

## Original Article

## The comparison of tendency to risky behavior, in secure/insecure attachment in parents

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### Abstract

**Introduction:** The purpose of the present research was comparing tendency to risky behaviors in secure/insecure attachment in parents (mother/father).

**Methods:** This research followed by a causal comparative method. The Sample were selected by an available method and was consisted of 340 single people (171 girls and 169 boys) living in Tehran, ranging between 18 and 30 years old. The data were collected via using the Young Adult's Risky Behaviors Scale (Zadeh Mohammadi et al. 2010), and Experience in Close Relationships-Relationships Structure Questionnaire (Frailyet al. 2011). Descriptive methods of statistics such as mean, standard deviation and inferential statistics such as Manova was used as well.

**Results:** The Results showed that those showing insecure attachment patterns towards the mother were significantly higher at risk to become cigarette smokers, drug persuasion, and alcohol drinkers compared to those with secure attachment patterns. Also those showing insecure attachment patterns towards the father were significantly higher at risk to become cigarette smokers, drug persuasion, compared to those with secure attachment patterns.

**Conclusion:** By considering the high-risk behavior in term of attachment, this research demonstrates that secure attachment creates an internal working model that provides compatible guidelines while encountering the stressful events.

**Declaration of Interest:** None.

**Keywords:** Attachment, Risk, Young adult, Parents

### Introduction

Risky behavior is described as taking part in the activities, which expose the individual to a danger. Activities such as excessive alcohol, smoking, illicit drug use and having unprotected sexual intercourse are examples of such activities (1). Risk-taking can also be considered as any voluntary participation of the individual in any behavior possibly leading to negative consequences (2). It includes behaviors with antisocial or illegal nature or those that are considerably harmful for health (3). Risk-taking is applied to the behaviors that potentially can damage the individual or the society and can increase the probability of the negative physical, psychological and social

consequences. By introducing the problem behavior syndrome, Jessor has included smoking, illicit drug abuse, drinking alcohol, reckless driving and immature sexual intercourse as risky behaviors (4). Eating disorder, violence and delinquency were added to that list (5).

Every year more adolescents and young people get engaged in such behaviors. Besides, the increase in risky behaviors, which is considered a threat to the health of youngsters, is the most robust reason to the necessity of understanding the fundamental signals of such increase.

Attachment theory (6) has lately been considered as a profound theoretical framework in studying close relationships and individual differences in

emotion regulation. It maintains that human has an intrinsic predisposition to build and sustain long-lasting emotional bonds deeply affecting individual's health and survival. Although parent-child relationship is the primary attachment bond during childhood, in adolescence and early adulthood it is gradually replaced with committed romantic relationships, but parents still keep their role as attachment figures throughout life (7). Attachment styles have been shown to be one of the main factors that predict the risky behaviors in individuals. Shaver and his colleagues (8) have suggested that adult attachment may be related both to the nature of individuals' sexual relationships and their motivations in seeking these relationships. Provided the strong relationships of different manifestations of psychological distress and substance abuse (9), it is reasonable to consider attachment insecurity as a key factor playing a role in the developmental perspective of substance abuse disorders.

Discovering a connection between the attachment and psychopathology has increasingly received interest in recent years (10). Although mere curiosity can lead to initiation of a risky behavior, the attachment style can influence its continuation (11). Despite the fact that few studies have been implemented on attachment and tendency to smoking and illicit drugs abuse, the drug abuse and attachment style seem to be deeply interrelated since both involve emotion regulation and coping strategies as central concepts (12).

Separation from source of security can be related to his tendency to substance abuse to avoid fears, anxiety and refuge to dreams. Tendency to smoking and substance abuse can be considered as a self-medication against emotional distress. It can also be viewed as an effort to cope with the emotional instability and loss of control. The attachment theory highlights the distinctions between different styles of attachment and how these styles require different types of emotion regulation and coping strategies (13).

Attachment styles can influence alcohol abuse and smoking. Insecure attachment is positively correlated to illegal drugs and alcohol abuse, and smoking. The individuals with insecure attachment style use alcohol, cigarettes and drugs to cope with the stress (14).

Research findings have confirmed higher drinking behaviors rates among the individuals who were

born in families lacking intimate parent-child relationships and have not experienced secure bonds (15). By studying attachment styles of 212 students in Chicago, Kassel et al. showed that insecure attachment is positively related to the frequency of marijuana and substance abuse, and smoking (9). Students with insecure attachment drink alcohol, smoke cigarettes and use substances more than others. They used alcohol and substance, to cope with their stress (16).

