



# The Relationship between Emotional Intelligence and Adolescent Attachment Style—Comparative Study

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## Abstract

Individuals are always interacting and communicating with their environment, but there are many factors that affect the quality of this interaction and communication. These factors may be influenced not only by personal characteristics but also by external factors. People’s previous experiences, personal characteristics, interests, attitudes and expectations can influence their interpersonal relationships. Besides, another factor worth mentioning in the relationships between people is their emotional intelligence, which predisposes them to have positive relationships with others and makes them less likely to report negative interactions with close friends.

## Subject Areas

Psychology

## Keywords

Adolescence, Attachment, Emotional Intelligence

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## 1. Introduction

There are many definitions of emotional intelligence (EI) in the literature, being considered as an integration of thinking with emotion, and effective communication as a result of that interaction (Cherniss and Golman, 2001) [1]. The different theories of emotional intelligence can be conceptualized in terms of a theory that defines a mood, an effect, or an ability. The concept of emotional intelligence, originally proposed by Salovey and Mayer in 1990, has provided a strong foundation on which to investigate individual differences in how people reason and express feelings [2]. Emotional intelligence is the individual’s ability to perceive, ex-

press, understand, use, and manage emotions in oneself and in relation to other people (Kim *et al.*, 2012) [3]. Awareness of one's own emotions involves accurately identifying the emotion being experienced, understanding how the emotion is related to one's goals and values, realizing how the emotion is related to thinking and behavior, appreciating how the experience of the emotion can affect the person's achievements (Matthews *et al.*, 2002, p. 26) [4].

In this paper, we refer to the investigation of EI in relation to attachment.

**Attachment theory** highlights the interpersonal source of adult emotionality, arguing that emotional defenses associated with insecure attachment inhibit information processing of emotional messages and block awareness of feelings and intentions in oneself and in relation to others (Bowlby, 1969) [5]. Adult attachment orientations include affective and cognitive rules and strategies that determine emotional reactions in individuals and in their relationships. Secure, anxious/ambivalent, and avoidant individuals use fundamentally different strategies for emotional regulation and processing of information about emotions (Shaver, Collins, & Clark, 1996) [6], and attachment theory therefore also provides a model of emotional regulation (Feeney, 1995) [7]. Internal working models of attachment could be understood as internal rules that guide the individual's emotional reactions to stressful situations. There is research that has found that people with secure attachment are better able to cope with negative emotions in social interactions, compared to people with anxious attachment, and have positive emotional regulation skills. Furthermore, research examining the relationships between attachment styles and emotional intelligence has found that secure attachment style is associated with perception, facilitation, understanding, and management of emotions (Hess & Bacigalupo, 2011) [8]. The purpose of this study is the relationship between attachment and emotional intelligence in adolescents.

**Emotional intelligence** (EI) has become a major focus of psychological research over the past two decades and continues to be the subject of research, although there have been voices challenging its construct validity. Studies with adolescents show that emotional intelligence is a skill that minimizes the negative consequences of academic stress (Goff, 2011) [9]. According to Salovey and Mayer (1990) [2], emotions are organized responses that cross psychological subsystems, which include physiological, cognitive, motivational, and experiential systems. An individual's emotions, both positive and negative, arise from a response to an internal or external event. Emotions can be distinguished from the closely related concept of moods in that emotions are shorter-lived and generally more intense. Regarding intelligence, the most frequently cited definition is Wechsler's statement that "intelligence is the aggregate of the individual's overall capacity to act purposefully, to think rationally, and to deal effectively with his or her environment" (Salovey & Mayer, 1990, p. 3) [2]. The conceptual construct of emotional intelligence is related to the construct of social intelligence, alexithymia and affective orientation (Taylor & Bagby, 2000) [10], emotional competence (Saarni, 2000) [11], and psychological sense (McCallum & Piper, 2000) [12]. It is evident

that the evolution of the definition of emotional intelligence is influential in the different definitions of these conceptual constructs.

The conceptual construct of alexithymia refers to difficulties in identifying and making differences between sensations of emotional arousal and difficulty in describing associated feelings. The construct of affective orientation refers to the extent to which people are aware of their emotions. The construct of emotional competence is defined as a capacity and skill in initiating emotional-social transactions and is considered more as a transaction than as a characteristic. The definitions of alexithymia, affective orientation, and emotional competence are related to the definition of emotional intelligence, incorporating aspects of thinking, feeling, awareness, and expression of emotions, as defined by Mayer and Salovey (1997) [13] and Goleman (1998) [14].

