



# Attachment and well-being: The mediating role of emotion regulation and resilience

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## ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to obtain better insight into the associations between attachment styles and psychological well-being, by testing the possible mediating roles of emotion regulation (i.e., reappraisal and suppression) and resilience. In a community sample of 632 individuals, secure and dismissing attachment styles were found to be associated with higher well-being, while preoccupied attachment was the attachment style with the most adverse outcome. Fearful attachment was not directly related to well-being. Results of the multiple mediation model revealed unique relationships with emotion regulation and resilience for each attachment style, explaining connections with well-being. Secure attachment was associated with higher reappraisal and resilience, partly mediating the effect on well-being. Complete mediation was found for dismissing attachment via higher reappraisal and resilience, and for preoccupied attachment via lower reappraisal and resilience. Remarkably, fearful attachment had indirect positive effects on well-being through higher reappraisal and resilience. Suppression failed to function as a mediator between attachment and well-being. The findings provide suggestive evidence why individuals differ in psychological well-being as a function of attachment style.

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## 1. Introduction

Attachment theory offers a compelling framework for a better understanding of individual differences in adaptive functioning in adulthood (Bowlby, 1982; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Attachment has generally been identified as an important determinant of psychological health and more specifically well-being (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007; van Ijzendoorn & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 1996). The current study presents a unique perspective on the relationship between attachment styles and well-being by focusing on the possible mediating roles of emotion regulation and resilience.

According to Bowlby (1982), early care giving experiences are internalized and working models are formed, underlying a person's attachment style. Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991) distinguished four attachment styles according to models of the self and of others: *secure attachment* (i.e., positive models of the self and of others, reflecting confidence in interactions with others), *fearful attachment* (i.e., negative models of the self and of others, referring to avoidance of personal interactions because of anxiety of being hurt or deceived), *preoccupied attachment* (i.e., negative model of the self and positive model of others, characterized by anxiously trying to get acceptance and validation of others), and *dismissing attachment* (i.e., positive model of the self and negative model of others,

reflecting self-confidence and striving for independence). Comparing the model of the self and of others to the typology of anxious and avoidant attachment (e.g., Hazan & Shaver, 1987), the model of the self has been regarded as closely related to anxious attachment and the model of others to avoidant attachment (see Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998).

Attachment styles are considered to be important not only for adults' close relationships but also for their well-being, reflecting the subjective quality of life, covering positive mood, vitality, and interest in things (WHO, 1999). Secure attachment has been found to be associated with higher well-being, whereas anxious and avoidant attachment both have been demonstrated to be connected with lower well-being (Kafetsios & Sideridis, 2006; La Guardia, Ryan, Couchman, & Deci, 2000; Lavy & Littman-Ovadia, 2011; Wei, Liao, Ku, & Shaffer, 2011). Concerning the underlying mechanisms, attachment styles could be theoretically linked to well-being through stress appraisal patterns, since they are related to an individual's beliefs and expectations about being able to cope with stressors and to resist stressors (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Emotion regulation mainly involves the appraisal of stressful events as threatening or not, as well as the individual's ways of dealing with stressors, whereas resilience particularly involves a stress-resistant attitude, related to the appraisal of *oneself* as able to cope with stressors. Therefore, emotion regulation and resilience are considered as supplementary factors in the stress-appraising process, expected to play a mediating role in the association between attachment and well-being.

Emotion regulation refers to the process of influencing the kind of emotions, as well as when and how to experience and express

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these emotions (Gross, 1998). According to Gross (1998) model, two major strategies are reappraisal (i.e., reframing an emotional situation as less emotional), influencing the entire subsequent emotion trajectory, and suppression of expression (i.e., inhibiting outward expression when emotionally aroused). Resilience, which has been found to be associated with emotion regulation (Beasley, Thompson, & Davidson, 2003; Tugade & Fredrickson, 2004), is considered a personality construct referring to the capacity to moderate the negative effects of stressors and to promote positive adaptation (Wagnild & Young, 1993). Reappraisal and resilience have been found to be related positively, and suppression negatively, to well-being (Gross & John, 2003; Mak, Ng, & Wong, 2011; Wagnild & Young, 1993).

Attachment theory considers support seeking as the attachment system's primary strategy when confronted with stressors (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). For insecurely attached people, support seeking is associated with worries about separation or rejection. In stressful situations, anxiously attached individuals therefore are postulated to rely on hyperactivating strategies, involving emotional and hypersensitive proximity-seeking reactions. Avoidantly attached individuals, in contrast, would rely in particular on deactivating strategies, involving down-regulation of emotions to maintain distance to others. Consistently, individuals high on anxious attachment, in contrast to secure attachment, have been found to appraise stressful events as more threatening, to have a low stress-resistant attitude and to use emotion-focused coping by directing attention toward their own distress (Birbaum, Orr, Mikulincer, & Florian, 1997; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007; Neria et al., 2001), suggesting low reappraisal and resilience. For avoidantly attached individuals, findings are less consistent. Most studies found that they appraise stressful events as threatening but also appraise themselves as being able to cope with stressors, and preferably use distancing coping strategies, such as stress denial (see Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Support-seeking tendencies, such as crying, have been found to be highly frequent in individuals with a preoccupied attachment style and infrequent in individuals with a dismissing attachment style (Laan, van Assen, & Vingerhoets, 2012), referring to emotion expression versus suppression respectively.

