

## Childhood trauma, relationship satisfaction and attachment styles in young adults

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### Abstract

This study examines the influence of childhood trauma on adult attachment styles and relationship satisfaction among young adults in Karnataka, India. Using a sample of 200 participants, the research explores how adverse early-life experiences shape interpersonal relationships in adulthood, specifically focusing on attachment patterns and relationship quality. The data were analyzed using Spearman's correlation and the Mann-Whitney U test. Results revealed significant correlations: childhood trauma positively correlated with insecure attachment styles ( $\rho = 0.415$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and negatively with relationship satisfaction ( $\rho = -0.407$ ,  $p < .001$ ), indicating that higher trauma levels are associated with attachment insecurities and lower relationship satisfaction. A negative correlation was also found between insecure attachment and relationship satisfaction ( $\rho = -0.221$ ,  $p = .002$ ), suggesting attachment insecurities adversely affect relationship quality. The Mann-Whitney U test showed no significant group differences, highlighting the consistency of these associations across demographic subgroups. These findings underscore the long-term impact of childhood trauma on attachment and relationship satisfaction, emphasizing the need for trauma-informed therapeutic interventions. Recommendations include incorporating trauma-focused approaches in therapy.

**Keywords:** Childhood Trauma; Attachment Styles; Relationship Satisfaction and Trauma Intervention; Therapy

### 1. Introduction

The impact of childhood trauma on interpersonal relationships has been a critical area of study within developmental psychology and mental health research. Childhood trauma, which encompasses adverse experiences such as abuse, neglect, and family instability, is recognized for its lasting effects on emotional regulation, self-esteem, and relational functioning. Individuals who have experienced trauma during their formative years often struggle with trust and security, which can significantly shape their attachment styles—patterns of relating to others formed early in life. These attachment styles are particularly relevant in young adulthood, a period when individuals commonly seek close, committed relationships. Attachment theory, originally proposed by John Bowlby, provides a framework for understanding how early relational experiences influence later behavior, particularly in romantic and close relationships. According to attachment theory, early adverse experiences can disrupt the formation of a secure attachment style, resulting in patterns such as anxious or avoidant attachment, which may manifest as dependency, fears of abandonment, or emotional distance.

The rationale for studying the interplay of childhood trauma, attachment styles, and relationship satisfaction in young adults stems from the need to better understand the mechanisms through which early trauma influences adult relational outcomes. Research suggests that young adults with insecure attachment styles tend to report lower relationship satisfaction and greater challenges with intimacy, trust, and conflict resolution. By exploring these connections, this study aims to shed light on how trauma-informed interventions can improve relationship satisfaction and attachment

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security in young adults. Understanding these dynamics not only offers insights for mental health professionals but also highlights the importance of addressing unresolved trauma to foster healthier relationships and overall well-being. This research has practical implications for therapeutic approaches, such as attachment-based therapy and trauma-informed care, which could support individuals in building more satisfying and secure relationships.

### 1.1. Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework for this study primarily draws on Attachment Theory and Trauma Theory to explain the impact of childhood trauma on relationship satisfaction and attachment styles in young adults. Attachment Theory, developed by John Bowlby and expanded by Mary Ainsworth, posits that early interactions with primary caregivers shape an individual's attachment style—secure, anxious, or avoidant—which in turn influences relational patterns in adulthood. Secure attachment is often associated with high levels of trust, comfort with intimacy, and effective emotional regulation, all of which contribute positively to relationship satisfaction. In contrast, insecure attachment styles, often developed in response to inconsistent or negative caregiving, can manifest as anxious attachment (characterized by dependency and fear of abandonment) or avoidant attachment (marked by discomfort with closeness and reliance on self-sufficiency), both of which may hinder relational fulfillment in adulthood.

Trauma Theory further supports this framework by providing insights into how adverse childhood experiences, such as abuse or neglect, disrupt emotional development and affect one's ability to form healthy relationships. Trauma Theory suggests that early exposure to trauma impacts the brain's stress response system, making it difficult for individuals to manage emotions, trust others, and feel safe in relationships. When combined with Attachment Theory, this perspective helps explain why childhood trauma often leads to insecure attachment styles and lower relationship satisfaction in adulthood. This study thus relies on these theories to investigate how early trauma impacts attachment and relational outcomes, proposing that unresolved trauma and insecure attachment styles are critical factors influencing young adults' relationship satisfaction.