Thus, the construct of social intelligence incorporates the individual's ability to think, feel, and behave in order to accomplish social tasks while functioning in a social environment. The construct of psychological sense is more comprehensive and refers to the willingness to learn the meanings and possible causes of internal and external experiences, as well as the ability to look inward, rather than outward, at environmental factors, thus allowing for the conceptualization of the relationship through thoughts, feelings, and actions in a given environment. The constructs of social intelligence and psychological sense are therefore closer to the definition of emotional intelligence as defined by Bar-On (1997) [15], as they incorporate the concepts of thinking, emotion, and action in a given environment (Schumacher *et al.*, 2009) [16].

The Bar-On model provides the theoretical basis for the Emotional Quotient Inventory (EQ-I) instrument, developed to assess multiple aspects of this construct and to deepen its conceptualization. According to this model, socio-emotional intelligence represents a cross-section of interrelated emotional and social competencies, skills, and facilitators that determine how effectively an individual understands and expresses themselves, understands and relates to others, and copes with daily demands. According to this model, being emotionally and socially intelligent means an individual's ability to understand and express themselves effectively, to understand and relate well to others, and to cope successfully with daily demands, challenges, and pressures. This is based primarily on the intrapersonal ability to be aware of one's own feelings, to understand one's strengths and weaknesses, and to express one's feelings and thoughts in a non-destructive manner. At the interpersonal level, being emotionally and socially intelligent encompasses the ability to be aware of the emotions, feelings, and needs of others and to establish and maintain cooperative, constructive, and mutually satisfying relationships. Being emotionally and socially intelligent means managing personal, social, and environmental changes, flexibly coping in strange situation, solving problems, and making good decisions. To do this, people need to control and manage their emotions, to have a positive attitude and to be self-motivated (Bar-On, 2000) [17].

Bar-On (1997) defines emotional intelligence as a set of non-cognitive capacities, competencies, and skills that influence one's ability to cope with environmental demands and pressures (Bar-On, 2000, p. 365) [17].

Bar-On's model of emotional intelligence includes five scales with fifteen subscales. These include: 1) Self-esteem, emotional awareness, assertiveness, independence, and self-actualization; 2) Empathy, social responsibility, and interpersonal relationships; stress tolerance and impulse control; reality testing, flexibility, and problem solving; optimism, and happiness (Bar-On, 2000) [18]. According to McCallum and Piper (2000) [12], Bar-On's proposed model is perhaps the clearest and most comprehensive to date.

### 1.1. Attachment

Attachment theory was originally developed by John Bowlby (1907-1990), who was trying to understand the intense distress experienced by infants who had been separated from their caregivers. In subsequent research, designed to further differentiate forms of attachment, Ainsworth *et al.* (1978) [18] conducted studies using the unfamiliar or strange situation task. This involved observing infants' reactions to separation from their caregiver in a systematic observational setting. Researchers identified three categories of attachments: secure, anxious-resistant, and anxious-avoidant. A more recent view of attachment was proposed by Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991) [19]. These authors examined attachment in young adults and identified four categories: secure attachment, preoccupied attachment, fearful (anxious) attachment, and avoidant attachment. These authors based their attachment model on two dimensions: 1) internalized self-evaluation and 2) internalized evaluation of others. Similar to Ainsworth *et al.* (1978) [18], these authors argued that securely attached individuals (high evaluations of self and others) develop a positive sense of self-worth and expect others to support them. All other attachment styles (preoccupied, fearful, and avoidant) are grouped together and labeled as forms of insecure attachment (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991) [19]. Preoccupied attachment (low self-evaluation, high evaluation of others) is characterized by low self-esteem and a high need for support/approval from others. Anxious attachment (low self-evaluation, low evaluation of others) is marked by a low sense of self-esteem and distrust of others. Avoidant attachment (high self-evaluation, low evaluation of others) is defined by a persistent avoidance of others in favor of the self.

