

## THE FATHER OR THE MOTHER: WHO IS ASSOCIATED WITH ATTACHMENT TO A PARTNER? THE MODERATING EFFECT OF ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIP SATISFACTION ON INSECURE ATTACHMENT STYLES

Anna Papińska<sup>1</sup> and Dominika van de Rijdt<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of Psychology, SWPS University, Warsaw, Poland

<sup>2</sup> DvR Praktijk voor Psychologie, Grasmat 42, 5658HK Eindhoven, Netherlands

The article examines the association of attachment styles from childhood to adulthood in a retrospective manner and their relationship with romantic relationships, focusing on gender differences and relationship satisfaction. The study involved 309 adults (170 women, 139 men) aged 18 to 74 in romantic relationships. The results suggest that individuals who retrospectively report certain attachment patterns with parents in childhood tend to report similar patterns in adult romantic relationships. Significant differences were found in attachment to mother and father, especially by gender. In women, anxious attachment in adulthood was associated with anxious attachment to both parents, while avoidant patterns showed weaker associations. In men, avoidant attachment to the mother was not associated with anxious attachment in adulthood. These findings highlight the differences in attachment dynamics to the mother and the father and their association with romantic relationships. Relationship satisfaction may moderate the negative associations of insecure attachment styles with romantic involvement. This underscores the need for considering attachment histories in therapeutic interventions.

**Keywords:** relationship satisfaction; relationship-specific attachment; gender differences

---

ANNA PAPIŃSKA, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5503-7391>; DOMINIKA VAN DE RIJDT. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Anna Papińska, Uniwersytet SWPS, Chodakowska 19/31, 03-815 Warszawa, Poland; e-mail: [apapinska@swps.edu.pl](mailto:apapinska@swps.edu.pl). The data and materials are available upon request. Special thanks to Dr. Dariusz Kuncewicz for his collaboration and assistance with data analysis.

Handling editor: MARIA KAŻMIERCZAK, University of Gdańsk. Received 23 July 2024. Received in revised form 10 April 2025. Accepted 8 May 2025. Published online 18 June 2025.

Articles are licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0)

Bowlby's attachment theory (1969) posits that humans have an inherent biological need for an emotional bond with a caregiver. Subsequent research has confirmed that this early-life relationship is pivotal in shaping human development (Cassidy & Shaver, 1999; Shaver & Mikulincer, 2007). It significantly influences socio-emotional functioning and the ability to form relationships (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). In attachment research, Fraley (2002) and Fraley et al. (2011) have distinguished two perspectives on the mechanisms underlying attachment stability and change. The first, the prototype perspective, assumes that attachment representations form a prototype that shapes attachment patterns throughout life. Bowlby (1969) hypothesized that this is because the core element of the attachment system is the Internal Working Models (IWMs), which consist of mental representations regarding oneself and others. Research (Fraley, 2007; Pierce & Lydon, 2001; Rosenthal & Kobak, 2010) has demonstrated that IWMs related to different individuals are varied. These IWMs are organized hierarchically, containing stable elements (global attachment style) and current representations specific to each relationship.

Traditionally, the literature identifies the mother as the primary caregiver. However, recent cultural shifts have altered the roles of men and women within the family. Studies indicate that couples now equally desire to care for their children (Centrum Badania Opinii Społecznej, 2013), and the role of fathers in child-rearing is becoming increasingly prevalent (Bakermans-Kranenburg et al., 2019). Contrary to stereotypical portrayals, men not only seek relationships but also wish to fulfil the role of fathers (Mrozowicz-Wrońska et al., 2023). This shift has led to increased research focus on attachment to fathers in recent years (e.g., Cowan et al., 2019; Di Folco et al., 2017; Gambin et al., 2021). Co-parenting positively impacts partners' well-being and reduces stress levels (Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2016), facilitating optimal parenting (Bonds et al., 2002). The involvement of both parents in a child's life benefits both the child and the romantic relationship. However, the extent to which attachment is shaped through interaction with the father versus the mother remains unclear.

Research findings regarding differences in attachment to fathers and mothers are inconclusive. Some studies indicate consistency in attachment to both parents, suggesting that children who feel secure in their relationship with their mother rarely exhibit insecurity in their relationship with their father. Conversely, insecure attachment is often felt towards both parents (Fox et al., 1991; Goossens & van IJzendoorn, 1990; Steele et al., 1996). Other studies, however, emphasize the particular importance of maternal sensitivity, which is a predictor of a child's sense of security in situations of pain or fear in young

children (Belsky, 1999; Solomon & George, 1999). The mother's role focuses on understanding the child's needs, emotional atonement, and providing a sense of security (Czub, 2014). In contrast, the father's role typically involves encouraging the child to explore and accompanying them during play (Grossmann et al., 2002). Research highlights the significance of the early father-child relationship in child development, showing that paternal sensitivity and involvement are associated with the proper development of social, cognitive, and emotional competencies (Grossmann et al., 2005).

Few studies address the specificity of attachment styles divided by gender. Disrupted attachment between fathers and daughters can lead to various psychological disorders (Saunokonoko et al., 2022). The influence of parental attachment is evident throughout life. Women whose fathers did not participate in caregiving tend to mature faster and show reduced interest in forming lasting relationships (Webster et al., 2014). The absence of a father during childhood in men is associated with increased aggression and decreased parental effort in adulthood (Draper & Harpending, 1982). Studies (Fermani et al., 2019) confirm that differences in attachment to fathers and mothers differentially impact romantic relationships.

The hierarchical specificity of attachment styles forms the basis for functioning in adult relationships. It is generally accepted that individuals who develop a secure attachment pattern in early childhood continue this pattern in romantic relationships. Similarly, insecure attachment styles also persist (Bretherton & Munholland, 2008; Fraley & Roisman, 2019; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). While some stability in attachment styles over time is suggested, IWMs undergo dynamic interaction influenced by the activation of specific structures. This allows attachment to be viewed both as a stable personality trait and as a state dependent on the content activated in a particular relationship (Marszał, 2014). Research shows that individuals have both a general working model of attachment guiding their reactions in various relationships and specific working models of attachment influencing interactions in specific relationships (Ross & Spinner, 2001).