### 1.2. Introductions to variables

#### 1.2.1. Childhood Trauma

Childhood trauma refers to emotionally distressing experiences that leave lasting psychological and physiological effects [1]. Early adversities impact brain development, shaping cognition, emotional regulation, and social skills [2]. Studies show that over two-thirds of children experience at least one traumatic event by age 16 [3], which can lead to depression, anxiety, and risk-taking behaviors in adulthood [4, 5]. Early interventions focused on cognitive and socioemotional development can mitigate these effects [6].

#### 1.2.2. Attachment Styles

Attachment theory explains how early caregiver relationships shape adult relational patterns [7, 8]. Secure attachment fosters trust and emotional intimacy, whereas insecure attachment (anxious, avoidant, or disorganized) results in relational difficulties [9]. Individuals with childhood trauma often develop insecure attachments, affecting their ability to form stable and fulfilling relationships [10].

#### 1.2.3. Relationship Satisfaction

Relationship satisfaction refers to an individual's perception of happiness and fulfillment in a romantic relationship [11]. Secure attachment is associated with higher relationship satisfaction due to better communication and conflict resolution [12]. In contrast, insecurely attached individuals often struggle with dependency, emotional withdrawal, and trust issues, reducing relational stability [10].

### 1.3. Aims and objectives of the study

#### *Aim of the Study*

This study investigates the relationship between childhood trauma, attachment styles, and relationship satisfaction among young adults. It explores how early adverse experiences (e.g., abuse, neglect, family instability) influence attachment patterns (secure, anxious, avoidant) and their impact on relationship satisfaction. The findings aim to inform trauma-informed interventions that enhance emotional well-being and relationship quality.

#### *Objectives*

- To examine differences in childhood trauma, attachment styles, and relationship satisfaction.

- To explore the relationship between childhood trauma, attachment styles, and relationship satisfaction.

#### **1.4. Need and significance of the study**

This study explores how childhood trauma impacts attachment styles and relationship satisfaction in young adults. Early adverse experiences—such as abuse, neglect, and household dysfunction—can lead to mental health concerns like anxiety, depression, and PTSD, affecting interpersonal relationships.

While research has examined childhood trauma and psychological functioning, fewer studies focus on its direct influence on adult relationship quality. Secure attachment is linked to greater relationship satisfaction, whereas insecure attachment—often stemming from trauma—leads to relational difficulties.

By studying young adults in Karnataka, this research highlights the cultural dimensions of trauma-related attachment issues. The findings will contribute to trauma-informed interventions, enhancing therapy approaches that address attachment insecurities and promote healthier relationships.

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## **2. Materials and methods**

### **2.1. Research design**

The study uses a correlational design to examine the relationships between childhood trauma, attachment styles, and relationship satisfaction using validated questionnaires. Pearson's correlation and multiple regression analyses will assess how trauma influences relationship satisfaction, with attachment styles as a potential mediator.

### **2.2. Participants**

The study uses a sample of 200 young adults including male and female in India, including both undergraduate and postgraduate psychology students.

### **2.3. Techniques used**

The study uses a convenience sampling technique, selecting undergraduate and postgraduate psychology students from colleges.

### **2.4. Inclusion criteria**

- Participant should be Indian citizen
- Participants must be between age of 18-30

### **2.5. Exclusion criteria**

- People with mental disorders
- People with severe substance abuse

### **2.6. Tools**

#### *2.6.1. Childhood trauma questionnaire*

The Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (CTQ) is a 28-item self-report tool developed by Bernstein and Fink in 1998 to assess various forms of childhood trauma. It evaluates five domains: sexual abuse, physical abuse, emotional abuse, and physical neglect. The CTQ shows high reliability, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients typically between 0.85 and 0.95, indicating strong internal consistency across subscales. Its validity is supported by good correlations with clinical diagnoses and other childhood trauma measures, making it effective for assessing the severity and breadth of traumatic childhood experiences.

#### *2.6.2. Adult attachment scale*

The Revised Adult Attachment Scale (RAAS), developed by Collins and Read in 1990, assesses individual differences in adult attachment styles. Consisting of eighteen items, it measures avoidant, anxious, and secure attachment across three dimensions. With Cronbach's alpha values typically ranging from 0.78 to 0.89, the RAAS demonstrates high reliability. Its predictive power for relationship outcomes and strong correlations with other attachment measures support its

validity. This scale provides valuable insights into how adult attachment patterns influence relationship satisfaction and interpersonal dynamics, offering a comprehensive understanding of responses to intimate relationships.