Related investigations (e.g. Mallinckrodt & Vogel, 2007) [20] have focused on insecure attachment and proposed that it be viewed along two dimensions, anxious attachment anxiety and avoidant attachment. Similar to the Horowitz model (1991), the evaluation of self and others has been considered important. Attachment anxiety is thought to arise from a negative working model of the self as unworthy of love. When the attachment system is activated, anxiously attached individuals engage in a hyperactive coping strategy. These strategies include, but are not limited to, rumination, intense observation of attachment figures for signs of

abandonment, an intensification of feelings of distress and behaviors associated with maintaining closeness to this figure, which often involve intense emotional reactions (e.g. Mallinckrodt, Porter, & Kvlighan, 2005) [21]. On the other hand, attachment avoidance is considered to manifest in a negative working model of others as untrustworthy. When the attachment system is activated, avoidantly attached individuals use a deactivation strategy to cope with stressful feelings (e.g., Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007) [22]. This involves distancing oneself from the attachment figure and suppressing any negative emotional reactions that may initially be activated. Individuals may exhibit high levels of anxious attachment, high levels of avoidant attachment, high levels of anxious and avoidant attachment, or low levels of anxious and avoidant attachment. Individuals who have low levels of anxious and avoidant attachment are considered to have healthy and secure attachments to others (e.g., Wei *et al.*, 2007) [20].

## 1.2. EI and Attachment

There are several studies on the cognitive and affective aspects of attachment that guide thinking about individual differences in the perception, facilitation, understanding, and management of emotion (Riggio & Reichard, 2009) [23]. First, there is a notable evidence for the relationship between attachment and emotional perception. Developmental research has shown that securely attached infants have sensitive and responsive caregivers who communicate effectively with them. Recent work on adult attachment documents some attachment-related emotion perception biases. Magai *et al.* found that securely attached individuals were relatively accurate in decoding facial expressions of negative emotions, while avoidant individuals scored lower on emotion decoding accuracy, particularly joy. Anxious/ambivalent men were inaccurate in decoding anger, but anxious/ambivalent women were more accurate, highlighting gender as a moderator of the attachment-EI relationship. More recently, research using both emotion-decoding accuracy tasks has found positive associations between secure attachment and accuracy in decoding emotions from partners' facial expressions (Kafetsios, 2000) [24]. Attachment has involved various interactions between affect and cognition that may support hypotheses related to the facilitation and understanding of emotions. It is noteworthy that these two EI subdomains were highly correlated (Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2000) [25]. In another study, (Kafetsios, 2004) [24] it was found that secure attachment was positively correlated with all subscales (except emotion perception) and with the total EI score. In the same study, results indicated that, among both genders, emotional intelligence was positively correlated with secure attachment style and negatively with avoidant and ambivalent attachment styles. Multivariate regression analysis showed that ambivalent, avoidant, and secure attachment styles could explain 25% and 17% of the variability in emotional intelligence among female and male participants, respectively (Kim, 2012) [3].

## 2. Study on the Development of Emotional Intelligence in Adolescents

### 2.1. Study Design and Procedure

#### *Participants*

Participants were 197 adolescents (98 boys, 99 girls) and were selected using a stratified random sampling method among high school students in the city of Slatina. Participants were aged between 15 and 18 years ( $M = 16.8$ ,  $AS = 1.3$ ). Participants completed the following tests, all instruments adapted for the Romanian population:

#### *Questionnaire for assessing attachment in relationships*

The Relationships scales Questionnaire (Griffin & Bartolomew, 1994) [26]. This scale has 17 items and assesses, on a Likert scale, four different attachment styles (secure, avoidant, anxious, and preoccupied). The reliability coefficients of the scale were calculated using the test-retest method and ranged from 0.66 to 0.82. The validity was tested in relation to the original scale (Keane, 2006) [27] and the correlation coefficients ranged from 0.58 to 0.75.

#### *Emotional intelligence level inventory*

The Emotional Quotient Inventory (Bar-On) measures emotional intelligence in adults and adolescents from the perspective of the Bar-On model. It includes 133 items, organized into 15 scales and evaluated with a Likert scale (five meta-factors: 1) Interpersonal components; 2) Intrapersonal components; 3) Adaptability components, 4) Stress management components; 5) General condition components). The inventory is calibrated on the Romanian population (Livinți, Iliescu and Bichiș, 2010) [28].