Fearful and preoccupied attachment is related to drinking alcohol (17). There is a positive relationship between anxious and avoidant attachment style and drinking alcohol to overcome problems, and conversely, there is a negative relationship between secure attachment style and these problems (18).

Based on what was discussed, young's relationship with their parents, which influences their attachment style, is one of the factors that can affect perpetration or temptation of risky behaviors in the youth. Just as the separation from mother, when encountered with difficulties, the need for a secure relationship is increased in the individuals and active seeking process is initiated again. In such a situation, if peer group, social sources, or family's source of security is not available or the individual doesn't have the communicational skills required to access such sources, they will inevitably resort to risky behaviors such as smoking, alcohol and substance abuse to relieve themselves. Due to its rapid effects, such a gratification can introduce a mechanism to these people who are escaping from challenges instead of confronting them, and in the absence of early interventions, it can lead to dependence. Identifying the factors contributing to a person's tendency to risky behaviors is one of the fundamental strategies for prevention from risky behaviors. Current study aims to investigate the role of the attachment style in tendency to risky behaviors in a sample of youths in Tehran.

## **Methods**

The population studied in current research comprised all the single male and female people ranging between 18 and 30 years old living in Tehran. The sample included 340 of young people chosen by convenient sampling method. The demographic distribution of the population indicated that the mean age of the participants was 24.19 (SD=3.58), 171 (50.3%) of them were

female and 169 (SD=49.7%) were male, 71 people (20.9%) were high school graduate, 39 (11.5%) had an associate diploma, 177 (52.1%) had a Bachelor's degree and 53 (15.5%) had a Master's or higher degree. 107 females (62.6%) and 109 males (64.5%) had secure attachment to their mothers and 64 females (37.4%) and 60 males (35.5%) has insecure attachment to their mothers. 70 females (40.9%) and 87 males (51.5%) had secure attachment to their fathers and 101 females (59.1%) and 82 males (48.5%) had insecure attachment to their fathers.

Experience in Close Relationship-Relationship Structure Questionnaire (ECR-RS): This questionnaire was constructed by Fraley et al. (2011) to measure the individual differences in any of these four domains: relationships with mother, father, romantic partners, and friends. This questionnaire contains a total of 36 questions and the respondents expressed their opinions on a 7-point Likert scale of 1 to 7 (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree). Nine questions are used to assess the attachment in each domain. The questionnaire evaluates the relationship between the two dimensions of anxious and avoidant attachment and based on the scores gained in these two dimensions, we can categorize an individual in any of the four attachment groups: secure, anxious, fearful, preoccupied, and dismissive and determine his/her attachment style (secure or insecure). Cronbach's alpha for each of the dimensions was reported to be 0.89 (19).

Youth Risk-taking Scale: This scale was constructed and normalized by Zadeh Mohammadi, et al. (2010) and contains 48 items to assess youth's tendency to 6 classes of risky behaviors including violence, reckless driving, smoking, illicit drugs abuse, alcohol use, and sexual risk-taking. The respondents expressed their agreement or disagreement with these items on a 4-point scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree. Cronbach's alpha for the risk-taking scale, reckless driving subscale, violence tendency subscale, smoking tendency subscale, tendency to illicit drugs abuse subscale, tendency to alcohol use subscale, and tendency to sexual risk-taking subscale was 0.93, 0.88, 0.77, 0.91, 0.83, 0.93 and 0.85, respectively (20).

## Results

All data were checked for outliers, skewness, and kurtosis. Low and high outliers were recoded to 1.5 times the interquartile range below the 25th or above the 75th percentile, respectively.

Mean scores of reckless driving tendency (24.59+/-6.38), violence tendency (14.05+/-4.40), smoking tendency (12.86+/-5.61), tendency to illicit and psychoactive drugs abuse (10.77+/-3.49), tendency to alcohol use (17.89+/-7.76), and tendency to sexual risk-taking (10.13+/-3.91) are presented.

Table 1 shows descriptive indices of risky behaviors in secure/insecure attachment to mother and father.

