



# Gender and birth cohort differences in adult attachment in Chinese college students: A meta-analysis



Cong Shu, Xu Chen <sup>\*</sup>, Ying Liu, Xing Zhang, Dengyu Hu, Na Hu, Xinyi Liu

<sup>a</sup> Faculty of Psychology, Southwest University (SWU), Chongqing 400715, China

<sup>b</sup> Research Center of Mental Health Education, Southwest University (SWU), Chongqing 400715, China

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## ABSTRACT

Since China adopted its reform and opening-up policy, the state of society has changed dramatically. Correspondingly, Chinese college students' scores of the Experiences in Close Relationships scale are expected to have changed from 2003 to 2015. A cross-temporal meta-analysis found that Chinese college students' scores of the attachment anxiety subscale increased by 0.2 standard deviations in the past 13 years. With a turning point in 2009, the scores of the attachment avoidance subscale increased by 0.58 standard deviations from 2003 to 2009 and decreased by 0.57 standard deviations from 2009 to 2015. Five social indicators including divorce rate, C-section rate, household size, Consumer Price Index, and Gini coefficient showed significant correlation with attachment anxiety. The results from a second meta-analysis showed that there was no gender difference or cohort effect in gender difference in Chinese college students' adult attachment scores. Finally, the explanations and implications of these changes and the insignificant gender difference are discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

Attachment styles are a motivational system that can explain differences in individuals' social relationships. At the earliest, attachment theory mostly focused on the affectional bonds formed in early life between infants and their caregivers (Bowlby, 1969). Subsequently, Hazan and Shaver proposed that affectional bonds could also be formed between adult lovers (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Since then, the principles of child-parent attachment have been extended to close personal relationships in adulthood. According to models of attachment, the early bond that individuals share with their parents helps create an internal working model of self in relationships that individuals carry forth into subsequent close relationships. Attachment theory has thus become a lifespan developmental theory. According to Bowlby, human attachments play a vital role “from the cradle to the grave” (Bowlby, 1973).

One of the most frequently used measuring methods of adult attachment, the Experiences in Close Relationships scale (ECR; Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998), includes attachment anxiety subscale (sample item: “I worry a fair amount about losing him or her”) and attachment avoidance subscale (sample item: “I don't feel comfortable opening up to him or her”), which have adequate validity and reliability (Crowell, Fraley, & Shaver, 2008). The anxiety subscale focuses on participants' levels of anxiety related to being abandoned in relationships, while

the questions of the avoidance subscale center on avoidant behaviors in close relationships (Brennan et al., 1998). Therefore, higher ECR scores indicate lower attachment quality. Four attachment styles have been defined by their position on the dimensions anxiety and avoidance (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991): secure (low anxious-low avoidant), preoccupied (high anxious-low avoidant), dismissive (low anxious-high avoidant), and fearful (high anxious-high avoidant). To sum up, we define the ECR as a measure of adult attachment in this article.

After the scale was translated into Chinese (Li & Kato, 2006; Tian, 2004b), an increasing number of Chinese researchers have used it and achieved a large number of results in this field. It has been 11 years since the Chinese version was first translated, and China has seen dramatic social changes during this period. Therefore, it is reasonable to speculate that changes in adult attachment might have taken place as well. In addition, the ECR scale is commonly given to college students, and their relative homogeneity over time is precisely why they are an ideal population to use to examine birth cohort changes compared to other populations (e.g., the general community, clinical samples; Konrath, Chopik, Hsing, & O'Brien, 2014). Therefore, college students were selected as the subjects of our research. The ECR scale was mainly used to assess the relationships with romantic partner. However, when scholars conducted a large-scale research on college students in China, the scale was commonly used to assess the generic close relationships (e.g., friends, family, romantic partner; Tian, 2004b). Therefore, the ECR scale was used to assess generic close relationships in our included studies.

In this study, we used cross-temporal meta-analysis (Twenge & Campbell, 2001) to examine changes of the scores of the two ECR

<sup>\*</sup> Corresponding author at: Faculty of Psychology, Southwest University, Tiansheng Road, Beibei, Chongqing 400715, China.

E-mail address: [chenxu@swu.edu.cn](mailto:chenxu@swu.edu.cn) (X. Chen).

subscales in Chinese college students. This method compares samples of similar age who completed the ECR at different times and allows us to correlate the mean scores with the year of data collection to assess birth-cohort changes in adult attachment. This meta-analytic method is based on the hypothesis that there are some corresponding relationships between the social reality and individual psychological structure (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). As many researchers have demonstrated, the state of society can have a considerable impact on the individual (Choi, Nisbett, & Norenzayan, 1998; Heine & Lehman, 1997; Heine & Renshaw, 2002; Suh, Diener, Oishi, & Triandis, 1998).