### 2.6.3. Relationship assessment scale

The Relationship Assessment Scale (RAS), developed by Hendrick in 1988, is a seven-item tool designed to measure overall relationship satisfaction. It assesses various aspects of relationship quality, including emotional support, communication, and intimacy. Known for its strong construct validity and internal consistency, the RAS typically achieves Cronbach's alpha values between 0.80 and 0.90. This scale is highly effective for gauging satisfaction levels in romantic relationships, as it is responsive to changes in relationship quality and aligns well with other relationship satisfaction measures.

## 2.7. Statistical analysis

### 2.7.1. Spearman's Rank-Order Correlation

Spearman's Rank-Order Correlation is a non-parametric test used to measure the correlation between childhood trauma and attachment styles, assessing both the strength and direction of the relationship between two continuous or ordinal variables. Unlike Pearson's correlation, which assumes a specific data distribution, Spearman's correlation does not require a normal distribution and is ideal for analyzing monotonic relationships. This method is particularly useful for data with outliers or non-normal distributions, making it suitable for this study, as trauma-related variables and attachment styles may not follow a normal distribution pattern.

### 2.7.2. The Mann-Whitney U Test

The Mann Whitney u test was utilized to compare differences between two independent groups on continuous or ordinal variables without relying on parametric assumptions. In this research, the Mann-Whitney U test was applied to examine the differences in relationship satisfaction and attachment styles between individuals with and without a history of childhood trauma. Given the lack of normal distribution in the data related to attachment styles and relationship satisfaction, the Mann-Whitney U test serves as an alternative to independent t-tests, enabling group comparisons without assuming normality. This method allows for a statistical analysis of the differences in the distributions of relationship satisfaction and attachment styles between the two groups, offering valuable insights into the impact of childhood trauma on these variables.

## 3. Result

This section presents key findings, analyzes trends, and compares them with previous studies. Significant correlations are linked to research objectives, with limitations acknowledged for transparency. The discussion interprets results in context, highlighting implications and expanding the knowledge base. Findings are transformed into meaningful insights, supporting coherent conclusions.

**Table 1** Mann-Whitney U Test for Childhood Trauma, Relationship Satisfaction, and Adult Attachment by Group

Variable	Mann-Whitney U	p-value
Childhood Trauma	4613	0.622
Relationship Satisfaction	4711	0.811
Adult Attachment	4276	0.176

Note: The Mann-Whitney U test was conducted to compare group differences. No significant differences were observed ( $p > 0.05$ ).

Table 1 presented the results of the Mann-Whitney U test, which indicated no significant group differences in childhood trauma, attachment styles, or relationship satisfaction. These findings suggest that the impact of trauma on attachment and relationship satisfaction remains consistent across demographic subgroups, highlighting the universal nature of these associations.

**Table 2** Spearman's Correlation Matrix for Childhood Trauma, Relationship Satisfaction, and Adult Attachment

Variable	Childhood Trauma	Relationship Satisfaction	Adult Attachment
Childhood Trauma	—	-0.407**	0.415**
Relationship Satisfaction	-0.407**	—	-0.221**
Adult Attachment	0.415**	-0.221**	—

Note: Spearman's rho ( $\rho$ ) values are reported. p-values:  $p < 0.001$  (Childhood Trauma & Relationship Satisfaction, Childhood Trauma & Adult Attachment),  $p = 0.002$  (Relationship Satisfaction & Adult Attachment).

Table 2 provided an overview of the relationships between childhood trauma, attachment styles, and relationship satisfaction using Spearman's correlation analysis. The results showed a significant positive correlation between childhood trauma and insecure attachment, indicating that individuals with higher trauma levels are more likely to develop attachment insecurities. Additionally, a negative correlation between childhood trauma and relationship satisfaction suggests that greater trauma leads to lower relationship satisfaction. A similar negative correlation was found between insecure attachment and relationship satisfaction, reinforcing that attachment insecurity negatively affects relational well-being.

#### 4. Discussion

The study examined the relationship between childhood trauma, attachment styles, and relationship satisfaction in young adults using a sample of 200 participants. Spearman's correlation analysis revealed significant associations among these variables. Childhood trauma showed a positive correlation with insecure attachment, indicating that individuals with higher trauma levels are more likely to develop insecure attachment styles. Additionally, childhood trauma was negatively correlated with relationship satisfaction, suggesting that greater trauma leads to lower satisfaction in adult relationships. A negative correlation was also found between insecure attachment and relationship satisfaction, reinforcing the idea that attachment insecurity negatively impacts relationship quality.