### 2.2. Results

Next, we will present the statistical results obtained from data processing: descriptive data, correlational and regression analysis between attachment styles and emotional intelligence (See **Table 1**).

**Table 1.** Descriptive data for IE-Bar-On dimensions and attachment styles.

Size	M (AS) N = 197
The Metafactor Intrapersonal Intelligence	86.1 (10.2)
The Metafactor Interpersonal Intelligence	82.3 (6.2)
The Metafactor Adaptability	80.6 (6.8)
The Metafactor Stress Management	79.3 (6.5)
The General Condition Metafactor	79.8 (6.4)
Secure Attachment	4.2 (1.2)
Avoidant Attachment	4.1 (1.1)
Anxious Attachment	4.3 (0.9)
Preoccupied Attachment	3.8 (0.8)

We note for all EI areas that the average of the participants is in the development area (average score below 90).

**Table 2.** Correlations between attachment style and emotional intelligence.

Attachment	IE	Intrapersonal Intelligence (r)	Intelligence Interpersonal (r)	Adaptability (r)	Management Stress (r)	Condition General (r)
Sure		0.43	0.39	0.26	0.28	0.29
Avoidant		-0.09	-0.26	0.09	0.04	0.08
Anxious		-0.22	-0.19	0.-21	-0.23	-0.23
Preoccupied		-0.16	0.24	-0.25	-0.11	-0.08

From **Table 2** we observe that the secure attachment style is positively and significantly correlated (weak and medium intensity relationship) with the dimensions of emotional intelligence—*intrapersonal intelligence, interpersonal intelligence, adaptability, stress management and general emotional disposition* ( $p < 0.01$ ). The other correlations that are significant, provide an idea of the meaning of the correlations, which could serve as a basis for future research on larger samples: the avoidant attachment style is negatively related to interpersonal emotional intelligence ( $r = -0.26$ ). The anxious attachment style is negatively related to intrapersonal intelligence ( $r = -0.22$ ), interpersonal intelligence ( $r = -0.19$ ), adaptability ( $r = -0.21$ ), stress management ( $r = -0.23$ ) and mood ( $r = -0.23$ ). Preoccupied attachment style is positively related to interpersonal emotional intelligence ( $r = 0.24$ ), but is negatively related to adaptability ( $r = -0.25$ ).

**Table 3.** Regression analysis attachment style—*intrapersonal emotional intelligence*.

Attachment	R	R <sup>2</sup>	F	B	t
<b>anxious</b>				-0.08	-0.1.22
<b>avoidant</b>	0.38	0.15	18.6*	0.06	0.655
<b>Sure</b>				0.36	7.34
<b>preoccupied</b>				-0.09	-1.55

$p < 0.05$ .

The results presented in **Table 3** show that anxious, avoidant, secure, and preoccupied attachment styles have a significant influence on intrapersonal emotional intelligence and explain 15% of the variance in intrapersonal emotional intelligence ( $R = 0.38$ ,  $R^2 = 0.15$ ,  $F(4, 197) = 18.6$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). Overall, this model is significantly predictive of intrapersonal emotional intelligence. Among specific scales of the RSQ, secure attachment style ( $B = 0.36$ ) was the only predictor of intrapersonal emotional intelligence ( $p < 0.05$ ).

The results presented in **Table 4** show that anxious, avoidant, secure, and preoccupied attachment styles have a significant influence on interpersonal emotional intelligence and explain 15% of the variance in interpersonal emotional

**Table 4.** Regression analysis attachment style—interpersonal emotional intelligence.

Attachment	R	R <sup>2</sup>	F	B	t
Anxious				-0.05	-0.82
Avoidant	0.33	0.11	14.4*	0.065	1.60
Sure				0.32	5.44
Preoccupied				-0.12	-2.70

$p < 0.05$ .

intelligence ( $R = 0.33$ ,  $R^2 = 0.11$ ,  $F(4, 197) = 14.4$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). Overall, this model is significantly predictive of interpersonal emotional intelligence. Among specific scales of the RSQ, secure attachment style ( $B = 0.32$ ) was the only predictor of interpersonal emotional intelligence ( $p < 0.05$ ).