Specifically, the question arises of how the larger social environment may influence adult attachment. Some researchers have proposed that the internal working model (Bowlby, 1973) formed in early caregiving environments persists for a long time, predicting individuals'

relationship dynamics as long as 20 years after initial assessment in early childhood (Oriña et al., 2011; Zayas, Mischel, Shoda, & Aber, 2010). Furthermore, a meta-analysis showed that attachment remained moderately stable from infancy to adulthood (Fraley, 2002). Taken together, attachment patterns formed in infancy can persist into adulthood. According to the ecological system theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1986), an infant's early caregiving environment belongs to the microsystem and the larger social environment belongs to the exosystem or macrosystem. The theory also discusses the influence of external environments on the functioning of families as contexts for child development (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). That is, the larger social environment may influence the family economic status, parents' marital relationship, and parents' parenting style, etc. (i.e., microsystem). Furthermore, these factors may help to shape children's attachment style

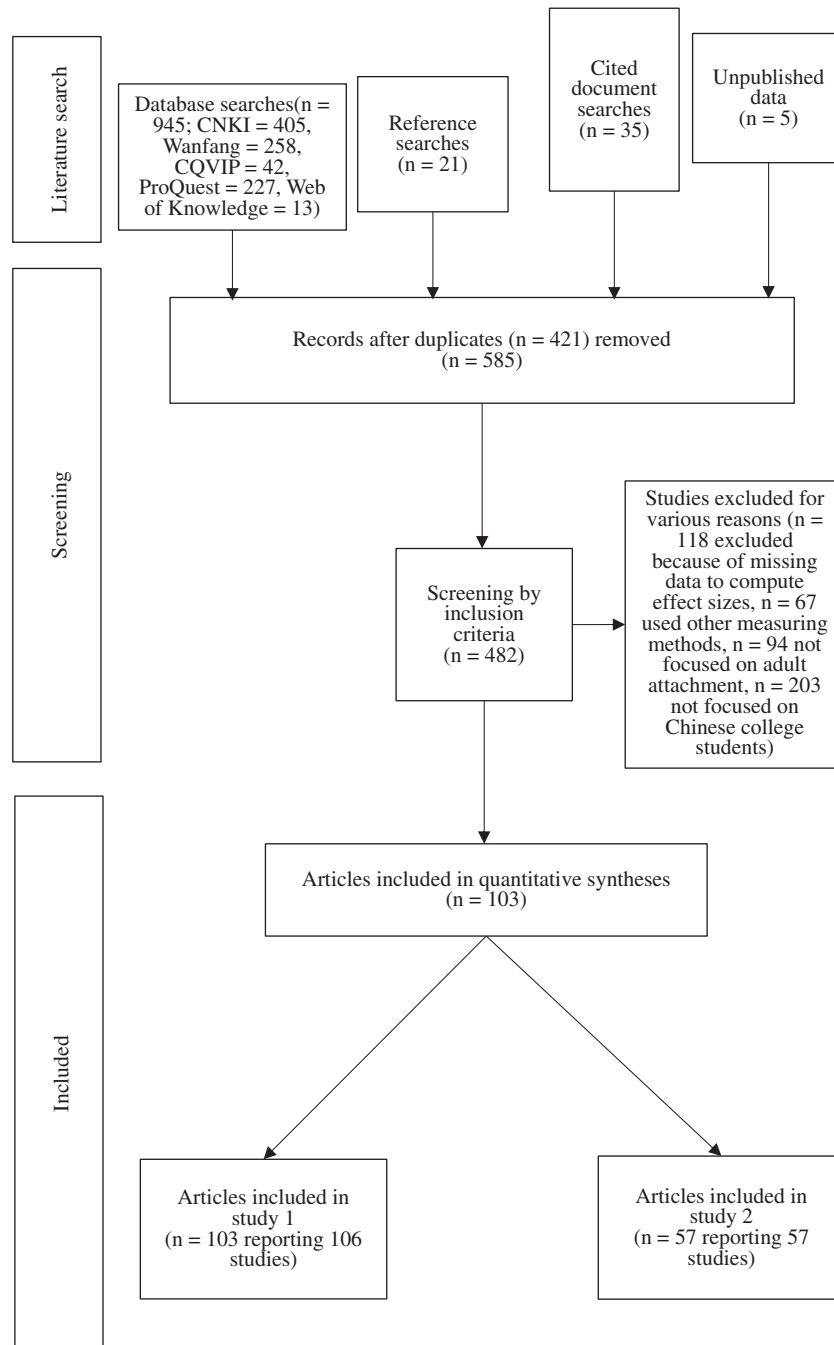


Fig. 1. PRISMA diagram of the search strategies and inclusion process. CNKI = China National Knowledge Infrastructure database; CQVIP = Chongqing VIP database.

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