Although there are studies on the specificity of attachment to significant figures (e.g., Cowan, 2019; Doyle & Markiewicz, 2009; Fraley et al., 2015), which have confirmed their link to various emotional difficulties (e.g., de Minzi, 2010; Saunokonoko et al., 2022), there is still a lack of information on their association with romantic relationships. This raises the question of whether specific attachment styles to fathers and mothers can shape attachment to a partner. Current research does not allow for hypotheses on this topic.

In this study, it was hypothesized that there would be a negative correlation between insecure specific attachment styles and relationship satisfaction. Numerous studies have shown the negative impact of insecure attachment styles on romantic relationship satisfaction (e.g., Candel & Turliuc, 2019; Li & Chan, 2012; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2015). Avoidant attachment styles in men are significantly associated with a preference for short-term relationships, while insecure attachment styles in women influence the tendency to seek other women's partners to fulfill sexual needs (Schmitt & Jonason, 2015). However, approximately 30% of individuals change their attachment pattern due to experiences (Senator, 2010). Studies on couples have shown that 22% of participants changed their attachment style from insecure (anxious or avoidant) to secure (Crowell et al., 2002). Modification of attachment styles depends directly on the specific relationship, and the content of IWMs can change based on the nature of the relationship (Manthos, 2016). This suggests that relationship satisfaction can moderate attachment. Studies have shown that reducing anxiety and avoidance in specific attachment in couples is significantly associated with increased relationship satisfaction (Burgess Moser et al., 2015). As relationships progress, the level of avoidance in attachment to the partner decreases (Umemura et al., 2018). It is assumed that in the present study, relationship satisfaction will also moderate the negative association between insecure attachment styles and adult attachment. In attachment research, gender differences have been found in how attachment styles are experienced and their association with romantic relationships. According to Mikulincer and Shaver (2007), women may be more emotionally affected by insecure attachment styles, particularly in relation to their mothers, which could influence their romantic relationships. In contrast, men may experience attachment-related issues differently, with attachment to fathers playing a crucial role in shaping their relationship dynamics (Bureau et al., 2017). These gender differences suggest that gender may moderate the association between attachment styles and romantic attachment, making it an important factor in understanding the attachment process.

Although attachment patterns may change under the influence of new experiences, the basic prototype remains stable. This study adopted the prototype perspective, assuming that attachment representations form a prototype that continues to influence attachment patterns throughout life. The research tools used, based on retrospective assessment, make it possible to capture both stable elements of attachment and the influence of life experiences, highlighting the interaction between the stability and variability of attachment over the lifespan.

The cross-sectional study examined whether the retrospective assessment of attachment to parents is associated with attachment to a partner (H1). It was also examined whether and how insecure attachment styles, developed in relationships with the father and mother (measured retrospectively), are associated with attachment to a romantic partner (H2). The hypothesis presented in the literature regarding the negative correlation between retrospectively assessed insecure attachment styles from childhood and romantic relationship satisfaction (H3) was tested. Finally, the hypothesis that romantic relationship satisfaction can moderate the negative association of insecure attachment styles developed in childhood with partner attachment (H4) was examined. Additionally, it was explored whether gender moderates the relationship between insecure attachment styles developed in relationships with parents and partner attachment (H5), with different mechanisms affecting this relationship depending on gender.

## METHOD

### Participants and Procedure

The sample consisted of 309 adults ranging in age from 18 to 74 years ( $M = 37.51$ ,  $SD = 12.39$ ). The gender distribution was 55% female ( $N = 170$ ) and 45% male ( $N = 139$ ). All participants were in romantic relationships, 64.6% of them in marital unions and 35.4% cohabiting. The duration of these relationships varied from 1 month to 50 years ( $M = 11$ ,  $SD = 10.27$ ). The research was conducted in Poland from June 2019 to June 2020. It was approved by the Ethics and Research Committee of the Faculty of Psychology at the SWPS University, Warsaw (approval no. 24/2019). Respondents were recruited in a large university in Central Europe through a research company remunerated for their participation. The study was conducted via an internet platform. The respondents completed the following questionnaires: a socio-demographic data collection form, the Experiences in Close Relationship (PL) scale for parents, the ECR-P for a romantic partner, and the Relationship Assessment Scale RAS (PL).

### Measures

We used the Relationship Assessment Scale (RAS; Hendrick, 1988), adapted for Polish by Natora (2011). This measure contains seven questions

on key global aspects of a relationship. Respondents respond on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *never* to 5 = *very often/very much*). A higher overall score represents higher relationship satisfaction. The internal consistency (Cronbach's  $\alpha$ ) of the Polish version of the RAS ranged from .89 to .92 (Kuncewicz & Jaśkowska, 2018; Natora, 2011; Papińska & Kuncewicz, 2021), while in this study it was .91.

The Experiences in Close Relationships questionnaire (ECR; Brennan et al., 1998), adapted for Polish by Stawska (2011), assesses attachment in romantic relationships along two dimensions: anxiety and avoidance. This instrument consists of 36 statements related to various experiences in a romantic partnership. Respondents rate each statement on a 7-point scale, ranging from 1 (*I strongly disagree*) to 7 (*I strongly agree*). The internal consistency (Cronbach's  $\alpha$ ) for the Polish version of the ECR ranged from .85 to .91 for avoidance and from .86 to .90 for anxiety (Stawska, 2010). In this study it reached .91 for avoidance and .90 for anxiety.

The ECR for parents (ECR; Brennan et al., 1998), adapted for Polish by Marchwicki (2004), assesses attachment in relationships on two dimensions: anxiety and avoidance. This tool comprises 20 statements related to experiences in a relationship with the mother and another 20 related to the father. Respondents rate each statement on a 7-point scale, ranging from 1 (*I strongly disagree*) to 7 (*I strongly agree*). Scores are calculated by summing the responses for all items on the scale. Higher scores indicate a greater intensity of the attachment style. The internal consistency (Cronbach's  $\alpha$ ) of the Polish version of the scale was .89 for avoidance and .68 for anxiety in the relationship with the mother, and .92 for avoidance and .82 for anxiety in the relationship with the father (Marchwicki, 2004). In this study it was .92 for avoidance and .87 for anxiety in the relationship with the mother, and .91 for avoidance and .91 for anxiety in the relationship with the father.

### Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics 27.0. Descriptive statistics and regression analyses were performed. Significance was assessed at the level of .05. To address the non-normal distribution of some variables and ensure the robustness of the results, bootstrapping methods were employed.

## RESULTS

### Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 depicts descriptive statistics for analysed variables, i.e. mean values, standard deviations, minimum and maximum values, and the values of Kolmogorov–Smirnov test for normality of variables distributions.

**Table 1**  
*Descriptive Statistics for Interval Variables*

Tool	Variables	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Min.	Max.	<i>K-S</i>	<i>p</i>
ECR	Parents—anxious	3.71	1.22	1.00	6.70	.04	.200
	Parents—avoidant	3.78	1.22	1.00	6.75	.05	.200
	Mother—anxious	3.85	1.25	1.00	6.90	.04	.200
	Mother—avoidant	3.10	1.26	.91	6.27	.07	.003
	Father—anxious	3.53	1.35	1.00	6.82	.05	.066
	Father—avoidant	4.15	1.46	1.00	7.00	.06	.020
ECR-P	Partner—anxious	4.04	1.29	1.00	6.83	.05	.045
	Partner—avoidant	2.38	1.06	.94	6.39	.09	.001
RAS	Satisfaction with relationship	4.04	.74	1.14	5.00	.15	.001

Statistically significant differences between the normal distribution and the distributions of avoidance in the relationship with the mother and the father, the variables anxious and avoidance in the relationship with a partner and the distribution of satisfaction with relationship were detected. Therefore, further analyses were performed with the use of the bootstrap method.

### Attachment to Parents and Attachment to Partner

Table 2 presents 95% confidence intervals for one-tailed Pearson correlation coefficients calculated with the use of the bootstrap method between the indicators of the attachment to parents and the attachment to a partner. Statistically significant correlations are marked in bold.

**Table 2***Correlation Coefficients Between Attachment to Parents and Attachment to Partner*

Variables	2.	3.	4.
1. Parents—anxious	-.07, .18	<b>.45, .64</b>	<b>.21, .43</b>
2. Parents—avoidant	—	<b>-.02, .23</b>	<b>.20, .41</b>
3. Partner—anxious		—	<b>.22, .46</b>
4. Partner—avoidant			—

*Note.* The values are 95% confidence intervals calculated using the bootstrap method.

Statistically significant correlations are marked in bold.

The level of anxiety inherent in the relationship with a partner correlated positively with avoidance. Also, anxious and avoidant attachment in the relationship with the parents correlated positively with avoidant attachment in the relationship with a partner. Anxious attachment in the relationship with parents correlated positively with anxious attachment to a partner. Moreover, avoidant attachment in the relationship with the parents correlated positively with anxious attachment to a partner.

Table 3 presents 95% confidence intervals for Pearson correlation coefficients between the indicators of attachment to a partner and indicators of attachment to the mother and the father in the group of women and in the group of men. Confidence intervals were calculated with the use of the bootstrap method. Statistically significant correlations are marked in bold.

**Table 3***Correlation Coefficients Between Attachment to Partner and Attachment to Mother and Father in Both Female and Male Groups*

Women	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.
1. Father—anxious	-.16, .15	<b>.64, .81</b>	-.24, .08	<b>.29, .57</b>	<b>.08, .38</b>
2. Father—avoidant	—	<b>.06, .36</b>	<b>.33, .59</b>	-.01, .32	<b>.16, .44</b>
3. Mother—anxious		—	-.11, .22	<b>.29, .57</b>	<b>.16, .46</b>
4. Mother—avoidant			—	-.20, .16	<b>.11, .44</b>
5. Partner—anxious				—	<b>.16, .51</b>
6. Partner—avoidant					—
Men	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.
1. Father—anxious	-.10, .29	<b>.73, .89</b>	-.21, .14	<b>.46, .68</b>	<b>.19, .52</b>
2. Father—avoidant	—	<b>.04, .35</b>	<b>.35, .67</b>	<b>.02, .31</b>	-.04, .30
3. Mother—anxious		—	-.20, .15	<b>.53, .75</b>	<b>.20, .51</b>
4. Mother—avoidant			—	-.13, .26	<b>.14, .46</b>
5. Partner—anxious				—	<b>.21, .51</b>
6. Partner—avoidant					—

*Note.* 95% confidence intervals for Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated using the bootstrap method. Statistically significant correlations are marked in bold.



In the group of women, anxious attachment to the father was positively correlated with anxious attachment to the mother. Avoidant attachment to the father correlated positively with both anxious and avoidant attachment to the mother. Furthermore, anxious attachment to the partner was positively associated with anxious attachment to both parents. Avoidant attachment to the partner was also positively correlated with both anxious and avoidant attachment to the father and the mother.

In the group of men, anxious attachment to the father was positively correlated with anxious attachment to the mother. Avoidant attachment to the father showed positive correlations with both anxious and avoidant attachment to the mother. Additionally, anxious attachment to the partner was positively related to both anxious and avoidant attachment to the father, as well as anxious attachment to the mother. Avoidant attachment to the partner was positively correlated with anxious and avoidant attachment to the mother.

Next, the hypothesis regarding a positive association between insecure attachment in the relationship with the mother and the father and attachment in adulthood was verified.

Table 4 presents the mean values of the attachment indicators in relationships with parents and a partner, for both women and men. The statistical significance of the differences were verified with the Student's *t*-test for independent samples. The statistical significance was calculated on the basis of the bootstrap method.

**Table 4**

*Mean Values of Indicators of Attachment in Relationships With Parents and With Partner Acquired in Both Female and Male Groups*

Variables	Women ( <i>n</i> = 170)		Men ( <i>n</i> = 139)		<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			
Parents—anxious	3.75	1.21	3.66	1.24	.60	302	.551
Parents—avoidant	3.87	1.33	3.87	1.07	1.45	301.89	.149
Partner—anxious	4.13	1.33	3.93	1.24	1.33	302	.184
Partner—avoidant	2.39	1.08	2.36	1.04	.21	302	.832
Father—anxious	3.51	1.34	3.54	1.37	-.16	302	.873
Father—avoidant	4.29	1.56	3.97	1.29	1.99	301.98	.047
Mother—anxious	3.92	1.27	3.76	1.22	1.16	302	.249
Mother—avoidant	3.13	1.41	3.07	1.06	.47	299.82	.642

Avoidant attachment in the relationship with the father was significantly higher in the female group.

