment style prefer to use. This would be beneficial for counseling situations to help the client understand his or her relational patterns to others and ways of managing stressful situations.

Experience of divorce or separation was expected to relate to more emotion-focused and avoidant coping usage and using less problem-focused and socially supported coping. However, no such relation was found, going against existing literature stating that exposure

to marital conflict relates to coping less effectively (Grych et al., 2000), characterized by applying more avoidant and emotional coping (Carver et al., 1989). In contrast, safe or fearful attachment together with the experience of divorce or separation related to socially supported coping. However, when investigating if it led to more or less usage of this coping style, these relations became insignificant. Therefore, the hypothesis stating that people with each attachment style and the experience of divorce or separation would use more emotion-focused and avoidant coping and less socially supported and problem-focused coping was not supported. This may be due to the convenient sample included in this study consisting mostly of university students who may have developed certain coping styles regardless of parental divorce or separation. However, these findings indicate that more research is needed into the relationship between parental divorce or separation and coping usage and its possible moderating role between coping and attachment.

Even though this study could not consider it, the cut-off age of six regarding experiencing divorce or separation was supported by literature revealing more emotional and behavioral disturbance together with lower self-esteem of the child at this age (Clarke-Stewart et al., 2000; Sirvanli-Ozen, 2005). However, the effect of divorce or separation on a child older than six should not be disregarded. Children aged between six and twelve have increased feelings of being unlovable and display more aggression when their parents divorce according to Oppawsky (1992). Furthermore, if the divorce occurs when the child is between twelve and eighteen, they distance themselves more physically and emotionally from the situations. Therefore, the adverse effects of divorce or separation on the child may be different considering the age of the child. Even though this study did not reveal such relations, it is an interesting direction future research could take.

It should be noted that this study includes several shortcomings. The cross-sectional nature of this study cannot identify directional or causal relations, which longitudinal

research could reveal. Nonetheless, from a theoretical perspective, attachment is more inclined to precede and subsequently contribute to the development of coping (Berry & Kingswell, 2012). Another limitation included the questionnaire used to assess attachment in childhood (ASPA-SF; Michael & Snow, 2019), which is fairly new and was only tested on a convenient sample of college students from the United States. Similarly, the sample of the present study consisted mostly of students attending university in the Netherlands. Therefore, additional studies including a variety of populations are needed to strengthen the meaning of the attachment styles stated by Snow et al. (2005) and the generalizability of studies to come, using this questionnaire.

Interesting for future research is to differentiate between attachment to the mother and the father. Anxious and avoidant attached child molesters used only more emotional coping when these attachment styles were in relation to the mother (Marshall et al., 2000). Furthermore, warmth and positivity were only related to more usage of problem-focused than avoidant coping if it was received from the mother (Meesters & Muris, 2004). However, if the father behaved more hostile, his children were more likely to use drugs, alcohol and had emotional outbursts (Johnson & Pandina, 1991). This research shows the importance of differentiating between attachment to both parents concerning different ways to cope with distress. Therefore, it would be interesting for future investigations to clarify how attachment to either of the parents could relate to different coping styles used by the child.

By differentiating within secure attachment between three types, this study highlights new areas for future investigation, since such distinction has rarely been made in the past. Bowlby (1973), Ainsworth et al. (1978), and Main and Solomon, (1990), for example, considered one type of secure and different types of insecure attachment. Even though this study did not assume different relations between coping and these three secure attachment styles, results revealed that safely attached individuals used more problem-solving coping,

opposed to people with dependent and parentified attachment who used more emotional

coping. These findings urge future research to examine these attachment styles more closely,

especially regarding coping preferences to help establish which coping styles are adaptive

and which are not. This would be beneficial in determining the effectiveness of coping which

remains one of the most complicated topics in research on coping (Somerfield & McCrae,

2000).

Conclusion

In conclusion, despite its limitations, the present study extends previous research on

the relationship between attachment in childhood and coping styles used in adulthood. The

findings of this study broaden our knowledge about the attachment styles of Snow et al.

(2005), specifically in relation to the usage of different coping styles, a field of research with

limited literature. Some patterns of results found in this study replicated previous research

(e.g. safely attached individuals using more problem-focused and socially supported coping

styles and less avoidant coping and distantly attached people using more avoidant coping)

and support the hypotheses stated in this study. However, new findings were also found (e.g.

dependent and parentified attachment relating positively to emotion-focused coping) together

with null findings (e.g. no relation between divorce or separation and coping styles),

contracting previous research and the hypotheses of this study. Therefore, until more

replications have been conducted, any conclusions based on this study should be made with

caution.

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