Table 1. Descriptive indices of risky behaviors in secure/insecure attachment to mother and father

	Group	Mean	S.D
Risky driving	Secure to mother	24.10	6.23
	Insecure to mother	24.26	6.08
	Secure to father	24.17	5.98
	Insecure to father	24.15	6.37
Violence	Secure to mother	13.79	4.13
	Insecure to mother	13.86	4.33
	Secure to father	13.79	4.15
	Insecure to father	13.99	4.33
smoking	Secure to mother	12.03	5.13
	Insecure to mother	14.10	5.70
	Secure to father	12.43	5.39
	Insecure to father	15.19	5.16
illicit drugs abuse	Secure to mother	9.91	1.73
	Insecure to mother	12.27	1.94
	Secure to father	10.05	1.85
	Insecure to father	13.07	1.82
Alcohol	Secure to mother	16.53	7.70
	Insecure to mother	18.32	6.90
	Secure to father	16.93	7.20
	Insecure to father	17.34	7.70
sexual risk-taking	Secure to mother	9.56	3.06
	Insecure to mother	9.53	3.24
	Secure to father	9.62	3.03
	Insecure to father	9.54	2.97

Results of multivariate ANOVA on tendency to risk-taking behaviors in secure and insecure attachment to mother is presented in the table 2.

Table 2. Multivariate ANOVA on tendency to risk-taking behaviors in secure and insecure attachment to mother

		Sum of square	df	Mean square	F	P
risky driving	Between group	1.93	1	1.93	0.051	0.822
	error	11650.142	305	38.197		
violence	Between group	0.292	1	0.292	0.017	0.898
	error	5380.124	305	17.640		
smoking	Between group	79.115	1	79.115	2.786	0.034*
	error	8662.605	305	28.402		
substance abuse	Between group	8.745	1	8.745	2.686	0.020*
	error	992.929	305	3.256		
alcohol	Between group	101.293	1	101.293	1.834	0.045*
	error	16847.248	305	55.237		
sexual risk-taking	Between group	0.470	1	0.470	0.005	0.126
	error	2975.920	305	9.757		

As we can see in table 3, there is a significant difference between secure and insecure attachment styles for the variables smoking (P=0.034), substance abuse (P=0.020) and alcohol use (P=0.045), but the difference between these two groups is not significant for the other variables. According to table 1, tendency to

smoking, substance and psychoactive drugs abuse and alcohol use is higher in insecure than secure group.

Results of multivariate ANOVA on tendency to risk-taking behaviors in secure and insecure attachment to father is presented in table 3.

Table 3. Multivariate ANOVA on tendency to risk-taking behaviors in secure and insecure attachment to

		Sum of square	df	Mean square	F	P
risky driving	Between group	0.056	1	0.056	0.001	0.970
	error	11.73.379	290	38.184		
violence	Between group	2.748	1	2.748	0.153	0.696
	error	5218.522	290	17.995		
smoking	Between group	4.228	1	4.228	0.152	0.041*
	error	8078.412	290	27.857		
substance abuse	Between group	0.038	1	0.038	0.011	0.029*
	error	975.972	290	3.365		
alcohol	Between group	11.998	1	11.998	0.216	0.643
	error	16114.522	290	55.567		
sexual risk-taking	Between group	0.054	1	0.054	0.054	0.816
	error	2862.491	290	9.871		

As we see in table 3, there is a significant difference between secure and insecure attachment styles for the variables smoking (P=0.041) and substance abuse (P=0.029), but the difference between these two groups are not significant for the other variables.

According to table1, tendency to smoking and substance and psychoactive drugs abuse is higher in insecure than secure group.

Mean score and standard deviation related to subscales of the risky behaviors in secure/ insecure attachment to parents are presented in table 4.

Table 4. Descriptive indices of risky behaviors in secure/ insecure attachment to parent

	Mother	Father	Mean	S.D
Risky driving	secure	secure	24.03	6.18
		insecure	24.52	6.27
	insecure	secure	24.86	5.23
		insecure	23.92	6.44
Violence	secure	secure	13.76	4.28
		insecure	14.13	3.97
	insecure	secure	14.03	3.68
		insecure	13.92	4.68
smoking	secure	secure	11.82	4.96
		insecure	12.25	5.39
	insecure	secure	15.03	4.42
		insecure	12.18	4.96
illicit drugs abuse	secure	secure	9.88	1.79
		insecure	10.01	1.69
	insecure	secure	10.76	1.98
		insecure	10.14	1.96
Alcohol	secure	secure	17.39	7.78
		insecure	18.13	7.69
	insecure	secure	17.28	7.54
		insecure	15.85	6.51
sexual risk-taking	secure	secure	9.48	3.08
		insecure	9.93	3.11
	insecure	secure	10.28	4.13
		insecure	9.18	2.79

Table 5 presents the multivariate ANOVA results on tendency to risk-taking behaviors in secure and insecure attachment to parents. As we can see in table 5, there is a significant

difference between secure and insecure attachment styles for the variables smoking (P=0.01), but the difference between these two groups is not significant for the other variables.