### Role of Satisfaction With Relationship

Table 5 presents 95% confidence intervals for Pearson correlation coefficients between relationship satisfaction and indicators of attachment to a partner, as well as attachment to one's parents, for women, men, and the total sample. The confidence intervals were calculated using the bootstrap method. Statistically significant correlations are marked with a bold font.

**Table 5**

*Correlation Coefficients Between Satisfaction With Relationship and the Indicators of Attachment to Partner and the Indicators of Attachment to Parents*

Attachment	Satisfaction with relationship		
	Women	Men	Total
Parents—anxious	<b>-.30, -.03</b>	-.29, .08	<b>-.25, -.03</b>
Parents—avoidant	<b>-.32, -.01</b>	<b>-.37, -.04</b>	<b>-.29, -.07</b>
Partner—anxious	<b>-.48, -.20</b>	<b>-.37, -.03</b>	<b>-.40, -.18</b>
Partner—avoidant	<b>-.59, -.30</b>	<b>-.63, -.38</b>	<b>-.57, -.38</b>
Father—anxious	-.24, .04	-.31, .05	<b>-.22, -.01</b>
Father—avoidant	<b>-.38, -.01</b>	-.29, .02	<b>-.31, -.05</b>
Mother—anxious	<b>-.34, -.07</b>	-.24, .12	<b>-.26, -.03</b>
Mother—avoidant	-.26, .08	<b>-.39, -.07</b>	<b>-.25, -.02</b>

*Note.* 95% confidence intervals for Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated using the bootstrap method. Statistically significant correlations are marked in bold.

The indicators of anxiety and avoidance correlated negatively with satisfaction with relationship. This applies to both the attachment styles in relationships with parents and partners. There was no significant correlation between anxious attachment in relationships with parents and relationship satisfaction in the group of men. However, in the group of women, both avoidant attachment in relationships with the father and anxious attachment in relationships with the mother were negatively correlated with relationship satisfaction. In the group of women avoidant attachment in the relationship with the father and anxious attachment in the relationship with the mother correlated negatively with satisfaction with the relationship. In the group of men the avoidance attachment within the relationship with a mother correlated negatively with satisfaction with relationship.

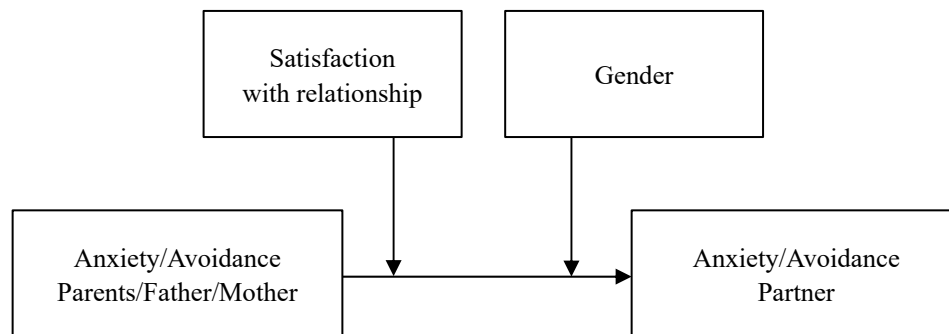
The average relationship satisfaction score for women was 4.01 ( $SD = 0.79$ ), which was similar to the average score for men at 4.07 ( $SD = 0.68$ ). The

difference between these means was not statistically significant,  $t(302) = -0.79$ ,  $p > .05$ , as determined by the bootstrap method.

The participants' gender and satisfaction with their relationships were also analyzed as moderators of the relationship between attachment to a parent and a partner. The moderation level was measured with Hayes macro Process version 3.5 (Hayes, 2018) in Model 2. Figure 1 depicts the analyzed associations between variables.

**Figure 1**

*Analysed Associations Between Variables*



In order to verify whether multicollinearity between attachment styles in the relationship with the parents and satisfaction in the current relationship distorts the results of the moderation analysis, variance inflation factors were calculated. They all fall within the range of 1.053 to 2.678.

Table 6 depicts the results of the moderation analysis for the association between avoidant and anxious attachment styles in the relationship with a parent and the attachment with the relationship with a partner. Satisfaction with the relationship and gender were analyzed as moderators.

**Table 6**

*Gender and Satisfaction With Relationship as Moderators of Association Between Avoidant and Anxious Attachment Styles in the Relationship With Father and Mother and Attachment With Relationship With Partner*

Father	Partner— <i>anxious</i>			Partner— <i>avoidant</i>		
	<i>B</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Father— <i>avoidant</i>	−.61	−2.47	.014	.15	.82	.416
Satisfaction with relationship	−1.22	−4.78	.001	−.70	−3.60	.001
Gender	−.15	−.34	.737	.33	1.00	.320
Satisfaction × father— <i>avoidant</i>	.18	3.16	.002	.01	.32	.747
Gender × father— <i>avoidant</i>	−.01	−.02	.986	−.07	−.88	.380
	$R^2 = .131$			$R^2 = .253$		
Father— <i>anxious</i>	.49	1.64	.102	−.01	−.01	.991
Satisfaction with relationship	−.22	.89	.374	−.71	−3.50	.001
Gender	−.58	1.67	.096	−.26	−.90	.367
Satisfaction × father— <i>anxious</i>	−.05	−.83	.406	.02	.39	.700
Gender × father— <i>anxious</i>	.11	1.23	.219	.08	1.02	.311
	$R^2 = .307$			$R^2 = .291$		
Mother	Partner— <i>anxious</i>			Partner— <i>avoidant</i>		
	<i>B</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Mother— <i>avoidant</i>	−.43	−1.33	.185	.46	1.91	.057
Satisfaction with relationship	−.82	−3.29	.001	−.37	−2.04	.042
Gender	−.17	−.42	.673	−.14	−2.04	.650
Satisfaction × mother— <i>avoidant</i>	.10	1.37	.173	−.08	−1.56	.120
Gender × mother— <i>avoidant</i>	.01	.03	.973	.05	.57	.566
	$R^2 = .096$			$R^2 = .281$		
Mother— <i>anxious</i>	−.08	−.26	.798	−.01	−.01	.994
Satisfaction with relationship	−.57	−2.08	.039	−.73	−3.17	.002
Gender	−1.17	−2.92	.004	−.31	−.92	.357
Satisfaction × mother— <i>anxious</i>	.04	.66	.512	.03	.47	.641
Gender × mother— <i>anxious</i>	.28	2.83	.005	.10	1.13	.258
	$R^2 = .336$			$R^2 = .308$		