Since to date little is known about the possible mediating roles of emotion regulation strategies and resilience, the goals of the present study are not only (i) to examine to what extent attachment styles predict well-being, but also (ii) to investigate if connections between attachment styles and well-being are mediated by the emotion regulation strategies reappraisal and suppression, and resilience. Based on the above reviewed literature, we hypothesize that secure attachment predicts higher well-being, whereas fearful, preoccupied and dismissing attachment styles are associated with lower well-being. The positive effect of secure attachment on well-being is expected to be mediated by higher reappraisal and resilience and lower suppression, and the negative effect of preoccupied attachment on well-being is expected to be mediated by lower reappraisal, suppression and resilience. We anticipate that dismissing attachment is negatively associated with well-being through higher suppression. Finally, we explore the mediating roles of reappraisal and resilience in relations of fearful and dismissing attachment with well-being because theory and prior findings are equivocal for these dimensions.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants and procedure

The sample consisted of 632 individuals (305 men, 327 women), aged 16–67 years ( $M = 36.92$ ,  $SD = 13.06$ ). The average educational level was medium to high, as most participants obtained

a degree approximately at the level of high school graduate (35%) and college graduate (59%). The majority of the participants had Dutch nationality (97%) and worked outside the home (66%). Fifty-four percent were involved in a romantic relationship and 39% had one or more children.

This study was part of a larger research project on music and emotions. Visitors of the website for "Top 2000", a popular Dutch radio program that is aired annually around Christmas, voluntarily responded to an invitation to participate in this study. Interested visitors could navigate to the Tilburg University website containing the study materials. After reading a consent form, explaining the goal of the research project and the procedure, participants completed online questionnaires. No compensation was provided. Data collection started in December 2011 and was terminated in January 2012.

### 2.2. Measures

#### 2.2.1. Attachment

The Attachment Styles Questionnaire (van Oudenhoven, Hofstra, & Bakker, 2003) measured four attachment styles: (i) secure attachment (eight items, e.g., "I find it easy to get engaged in close relationships with other people",  $\alpha = .82$ ), (ii) fearful attachment (four items, e.g., "I would like to be open to others, but I feel I can't trust other people",  $\alpha = .83$ ), (iii) preoccupied attachment (seven items, e.g., "I have the impression that usually I like others better than they like me.",  $\alpha = .82$ ), and (iv) dismissing attachment (five items, e.g., "It is important to me to be independent",  $\alpha = .64$ ). Items were rated on a 5-point scale; from strongly disagree to strongly agree. van Oudenhoven and Hofstra (2004) reported acceptable factor structure, internal consistency (Cronbach's alphas ranging from .63 for dismissing attachment to .80 for preoccupied attachment), stability after a 1 year interval (correlations from .59 for dismissing attachment to .77 for preoccupied and fearful attachment), and construct validity.

#### 2.2.2. Emotion regulation

Emotion regulation strategies were assessed by the Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (ERQ; Gross & John, 2003; Dutch translation Koole, 2004). Items measuring reappraisal (six items,  $\alpha = .83$ ) and suppression (four items,  $\alpha = .79$ ), were answered on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Examples of items are "I control my emotions by changing the way I think about the situation I'm in" (reappraisal) and "I control my emotions by not expressing them" (suppression). Factor structure, internal consistency ( $\alpha = .79$  for reappraisal,  $\alpha = .73$  for suppression), test-retest reliability across three months ( $r = .69$  for both scales), convergent and discriminant validity have been demonstrated to be adequate (Gross & John, 2003).

#### 2.2.3. Resilience

Resilience was measured by the Dutch version of the Resilience Scale (RS-nl, Portzky, Wagnild, De Bacquer, & Audenaert, 2010; original RS, Wagnild & Young, 1993). The RS-nl comprises 25 items (e.g., "When I make plans I follow through with them"), which the respondents rated on a 4-point Likert scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The sum score reflected the score for resilience ( $\alpha = .84$ ). Portzky, Wagnild, De Bacquer, and Audenaert, (2010) reported good internal consistency ( $\alpha = .84$ ), test-retest stability across a 3-month period ( $r = .90$ ), and acceptable construct validity of the RS-nl.

#### 2.2.4. Well-being

The Dutch version of the WHO-Five well-being index (WHO, 1999) was used to assess the current state of psychological well-being. Participants indicated how they felt during the past two

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