Table 5. Multivariate ANOVA on tendency to risk-taking behaviors in secure and insecure attachment to

		Sum of square	df	Mean square	F	P
risky driving	Between group	29.28	1	29.28	766	0.38
	error	10935.58	286	38.23		
violence	Between group	3.26	1	3.26	180	0.67
	error	5175.73	286	18.09		
smoking	Between group	151.54	1	151.54	5.55	0.01*
	error	7808.31	286	27.30		
substance abuse	Between group	7.91	1	7.91	2.37	0.12
	error	955.24	286	3.34		
alcohol	Between group	65.82	1	65.82	1.19	0.28
	error	15837.38	286	55.37		
sexual risk-taking	Between group	33.52	1	33.52	3.40	0.06
	error	2818.76	286	9.85		

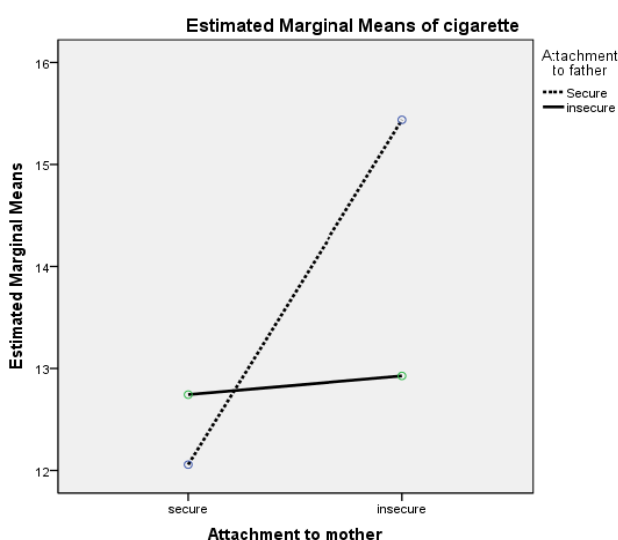


Figure 1: Tendency to smoke in attachment to parent

According to figure 1, when individual's attachment to their father is secure, but to mother is insecure, the tendency to smoking is higher. But when the attachment to father is insecure, and to mother is either secure or insecure, or when the attachment to both of the parents is secure, there's no significant difference between them.

### Conclusion

As we saw in results section, the tendency to risky behaviors such as smoking, drug abuse and taking psychoactive drugs and alcohol use are higher in maternal insecure attachment than

secure attachment. This result is consistent with the findings (9, 14, 17- 18).

According to the attachment approach, the quality of mother-child relationship and the how well mother tries and cares to form a secure relationship has a key role in taking a positive point of view to other significant relationships and how one reacts to difficult situations of life. Secure attachment is related to proper and flexible adjustment to the emotional experiences and tolerating stressors. On the contrary, strategies of the insecure people to overcome negative emotions and situations is located in a spectrum of attempts to maximize or minimize attachment needs. Both of these strategies may expose the person to further danger and vulnerability and the risk of self-destructive behaviors and predispose insecure people to perpetrate risky behaviors (12). Individuals with insecure attachment resort to other ways of self-regulating themselves, example drinking, substance abuse, and smoking. Then, emotion-based coping strategies can be used as a mechanism influencing the severity of substance abuse, smoking, and alcohol to explain the results. In case people with secure attachment style seek social support when confronting emotional stresses, it probably explains avoidance of the secure people from taking illicit drugs and smoking. Research has confirmed that drinking alcohol is a strategy to overcome negative emotions. One of the first outcomes of the attachment in the adults is

regulating their emotions. Those who are unable to manage and suppress their negative emotions in their interpersonal relationships are more likely to use alcohol as a maladjustive way of reducing stress (17). People with dependence on substance and smoking suffer from painful childhood experiences related to severe discouragement of their parents, especially their mothers, and so, they get dependent on external issues and objects and smoking and taking drugs becomes one of the compensation strategies they employ later in life (14).

As we saw in findings section, the tendency to risky behaviors such as smoking, drug abuse and taking psychoactive drugs are higher in paternal insecure attachment than secure attachment. This result is consistent with the findings (9, 14). To explain such a finding we can claim that there is a positive relationship between performance and integrity of the family, parent-child relationship quality, and interactions among family members and reducing their external problems. In fact, integrity level of the family, parent-child relationship and monitoring quality are key protective factors against external behavioral problems of the family members, especially adolescents (21) and since mothers cannot manage to monitor and take care of the adolescents and young children alone and doesn't show required competence (22), high parental monitoring, especially paternal role and the positive performance of the family is correlated with lower rates of relationship with delinquent peers and risky behavior perpetration and these two factors determine lower probability of risk-taking behavior.