A statistically significant interaction between satisfaction with the relationship and the avoidant attachment style in the relationship with the father was found. According to the simple effects analysis, if the level of satisfaction with the relationship was low, the association between avoidant attachment in the

relationship with a father and anxious attachment in the relationship with a partner was statistically insignificant, for both women ( $B = -.03$ ,  $t = -.45$ ,  $p = .655$ ) and men ( $B = -.03$ ,  $t = -.34$ ,  $p = .732$ ). However, if the level of satisfaction with the relationship was high, the link between avoidant attachment in the relationship with the father and anxious attachment in the relationship with a partner was statistically significant and positive, in both the female group ( $B = .22$ ,  $t = 2.20$ ,  $p = .004$ ) and the male group ( $B = .22$ ,  $t = 2.58$ ,  $p = .010$ ). A statistically significant interaction between participants' gender and avoidant attachment in the relationship with the mother was detected. According to the simple effects analysis the association between anxious attachment in the relationship with the mother and anxious attachment in the relationship with a partner was stronger in the group of women ( $B = .38$ ,  $t = 2.58$ ,  $p = .010$ ) compared to men, where  $B = .22$ ,  $t = 2.20$ ,  $p = .004$ .

## DISCUSSION

The aim of this study was to examine the association between retrospectively assessed insecure attachment styles towards the father and the mother as well as adult attachment. Also, we explored whether having a secure romantic relationship moderates this association.

Although the cited literature suggests that attachment styles may exhibit relative stability into adulthood, the present study could not confirm that due to its cross-sectional design. However, the results of the correlational study showed that retrospectively perceived attachment to parents is associated with a similar perception of romantic relationships. This association may reflect the cognitive aspects of attachment patterns, where experiencing a current, specific attachment relationship is linked to past memories or experiences.

The study also revealed significant gender differences. In the female cohort, anxious attachment in adulthood was associated with retrospectively reported anxious attachment styles in relationships with both the father and the mother. Conversely, avoidant attachment in adulthood was associated with both retrospectively reported avoidant and anxious attachment styles in relationships with both parents. These findings suggest that, in women, avoidant attachment styles reported in relation to childhood experiences were not associated with anxious attachment to partners in adulthood. These results align with the conceptualization of attachment proposed by Fraley et al. (2015), who

viewed attachment as a dimensional construct arising from various relational experiences.

A particularly intriguing result is the lack of an association between avoidant attachment styles in relationships with both parents and anxious attachment in adulthood. It is possible that deactivation strategies characteristic of avoidant attachment are not strongly associated with anxious attachment in adulthood. The mere deactivation of proximity needs in childhood does not appear to be sufficiently associated with the activation of hyperactivation strategies in adulthood. Similarly, in the male cohort, avoidant attachment style in the relationship with the mother was not associated with anxious attachment in adulthood. The results of this study indicate a lack of association between avoidant attachment to the mother and an anxious attachment pattern, regardless of gender. Research by Tian, Hazen, and Jacobvitz (2023) demonstrated that 40% of individuals form secure attachment styles with only one parent, with 60% concordance in attachment styles between parents. Tian et al. (2023) hypothesized that fathers are more likely to assume caregiving roles when mothers exhibit insecure attachment styles, potentially leading to maternal withdrawal and creating more space for father–child bonding.

In the male cohort, avoidant attachment style in the relationship with the father was not associated with avoidant attachment to a partner. These findings differ from previous studies (Zagefka et al., 2021), which found associations between specific insecure attachment styles to parents and romantic attachment, though these studies did not disaggregate by gender. These findings suggest that attachment to fathers and mothers develops differently for women and men, supporting the hypothesis that individual differences in adult attachment are best conceptualized and measured dimensionally, irrespective of the type of close relationship (Fraley et al., 2015). Cultural approaches to gender, such as different child-rearing practices and expectations for boys and girls, might also account for these differences (Ellemers, 2018; Richaud & de Minzi, 2006).

These findings partially support the hypothesis that satisfaction in romantic relationships can moderate the link between insecure parental attachment styles and attachment to a partner. However, according to attachment theory, early attachment patterns, particularly the relationship with a caregiver, have long-lasting effects on later romantic and social bonds. In the literature, it has been suggested that relationship satisfaction could act as a moderator, influencing how childhood attachment styles affect adult romantic relationships. High levels of satisfaction might diminish the negative effects of insecure

attachment styles, whereas low satisfaction might amplify these effects. For this reason, satisfaction in relationships was treated as a moderator of the influence of attachment styles on romantic relationships in adulthood. Thus, Hypothesis 4 posits that relationship satisfaction moderates the relationship between attachment to parents and attachment to a partner in adulthood. Hypothesis 4 suggests that relationship satisfaction moderates the association between insecure attachment styles and attachment to a partner, with higher levels of satisfaction being linked to a weaker association between these variables. Consistent with previous research (Candel & Turliuc, 2019; Manthos, 2016; Papińska & Kuncewicz, 2021), this study found that insecure attachment styles are associated with lower romantic relationship satisfaction. However, this construct and its interaction with gender are complex. In this study, the relationship between avoidant attachment to fathers and anxious attachment to partners was not significant when partners exhibited low romantic relationship satisfaction. This relationship became significant for both genders when romantic relationship satisfaction was high. High satisfaction in a romantic relationship is associated with greater engagement and emotional security within the relationship. This, in turn, may be linked to a weaker association between insecure attachment and romantic relationships (Park et al., 2019). In the family context (e.g., relationship with the father), the impact of insecure attachment may be less noticeable when partners report feeling more satisfied and secure in their relationship. However, a certain level of relationship satisfaction may be associated with greater attentiveness to the relationship, which could encourage partners to invest in the relationship.

