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RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PERSONALITY TRAITS, ATTACHMENT STYLES AND LIFE SATISFACTION AMONG ADOLESCENTS

Wan Shahrazad, W.S., Nor Ba'yah Abdul Kadir, Fatimah Omar & Fatimah Wati Halim

ABSTRACT

Adolescence is an important developmental stage for every individual as it is a transition period from childhood to adulthood. Hence, many variables contribute to the feelings of life satisfaction among adolescents. It is therefore prudent to investigate what adolescents deem as important in influencing their life satisfaction. The objective of this study was to examine the relationship between personality traits, attachment styles with adolescents' life satisfaction. A total of 315 respondents aged between 18 to 21 years old participated in this study. Three standardized instruments were used and they are: the NEO Five Factor Inventory (NEO-FFI) to measure personality, the Attachment Style Questionnaire (ASQ) and the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS). Results showed that there were significant relationships between personality traits of extraversion, openness and conscientiousness with life satisfaction. The findings also indicated significant correlations between attachment styles of confidence and relationship with life satisfaction. In addition, results showed that there were significant relationships between most of the personality traits with attachment styles. In conclusion, adolescents who were satisfied with their lives were those who have personality traits of extraversion, openness and conscientiousness and secure attachment style. These findings give important insights in understanding the well-being of adolescents.

Keywords: personality; extraversion; conscientiousness; attachment style; life satisfaction

INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is an important developmental stage for every individual as it is a transition period from childhood to adulthood. It is the one stage most marked by rapid and tumultuous transition (Brockman, 2003; Cook & Furstenberg, 2002). While the transition is unavoidable, the speed and magnitude of these changes overtax the capacity for many young people to cope (Collins, 2001; Davis, 2003; Jessor, 1993).

In the course of these physical, cognitive and emotional developmental processes, these individual differences coupled with attachment styles may influence the psychological well-being of adolescents. Our behavior in adult relationships is based on our experiences in the early years of life with our parents or caregivers. According to the theory of attachment styles, the kinds of

bonds we form early in life influence the kinds of relationships we form as adults. The theory was first formulated by John Bowlby (1973; 1980; 1982; 1988) who charted the process of close relationships in parent-infant interactions and disruptions, illuminated by three phases in the child's response – protest, despair and detachment. Bowlby's (1973) work on affectional bonds stated that the quality of early relationships would exert long-term influence on personality and on the subsequent relationships through different styles. This style is called attachment style.

Ainsworth (1989) developed the theory further by identifying secure and insecure attachment styles in infants which typified certain ways of responding to brief laboratory controlled separation from mother. These were secure, insecure anxious-ambivalent and insecure anxious-avoidant. These styles have been further examined in adulthood by Main and others in relation to parenting (George, Kaplan & Main, 1984).

Hazan and Shaver (1987) identified three styles of close relationships based on the childhood ones – preoccupied, avoidant and secure which they assessed in a self-report questionnaire which included a brief vignette on each style which respondents had to choose as most like them. This was tested on a sample of 620 individuals self-selected through answering a magazine advert asking about partner relationships. Each of the styles identified was characterized in terms of level of comfort with closeness and level of autonomy. A desire for intimate relationships, a balance of closeness and autonomy, and feeling comfortable with a degree of dependency were all associated with secure attachment style. The preoccupied or anxious-ambivalent styles were characterized by a greater need for close relationships, proximity and high dependency. Avoidant attachment styles were associated with maintaining distance and feeling of discomfort with intimacy and high self-reliance.

There is a large literature on close relationships and its relation to personality, self-criticism and dependency, dysfunctional attitudes and perfectionism (Wei, Mallinckrodt, Larson & Zakalik, 2005; Luecken, 2000; Murphy & Bates, 1997). Close relationships of adults is associated with psychopathology such as depression and other mental disorders (Mickelson et al., 1997). There are fewer studies focusing on depression and other psychiatric disorders but these show a relationship between insecure close relationships style and disorder (Hammen et al., 1985; Gerlsma & Luteijn, 2000). Whilst rather more studies find anxious styles more predictive (Gerlsma & Luteijn, 2000; Wei et al, 2005) some find avoidant style confers risk (McCarthy & Taylor, 1999; Cassidy, 1994) and some identify fearful style as the most vulnerable (Murphy & Bates, 1997). This inconsistency is likely to relate to the variety of measures used, the distinction between depression and anxiety disorder outcomes, and the frequent use of cross-sectional study where close relationship ratings may be contaminated by the disorder (Bifulco et al., 2002a; 2002b).