Insecure attachment styles pave the way for young adult's drug abuse and smoking by creating psychological disturbances. Tendency to drug abuse and smoking can be considered as some kind of self-medication against problems and emotional disturbances. They can also be considered as an attempt to cope with the emotional instability and loss of control. Probably, the lack of appropriate interaction between father and child, father's negligence to child's emotional needs during adolescence and young age, lack of trust between father and the child, and big distance between father and the

child, lack of empathy in stressful issues and inability of the parents, especially fathers in expressing their reasonable feelings, all contribute to propelling the individual to drug abuse and smoking. Drug abuse leads the individual to the discovery that he/she is able to control and relieve his/her anguish from failure and frustration in securing relationship and change his/her morale.

As we saw in the findings section, the difference between father and mother is only significant in smoking, which means that if the attachment to father is secure and the attachment to mother is insecure, tendency to smoking is higher.

Among familial factors, parents' monitoring has been known as a main source of the tendency to commit risky behaviors. Higher modeling effect from father, closer and more intimate relationship with the father, forming coalition and triangling in the family, mother's poor influence and lower power on others' behaviors (poor maternal authority), tendency to authoritarian mother-child relationship, and permissive style in father-child relationship are some of the familial factors that reinforce tendency to masculine behaviors. Therefore, considering smoking as a masculine behavior and as a one that can be suggestive of being grown-up and independent, tendency to smoking will continue if the familial background is ready.

On the other hand, the individual is absorbed from family into the society and relationships with the peers become important. Negligence in parental responsibilities is one of the factors facilitating adolescents' company with the delinquent peers and perpetrating risky behaviors (23). Subsequently, in explaining this finding we can point out that this difference is related to family and social background, positivism to low dangers of this behavior, lower social ostracism, and prevalence of the parents who smoke and ease of accessing cigarettes (24). People perceive much less danger in smoking than the other risky behaviors such as drug abuse and sexual relationships and many parents might have experienced it. That is why it seems logical that in other behaviors, there is not a significant difference between these two groups.

In comparing fathers and mothers, we can also mention that secure attachment to the mother creates a safety and peace of mind in physiological level and in stress. Hence, that mother, as the main attachment figure can act as a secure base for the child who provides security and comfort for the child when threatened or stressed out. Getting separated from the source of the security can be related with the disconnection of the individual from human resources around him/her and tendency to use drugs and smoke to escape from fears and anxieties. In reverse, father provides security in monitoring and regulating emotions by being sensitive to the child when playing and supporting him/her when his/her discovering system is activated (25). People whose attachment figure (mother) has not been available and responsive in stressful situations and has developed an insecure attachment style uses smoking as a maladjusted method to reduce stress.

Moreover, in explaining the insignificant relationship of the insecure attachment style and violence we can mention that most of the questions related to the violence implied physical violence and verbal violence was not covered. Besides, those who have high anxious attachment are not able to overcome their stress and problems, and then, have high motivation to keep their relationship with the others and avoiding being rejected by the others. Since these people care about the others more than themselves, when they are angry, they project their aggression directly to themselves instead of others. A lot of research studies have demonstrated the relationship between anxious attachment and suicide (26).

There wasn't a significant relationship between the attachment and tendency to reckless driving. To explain, it can be mentioned that immediate rewards or punishments are more effective than delayed ones. Smoking, drinking alcohol, and drug abuse have immediate effects (sedation, painkilling, etc.) and their negative consequences (addiction, addiction-related diseases such as AIDS) are disclosed later and youth are more likely to be involved in these behaviors due to their instantaneous pleasure and delayed, whereas the negative consequences of reckless driving, such as accidents, injury and getting fined are

immediate and can modify youth' risk-taking behavior.

Tendency to aggression, reckless driving and risky sexual behaviors are also related more with sensation seeking of the individual than an emotion-regulation or stress-reducing strategy and might not be much related with the attachment style.

Current study compared tendency to risky behaviors in secure/insecure attachment to parents. Results indicated that generally, Tehranian young adults' risk-taking behavior is in alarming state. Regarding the effectiveness of the attachment style, the results suggested that secure attachment with significant figures of life is important in regulating emotions and affections. Secure attachment through the adjusted and adaptive strategies can provide proper emotional relationships and lead to well-being, but insecure attachment through maladjustive and maladaptive emotional and affective strategies can propel the individual to employ maladjustive methods such as alcohol, smoking or taking drugs when confronting pressure and life stresses to alleviate himself/herself. Although effectively relieving, this strategy is a self-destructive way for the individual.

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