### 3. Conclusions and Discussions

According to the research findings, overall attachment style scores significantly predict EI scores. Consistent with previous investigations on the relationships between attachment styles and emotional intelligence (Khledian, 2013) [29], this comparative study found positive correlations between secure attachment styles and EI. The research result also indicates that secure attachment style predicts EI intelligence. According to this result, it can be stated that people with secure attachment styles have more positive characteristics, as self-awareness, self-esteem, self-awareness and self-actualization than those with anxious, avoidant and preoccupied attachment. Individuals with intrapersonal skills have more self-confidence in facing problems, are more independent and self-reliant (Goleman, 2000) [30], are aware of their emotions (Goleman, 2000), and are more self-actualized (Bar-On, 2006) [31]. Many studies report that individuals with a secure attachment style have a higher level of self-esteem than those with anxious, avoidant, and preoccupied attachment styles. In light of these findings, we can conclude that people with secure attachment styles have better intrapersonal skills. Therefore, the importance of developing a secure attachment from childhood to adolescence has been verified again.

Therefore, attachment styles significantly predict interpersonal emotional intelligence. Among the specific RSQ scales, secure and avoidant attachment styles are predictors of intrapersonal emotional intelligence. Interpersonal emotional intelligence was positively correlated with secure attachment, but negatively correlated with avoidant attachment style. People with an avoidant attachment style have positive self-concepts and negative concepts of others. They tend to view themselves as worthy and have negative views of others. They are reluctant to engage in close relationships and tend to deny the need or demand for social relationships. Therefore, these types of people are not expected to have effective and close relationships with others and have interpersonal skills (Emdady, 2013) [32]. Most attachment research reports that childhood attachment has a profound im-

pact on the development of social effectiveness and the quality of peer interactions. According to attachment theory, positive caregiver responses lead to positive internal working models and develop a secure attachment style. This process helps individuals with secure attachment develop better interpersonal relationships, and interpersonal skills are related to social skills. Individual skills are related to social skills, people with higher levels of social skills establish more effective interactions with others and demonstrate empathetic attitudes. Individuals with higher levels of emotional intelligence are more likely to have positive relationships with others, such as perceived support, and are less likely to report negative interactions with close friends. The positive outlook in interpersonal relationships helps individuals with a secure attachment style demonstrate positive social skills. Adolescents with a secure attachment style have been found to have higher levels of social skills. Attachment styles predict the adaptability of emotional intelligence as a whole. Among the specific RSQ scales, secure and preoccupied attachment styles are predictors of adaptability. Adaptability is positively correlated with secure attachment style, but shows a negative correlation with preoccupied attachment style. Adaptability is related to reality testing, flexibility, and problem solving. Individuals with higher levels of adaptability can solve academic, family, and relationship problems and find effective solutions. Therefore, secure attachment affects these abilities, the result of research suggests that adolescents with secure attachment styles are more adaptive (Zimmermann, 2016) [33] and supports the present findings. While individuals with a secure attachment style have to understand and deal with their problems, it is difficult for individuals with preoccupied and anxious attachment styles. Zimmerman stated that individuals with insecure attachment styles have more difficulty in making efforts to solve problems. This finding is similar to the conclusions of the present research. Overall, attachment styles significantly predict stress management. Among the specific RSQ scores, anxious and secure attachment styles were found to be predictors of stress management. People with stress management skills can cope with stress without despair, introversion, and loss of control. These types of people generally feel calm, rarely lose their temper, and easily cope with pressure (Stein & Book, 2003) [34]. Overall, attachment styles significantly predict general mood. Among the specific RSQ scores, secure attachment styles were found to be the only predictor of general emotional intelligence. The general mood dimension encompasses optimism and happiness. Optimistic people can think positively even in negative situations (Stein & Book, 2003) [34].

### Research limitations

Future research should attempt to generate results obtained by investigating a larger sample of participants. This study has a small sample size.

### Implications

The present study has a number of practical implications for parents and counse-

lors. First, the development of programs to develop adolescents' emotional intelligence. If adolescents feel safe, emotionally stable, satisfied, and emotionally connected to school, they are actively engaged in their own education. More importantly, developing adolescents' emotional intelligence competencies, such as the interpersonal dimension, is important for increasing young people's ability to cope with social change.

## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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