Individuals with insecure attachment styles often experience lower satisfaction in romantic relationships, which may make them less attuned to relational dynamics. This view aligns with Gallegos et al. (2020), who found that mothers are more critical of paternal caregiving behaviours during marital conflicts, potentially leading to maternal withdrawal from the parent–child relationship. Higher romantic relationship satisfaction may be associated with greater attentiveness to the relationship among individuals with insecure attachment, potentially linking it to hyperactivation strategies known from avoidant attachment with fathers (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). These findings indicate that relationship satisfaction does not moderate the relationship between anxious attachment to fathers and insecure attachment styles in adulthood. While some studies suggest a stronger link between child difficulties and insecure attachment with fathers compared to mothers (Bureau et al., 2017), and that attachment to fathers is associated with life satisfaction, secure

attachment to mothers remains a predictor of stronger romantic relationships (Guarnieri et al., 2015). Meta-analyses also show that fathers may be less effective than mothers in mitigating avoidant tendencies in children through responsive interactions (Koehn & Kerns, 2018).

Differences in attachment to fathers and mothers are also evident in mentalization capacity. Low secure attachment to fathers is significant, as attachment to fathers provides an alternative perspective, fostering the development of self-identity (Gambin et al., 2021). For women, self-esteem correlates with attachment to fathers, while this relationship is not significant for men (Keizer et al., 2019).

An interesting finding is the attachment of women to their mothers. This study showed that anxious attachment styles in maternal relationships are linked to anxious attachment to partners, with this relationship being stronger in women. For women, maintaining a relationship often equates to ensuring security (Buss, 2001). Individuals with anxious attachment experience continual relational uncertainty, seeking closeness and absolute acceptance from partners (Mikulincer et al., 2003). This may reflect a pattern where insecure attachment styles in maternal relationships are more strongly linked to anxious attachment in daughters. This finding is supported by Molero et al. (2017), who discovered that women's life satisfaction is influenced by anxious attachment to partners. Moreover, the increased susceptibility to interpersonal stressors is more evident in societies with traditional gender roles, such as Poland, where this study took place (Gambin et al., 2021).

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

While this study provides new insights into gender differences in the experience of attachment styles in romantic relationships, it is not without limitations. First, its cross-sectional and correlational design prevents any causal inferences regarding the direction of relationships between childhood attachment styles and adult attachment. Although the study shows associations between retrospectively assessed childhood attachment and romantic relationships, it does not determine whether childhood attachment styles influence adult attachment or whether other factors mediate this relationship.

Second, the study did not account for various life events that may affect attachment patterns in adulthood, such as parenthood, relationship dissolution, or adverse experiences (Fraley, 2019). Future research should consider these



factors to gain a more nuanced understanding of attachment stability and change.

Third, there was no information on the primary attachment figure in childhood. This distinction is important as a dominant attachment figure might compensate for deficits arising from insecure attachment with another caregiver. Studies suggest that fathers with secure attachment styles are more attentive to their children than fathers with insecure patterns (Dinzinger et al., 2023). However, historically, fathers were less involved in childcare (Ellemers, 2017), making it difficult to evaluate their contribution to participants' attachment experiences (Lamb, 2000).

Fourth, although the study included participants with a wide range of relationship duration—from 1 month to 50 years—this variable was not controlled for in the analyses. Future research should consider the length of romantic relationships as a potential moderating or control variable, as the duration of a relationship may significantly influence attachment patterns and relationship satisfaction.

Future research could apply the latent state-trait theory (LST-R, Steyer et al., 2015) to distinguish between stable and modifiable aspects of attachment. Given the cross-sectional nature of the present study, it was not possible to determine whether attachment styles remain consistent over time or are subject to change. Understanding these mechanisms may support therapists and counselors in designing interventions aimed at improving romantic relationship quality through a better understanding of attachment dynamics.

### **CRedit Author Statement**

ANNA PAPIŃSKA (60%): conceptualization, methodology, software, validation, formal analysis, resources, writing (original draft), supervision, writing (review and editing).

DOMINIKA VAN DE RIJDT (40%): formal analysis, resources, writing (original draft).

### **REFERENCES**

- Bakermans-Kranenburg, M. J., Lotz, A., Alyousefi-van Dijk, K., & van IJzendoorn, M. H. (2019). Birth of a father: Fathering in the first 1,000 days. *Child Development Perspectives*, 13(4), 247–253. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cdep.12347>