Prior studies have documented robust relationships between global positive affect and the Big Five trait Extraversion, as well as secure adult attachment style (e.g., Costa & McCrae, 1980; McCrae & John, 1992; Simpson, 1990; Torquati & Rafaelli, 2004; Watson & Clark, 1997). One of the most robust findings in the literature on affect and personality is the

strong correlation between dispositional global positive affect and the Big Five factor Extraversion (e.g., Costa & McCrae, 1980; John, 1990; Larsen & Ketelaar, 1989; McCrae & John, 1992; Watson & Clark, 1997). Extraversion scores predict frequency and intensity of felt positive emotion, as well as reactivity to positive feedback (Larsen & Ketelaar, 1989; Meyer & Shack, 1989; Watson & Clark, 1997).

Prior studies have found that insecure attachment is associated with higher levels of negative affect, especially in the context of romantic relationships (e.g., Feeney & Kirkpatrick, 1996; Simpson, 1990). Insecure attachment style also predicts increased vulnerability to affective disorders, including depression and anxiety (Roberts, Gotlib & Kassel, 1996). Less is known about the relationship between attachment style and the experience of positive emotions in adulthood. A few studies have found that securely attached individuals do experience more positive emotion than insecurely attached individuals, particularly in the context of romantic relationships (e.g., Simpson, 1990; Torquati & Raffaelli, 2004).

A growing body of evidence suggests links between the dimensions of insecure attachment and psychological distress. For example, studies have shown that insecure adult attachment is related to negative affect (Simpson, 1990); lower levels of emotional adjustment (Rice, FitzGerald, Whaley & Gibbs, 1995; Rice & Whaley, 1994); depression, anxiety, and hostility (Priel & Shamai, 1995; Mikulincer, Florian & Weller, 1993; Robert, Gotlib & Kassel, 1996); shame, anger, fear of negative evaluation, and pathological narcissism (Wagner & Tangney, 1991); and interpersonal problems and core relationship conflicts (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Horowitz, Rosenberg & Bartholomew, 1993; Mallinckrodt & Wei, 2000). In general, previous studies have shown that securely attached persons are significantly less anxious, depressed, and angry and have less interpersonal distress than those with either anxious or avoidant attachment (for a review, see Lopez & Brennan, 2000).

The main objectives of this research therefore, are: (1) to examine the relationship between personality traits and attachment styles, (2) to examine the relationship between personality traits and life satisfaction among adolescents, and (3) to examine the relationship between attachment styles and life satisfaction among adolescents.

MATERIALS AND METHOD

The participants in this study were 315 respondents aged between 18 to 21 years old. Three standardized instruments were used and they are:

- i. The NEO Five Factor Inventory (NEO-FFI) to measure five traits of personality namely neuroticism, extraversion, openness, agreeableness and conscientiousness. This inventory consists of 60 items with 12 items for each dimension. Respondents answered to the statements using a five-point Likert scale from 1=Strongly Disagree

to 5=Strongly Agree. Reliability analysis showed that the scale has moderate reliability for its dimensions ranging from alpha .52 to .79 while alpha for all items was .81.

- ii. The Attachment Style Questionnaire (ASQ) consists of 40 items measuring five dimensions namely confidence, discomfort, relationship, approval and preoccupied. The dimensions of confidence and approval can be categorized as the secure attachment style. The inventory uses a six-point Likert scale with 1=Strongly Disagree to 6=Strongly Agree. The reliability of the instrument showed moderate reliability for its dimension ranging from alpha .55 to .72 while alpha for all items was .84.
- iii. The Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS). This scale consists of five positively worded items that measure general life satisfaction. The responses use seven point Likert scale with 1=Strongly Disagree to 7=Strongly Agree. The reliability of this scale was moderate with alpha Cronbach of .60.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 shows the results of respondents' demographic profile. A total of 111 (35.2%) respondents were 18 years old, 66 (21%) were 19 years old, 112 (35.6%) were 20 years old and 26 (8.3%) were 21 years old. A total of 185 respondents were male (58.7%), while 130 respondents (41.3%) were female. Based on ethnic distribution, 273 respondents (86.6%) were Malays, 9 Chinese (2.9%), 32 Indians (10.2%), and 1 from other ethnicities (0.3%).