To assess group differences, the Mann-Whitney U test was conducted, revealing no significant differences in childhood trauma, relationship satisfaction, or attachment styles across demographic groups. This suggests that these factors remain stable regardless of participant characteristics, supporting the consistency of the correlation findings.

These results highlight the lasting effects of childhood trauma on adult relationships. The strong link between trauma and insecure attachment aligns with existing literature, emphasizing how early adverse experiences shape interpersonal relationships. Lower relationship satisfaction among individuals with insecure attachment further underscores the challenges in maintaining fulfilling connections.

The findings suggest that trauma-informed interventions should focus on enhancing emotional regulation and fostering secure attachment patterns. Programs designed to improve relational dynamics and emotional well-being could significantly benefit individuals with a history of childhood trauma, ultimately promoting healthier adult relationships.

#### 5. Summary and conclusion

##### 5.1. Summary

This study investigates the influence of childhood trauma on adult attachment styles and relationship satisfaction among young adults in Karnataka, India. Using a sample of 200 participants, the Mann-Whitney U test and Spearman's correlation were applied to examine differences and relationships among childhood trauma, attachment, and relationship satisfaction.

The Mann-Whitney U test showed no significant group differences for childhood trauma ( $U = 4613$ ,  $p = .622$ ), relationship satisfaction ( $U = 4711$ ,  $p = .811$ ), or adult attachment ( $U = 4276$ ,  $p = .176$ ). This finding suggests that these variables are stable across the demographic groups in the sample, highlighting the consistent impact of early-life experiences across different backgrounds.

Spearman's correlation revealed significant associations: childhood trauma was positively correlated with insecure attachment styles ( $\rho = 0.415$ ,  $p < .001$ ), indicating that higher trauma levels are linked to more insecure attachments

in adulthood. Conversely, childhood trauma was negatively correlated with relationship satisfaction ( $\rho = -0.407$ ,  $p < .001$ ), suggesting that greater trauma experiences are associated with lower relationship satisfaction. Additionally, a negative correlation between insecure attachment and relationship satisfaction ( $\rho = -0.221$ ,  $p = .002$ ) highlights that attachment insecurities may hinder the quality of adult relationships.

These results reinforce previous findings that adverse early-life experiences have enduring impacts on adult relational dynamics. The study underscores the importance of trauma-informed interventions focusing on attachment security and emotion regulation to enhance relationship satisfaction for individuals with histories of childhood trauma. Such interventions, by addressing attachment-related issues, could foster healthier relationship patterns and overall mental well-being in affected individuals.

## 5.2. Implications of research

This research holds implications for both research and practical interventions. Awareness programs can be initiated to educate individuals on trauma-informed care and attachment theory may help individuals develop healthier attachment styles and improve relationship satisfaction. And offering coping strategies for those who have experienced childhood trauma. In addition to this psychoeducational groups which focusing parents can contribute to early recognition of signs of trauma and promotion of good and healthy attachment styles among children.

## 5.3. Limitations of the study

This research offers useful insights, but we need to keep in mind its drawbacks. Since the study relies on people reporting their own experiences, it might not be accurate – some participants could downplay or exaggerate what they've been through. Also, the way they picked their sample (convenience sampling) makes it hard to apply these findings to everyone.

## 5.4. Directions for future research

The study also suggests measures for future research, larger scale studies with various samples will provide more understanding of how specific types of traumata relate to different attachment styles. In the future, researchers should think about doing long-term studies. This would help them better understand how childhood trauma attachment styles, and relationship satisfaction are connected over time.

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## 6. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study's results show that childhood trauma has a great impact on how adults form attachments and how happy they are in relationships. The links we found suggest that talking about childhood experiences in therapy can help improve how adults interact with others. When mental health experts understand these connections, they can do a better job of helping people build healthier relationships.

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## Compliance with ethical standards

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### *Disclosure of conflict of interest*

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

### *Statement of ethical approval*

This study follows rigorous ethical standards to safeguard participants' rights, privacy, and well-being. Before participation, individuals will provide informed consent, ensuring they have a clear understanding of the study's objectives, procedures, and voluntary nature. Strict confidentiality measures will be maintained, with all personal data securely stored and anonymized to prevent identification. Participants will retain the right to withdraw at any stage without any negative consequences, ensuring their autonomy and comfort throughout the research process.

### *Statement of informed consent*

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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