- Ben-Naim, S., Hirschberger, G., Ein-Dor, T., & Mikulincer, M. (2013). An experimental study of emotion regulation during relationship conflict interactions: The moderating role of attachment orientations. *Emotion, 13*, 506–519. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0032671>
- Brennan, K. A., Clark, C. L., & Shaver, P. R. (1998). Self-report measurement of adult attachment: An integrative overview. In J. A. Simpson & W. S. Rholes (Eds.), *Attachment theory and close relationships* (pp. 46–76). The Guilford Press.
- Bonds, D. D., Gondoli, D. D., Sturge-Apple, M. L., & Salem, L. N. (2002). Parenting stress as a mediator of the relation between parenting support and optimal parenting. *Parenting: Science and Practice, 2*, 409–435. [https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327922PAR0204\\_04](https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327922PAR0204_04)
- Bretherton, I., & Munholland, K. A. (2008). Internal working models in attachment relationships: Elaborating a central construct in attachment theory. In J. Cassidy & P. Shaver (Eds.), *Handbook of attachment: Theory, research, and clinical applications* (pp. 102–127). The Guilford Press.
- Bureau, J. F., Martin, J., Yurkowski, K., Schmiedel, S., Quan, J., Moss, E., Deneault, A. A., & Pallanca, D. (2017). Correlates of child–father and child–mother attachment in the preschool years. *Attachment & Human Development, 19*(2), 130–150. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616734.2016.1263350>
- Burgess Moser, M., Johnson, S. M., Dalglish, T. L., Lafontaine, M.-F., Wiebe, S. A., & Tasca, G. A. (2015). Changes in relationship-specific attachment in emotionally focused couple therapy. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy, 42*(2), 231–245. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jmft.12139>
- Buss, D. M. (2001). Human nature and culture: An evolutionary psychological perspective. *Journal of Personality, 69*(6), 955–978. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-6494.696171>
- Candel, O.-S., & Turliuc, M. N. (2019). Insecure attachment and relationship satisfaction: A meta-analysis of actor and partner associations. *Personality and Individual Differences, 147*, 190–199. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2019.04.037>
- Centrum Badań Opinii Społecznej. (2013). *Komunikat badań o roli kobiet w rodzinie* (Research Report No. BS/30/2013). Retrieved June 24, 2024, from [https://www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2013/K\\_030\\_13.PDF](https://www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2013/K_030_13.PDF)
- Cowan, P. A., Cowan, C. P., Pruett, M. K., & Pruett, K. (2019). Fathers' and mothers' attachment styles, couple conflict, parenting quality, and children's behavior problems: An intervention test of mediation. *Attachment & Human Development, 21*, 532–550. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616734.2019.1582600>
- Croft, A., Schmader, T., & Block, K. (2015). An underexamined inequality: Cultural and psychological barriers to men's engagement with communal roles. *Personality and Social Psychology Review, 19*(4), 343–370. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1088868314564789>
- Crowell, J. A., Treboux, D., & Waters, E. (2002). Stability of attachment representation: The transition to marriage. *Developmental Psychology, 38*(4), 467–479.
- Czub, M. (2014). Specyfika relacji dziecka z ojcem w pierwszych latach życia z perspektywy teorii przywiązania. *Dziecko Krzywdzone. Teoria, Badania, Praktyka, 13*(3), 74–93.
- de Minzi, M. C. R. (2010). Gender and cultural patterns of mothers' and fathers' attachment and links with children's self-competence, depression and loneliness in middle and late childhood. *Early Child Development and Care, 180*(1–2), 193–209. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430903415056>

- Di Folco, S., Messina, S., Zavattini, G. C., & Psouni, E. (2017). Attachment to mother and father at transition to middle childhood. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 26(3), 721–733. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-016-0602-7>
- Dinzinger, A., Ismail, S., Brisch, K. H., Sperl, W., Deneault, A. A., Nolte, T., Hitzl, W., & Priewasser, B. (2023). Mentalizing in first-time fathers: reflective functioning as a mediator between attachment representation and sensitivity. *Attachment & Human Development*, 25(5), 544–565. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616734.2023.2258354>
- Doyle, A. B., & Markiewicz, D. (2009). Attachment style with father and mother in early adolescence: Gender differences and perceived peer competence. *European Journal of Developmental Science*, 3(1), 80–93. <https://doi.org/10.3233/DEV-2009-3109>
- Draper, P., & Harpending, H. (1982). Father absence and reproductive strategy: An evolutionary perspective. *Journal of Anthropological Research*, 38, 255–273. <https://doi.org/10.1086/jar.38.3.3629848>
- Ellemers, N. (2018). Gender stereotypes. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 69, 275–298. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-psych-122216-011719>
- Fermani, A., Bongelli, R., Carrieri, A., del Moral Arroyo, G., Muzi, M., & Portelli, C. (2019). “What is more important than love?” Parental attachment and romantic relationship in Italian emerging adulthood. *Cogent Psychology*, 6(1), Article 1693728. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311908.2019.1693728>
- Fraley, C. R. (2019). Attachment in adulthood: Recent developments, emerging debates, and future directions. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 70(1), 401–422. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurevpsych-010418-102813>
- Fraley, R. C., & Roisman, G. I. (2019). The development of adult attachment styles: four lessons. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 25, 26–30. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2018.02.008>
- Gallegos, M. I., Jacobvitz, D. B., & Hazen, N. L. (2020). Marital interaction quality over the transition to parenthood: The role of parents’ perceptions of spouses’ parenting. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 34(6), 766–772. <https://doi.org/10.1037/fam0000656>
- Gambin, M., Woźniak-Prus, M., Konecka, A., & Sharp, C. (2021). Relations between attachment to mother and father, mentalizing abilities, and emotion regulation in adolescents. *European Journal of Developmental Psychology*, 18(1), 18–37. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17405629.2020.1736030>
- Grossmann, K., Grossmann, K. E., Fremmer-Bombik, E., Kindler, H., Scheuerer-Engelsch, H., & Zimmermann, P. (2002). The uniqueness of the child–father attachment relationship: Fathers’ sensitive and challenging play as a pivotal variable in a 16-year longitudinal study. *Social Development*, 11(3), 301–337.
- Grossmann, K., Grossmann, K. E., & Kindler, H. (2005). Early care and the roots of attachment and partnership representations: The Bielefeld and Regensburg longitudinal studies. In K. E. Grossmann, K. Grossmann, & E. Waters (Eds.), *Attachment from infancy to adulthood: The major longitudinal studies* (pp. 98–136). Guilford Publications.
- Guarnieri, S., Smorti, M., & Tani, F. (2015). Attachment relationships and life satisfaction during emerging adulthood. *Social Indicators Research*, 121(3), 833–847. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11205-014-0655-1>
- Hazan, C., & Shaver, P. (1987). Romantic love conceptualized as an attachment process. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 52(3), 511–524. <https://doi.org/10.1037/00223514.52.3.511>