Table 1: Respondents' demographic profile

Demography		Frequency	Percentage
Age	18	11	35.2
	19	66	21.0
	20	112	35.6
	21	26	8.3
Gender	Male	185	58.7
	Femal	130	41.3
Ethnicity	Malay	273	86.6
	Chines	9	2.9
	Indian	32	10.2
	Others	1	0.3

The first objective of this study was to the relationship between personality traits and attachment styles. Results showed in Table 2 found that neuroticism was significantly related with three dimensions of attachment style namely discomfort, $r=.301$, $p<0.0001$; approval, $r=.363$, $p<0.0001$; and preoccupied, $r=.385$, $p<0.0001$. Extraversion was significantly correlated with confidence, $r=.420$, $p<0.0001$, and relationship, $r=.131$, $p<0.0001$. Openness was correlated with

all dimensions of attachment style with confidence, $r=.291$, $p<0.0001$; discomfort, $r=.200$, $p<0.0001$; relationship, $r=.207$, $p<0.0001$; approval, $r=.139$, $p<0.05$; and preoccupied, $r=.161$, $p<0.05$. Agreeableness on the other hand was significantly correlated with relationship, $r=-.202$, $p<0.0001$; and preoccupied, $r=-.160$, $p<0.0001$. Finally, conscientiousness was significantly correlated with four dimensions of attachment style and they are, confidence, $r=.430$, $p<0.0001$; discomfort, $r=.133$, $p<0.05$; relationship, $r=.130$, $p<0.05$; and approval, $r=.148$, $p<0.05$.

Table 2: Results of correlation between personality traits and attachment styles

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
9	10							
Neuro. (1)	-							
Open. (3)	.046	.359*	-					
Agree. (4)	-	*	-.028	-				
Consci. (5)	.164*	.462*	.445*	.222*	-			
Confid. (6)	.068	.420*	.291*	.019	.430*	-		
Discom. (7)	.301*	.007	.200*	-.144	.133*	.162*	-	
Relat. (8)	.132	.131*	.207*	-	.130*	.232*	.344*	-
Approv. (9)	.363*	.046	.139*	-.044	.148*	.163*	.577*	.293*
Preocc. (10)	.385*	.066	.161*	-.160*	.069	.214*	.468*	.282*
								.589*

* $p<0.05$
** $p<0.0001$

The second objective was to examine the relationship between personality traits and life satisfaction among adolescents. Results in Table 3 showed that there was significant and negative correlation between neuroticism and life satisfaction, $r=-.126$, $p<0.05$. There was also significant correlation between extraversion and life satisfaction, $r=.195$, $p<0.05$. A significant and positive correlation was also observed between openness and life satisfaction, $r=.239$, $p<0.05$. Finally, results also showed a positive and significant correlation between conscientiousness and life satisfaction. Results however showed no significant correlation between agreeableness and life satisfaction.

Table 3: Results of correlation between personality traits and life satisfaction

	1	2	3	4	5	6
Neuro. (1)	-					
Extrov. (2)	-.101	-				
Open. (3)	.046	.359*	-			
Agree. (4)	-	-.032	-.028	-		
Consci. (5)	.164*	.462*	.445*	.222*	-	
Life (6)	-.126*	.195*	.239*	-.005	.265*	-

The third objective examined the relationship between attachment style and life satisfaction among adolescents. Results in Table 4 showed that there were significant correlations between two dimensions of attachment style and life satisfaction namely, confidence, $r=.267$, $p<0.0001$ and relationship, $r=.169$, $p<0.05$. There were however no significant correlations between discomfort, approval and preoccupied.

Table 4: Results of correlation between attachment style and life satisfaction

	1	2	3	4	5	6
Conf. (1)	-					
Disc. (2)	.162	-				
Relat. (3)	.232**	.344**	-			
Appr. (4)	.163*	.577**	.293**	-		
Preocc.	.214**	.468**	.282**	.589**	-	
Life (6)	.267**	.021	.169*	-.078	-.082	-

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to examine the relationship between personality traits, attachment style and life satisfaction among adolescents. Findings indicated that adolescents who experienced life satisfaction were those who have emotional stability, extravert, open and conscientious. In addition, those who have confident and relationship attachment style has higher life satisfaction

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Wan Shahrazad, W.S, Nor Ba'yah Abdul Kadir, Fatimah Omar & Fatimah wati Halim
School of Psychology and Human Development

Faculty of Social Science and Humanities

Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia

43600 UKM Bangi, Selangor,

Malaysia

Tel.:603-89214190

Fax:603-89213541

E-mail :shara@ukm.my