- Jacobvitz, D., Curran, M., & Moller, N. (2002). Measurement of adult attachment: The place of self-report and interview methodologies. *Attachment and Human Development*, 4, 207–215. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616730210154225>
- Keizer, R., Helmerhorst, K. O. W., & van Rijn-van Gelderen, L. (2019). Perceived quality of the mother–adolescent and father–adolescent attachment relationship and adolescents’ self-esteem. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 48(6), 1203–1217. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-019-01007-0>
- Koehn, A. J., & Kerns, K. A. (2018). Parent–child attachment: meta-analysis of associations with parenting behaviors in middle childhood and adolescence. *Attachment & Human Development*, 20(4), 378–405. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616734.2017.1408131>
- Kuncewicz, D., & Jaśkowska, K. (2018). Mało bezpieczne wzorce więzi i opowieści o miłości, a satysfakcja ze związku. *Annales*, 31(2), 313–329.
- Lamb, M. L. (2000). The history of research on father involvement. *Marriage & Family Review*, 29(2–3), 23–42. [https://doi.org/10.1300/J002v29n02\\_03](https://doi.org/10.1300/J002v29n02_03)
- Manthos, M. (2016). Global and specific attachment patterns in romantic relationships: distinct and interactional functions (Paper no. 2554). Electronic Theses and Dissertations, University of Louisville. <https://doi.org/10.18297/etd/2554>
- Marchwicki, P. (2004). Style przywiązania a postawy rodzicielskie. Doniesienie z badań. *Roczniki Psychologiczne*, 7(2), 81–103.
- Marszał, M. (2014). Specyficzne wewnętrzne modele operacyjne przywiązania osób z organizacją osobowości borderline. *Psychologia Rozwojowa*, 19(2), 69–82. <https://doi.org/10.4467/20843879PR.14.012.2290>
- Mikulincer, M., & Shaver, P. R. (2007). A behavioral systems perspective on the psychodynamics of attachment and sexuality. In D. Diamond, S. J. Blatt, & J. D. Lichtenberg (Eds.), *Attachment and sexuality* (pp. 51–78). The Analytic Press/Taylor & Francis Group.
- Mikulincer, M., & Shaver, P. R. (2016). *Attachment in adulthood: Structure, dynamics, and change* (2nd ed.). Guilford Press.
- Molero, F., Shaver, P. R., Fernández, I., & Recio, P. (2017). Attachment insecurities, life satisfaction, and relationship satisfaction from a dyadic perspective: The role of positive and negative affect. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 47(3), 337–347. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.2276>
- Mrozowicz-Wrońska, M., Janowicz, K., Soroko, E., & Adamczyk, K. (2023). Let’s talk about single men: A qualitative investigation of never married men’s experiences of singlehood. *Sex Roles*, 89, 360–376. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-023-01380-y>
- Natora, M. (2011). *Role w związku partnerskim a strategie rozwiązywania konfliktów i satysfakcja ze związku* [Unpublished master’s thesis]. Szkoła Wyższa Psychologii Społecznej, Warszawa.
- Papińska, A., & Kuncewicz, D. (2021). A Polish adaptation and validation of the Positive–Negative Relationship Quality (PN-RQ) Scale. *Annals of Psychology*, 24(2), 173–191. <https://doi.org/10.18290/rpsych21242-5>
- Park, Y., Impett, E. A., MacDonald, G., & Lemay, E. P., Jr. (2019). Saying “thank you”: Partners’ expressions of gratitude protect relationship satisfaction and commitment from the harmful effects of attachment insecurity. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 117(4), 773–806. <https://doi.org/10.1037/pspi0000178>

- Pierce, T., & Lydon, J. (2001). Global and specific relational models in the experience of social interactions. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 80, 613–631. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.80.4.613>
- Ross, L. R., & Spinner, B. (2001). General and specific attachment representations in adulthood: Is there a relationship? *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 18, 747–766.
- Saunokonoko, A. J., Mars, M., & Sattmann-Frese, W. J. (2022). The significance of the father-daughter relationship to understanding and treating bulimia nervosa: A hermeneutic phenomenological study. *Cogent Psychology*, 9(1), Article 2095721. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311908.2022.2095721>
- Schmitt, D. P., & Jonason, P. K. (2015). Attachment and sexual permissiveness: Exploring differential associations across sexes, cultures, and facets of short-term mating. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 46(1), 119–133. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022022114551052>
- Schoppe-Sullivan, S. J., Settle, T., Lee, J.-K., & Kamp, C. M. (2016). Supportive co-parenting relationship as a haven of psychological safety at the transition to parenthood. *Research in Human Development*, 13, 32–48. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15427609.2016.1141281>
- Senator, D. (2010). Wiek w rodzinie a ryzyko zaburzeń rozwoju emocjonalnego dzieci i młodzieży. In B. Tryjarska (Ed.), *Bliskość w rodzinie. Więzy w dzieciństwie a zaburzenia w dorosłości* (pp. 43–61). Wydawnictwo Naukowe Scholar.
- Shaver, P. R., & Mikulincer, M. (2007). Adult attachment strategies and the regulation of emotion. In J. J. Gross (Ed.), *Handbook of emotion regulation* (pp. 446–465). Guilford Press.
- Stawska, M. (2011). *Styl przywiązania i percepcja partnera a satysfakcja ze związku* [Unpublished master's thesis]. Uniwersytet Kazimierza Wielkiego, Bydgoszcz.
- Steyer, R., Mayer, A., Geiser, C., & Cole, D. A. (2015). A theory of states and traits—Revised. *Annual Review of Clinical Psychology*, 11, 71–98. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-clinpsy-032813153719>
- Tian, Z., Hazen, N., & Jacobvitz, D. B. (2023). Triadic family interactions at 2 years: The role of prenatal marital quality and infants' attachment configuration with mother and father. *Attachment & Human Development*, 25(5), 524–543. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616734.2023.2257677>
- Umemura, T., Lacinová, L., Kotřová, K., & Fraley, R. C. (2018). Similarities and differences regarding changes in attachment preferences and attachment styles in relation to romantic relationship length: Longitudinal and concurrent analyses. *Attachment & Human Development*, 20(2), 135–159. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616734.2017.1383488>
- Webster, G. D., Graber, J. A., Gesselman, A. N., Crosier, B. S., & Sember, T. O. (2014). A life history theory of father absence and menarche: A meta-analysis. *Evolutionary Psychology*, 12(2), 273–294. <https://doi.org/10.1177/147470491401200202>
- Zagefka, H., Andrew, N., Boelen, B., Cummings, O., Denton, R., Harris, S., Knoetig, L., Mahmood, M., Shahid, A., Swan, M., Tarter, J., Welch, A., & Williams, R. (2022). Attachments to mother, father, and romantic partner as predictors of life satisfaction. *The Family Journal*, 30(4), 570–578. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10664807211064147>