Attachment Style, Perceived Social Support and Loneliness among College Students

Sushma Suri[1], Siddharth Garg[2], Geetika Tholia[3]

[1]Assistant Professor, Department of Psychology, Jamia Millia Islamia, Delhi, India

[2]Student, Department of Psychology, Jamia Millia Islamia, Delhi, India

[3]Research Scholar, Department of Psychology, Jamia Millia Islamia, Delhi, India

Abstract: *Loneliness is an invisible epidemic that has swept across the world and has manifested as a serious mental and societal adjustment issues, etc. The present study was designed to make a comparison between* males and females on attachment styles (dimensions),*Perceived Social Support (dimension) and Loneliness. The authors also examined the relationship between loneliness, attachment style, and perceived social support and Attachment Style and Perceived Social Support as Predictors of Loneliness among College Students. 256 Students studying in Jamia Millia Islamia, and Delhi University were selected through purposive sampling. Measure of* Attachment Style Questionnaire, *Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support and UCLA Loneliness Scale were administered. Results of the study indicated that b*oth Ambivalent and Avoidant attachment style emerged as a predictor of loneliness. Males experienced greater loneliness as compared to female counterparts. Our study is specific and relevant to parents, mental health professionals and educators working with college students.*

Keywords: *Loneliness, Attachment styles, Social support*

1. INTRODUCTION

According to Ernst and colleagues, Human beings are social animals. In light of this, our research aims to improve our knowledge of loneliness in the Indian context. Loneliness is a complicated mix of affections and cognitions that reflect distressing and negative emotional experiences arising from an individual's perceived deficiency in personal relationships [1]. Loneliness is an invisible epidemic; it has no visible symptoms but dire consequences. Stravynski and Boyer stated that loneliness is associated with several psychological factors e.g. depression, fatigue, pain, subclinical paranoia, internet addiction, cardiovascular reactivity, suicidal ideation, parasuicide and all out mortality in several studies [2].

Young adults are markedly susceptible to feeling alone and derelict [3]. Weiss has further suggested that the main developmental task of young adulthood is to relinquish parental attachments and form new attachments with same or cross-sex peers and/or to a peer group and that the hampering of this process causes feelings of isolation [4]. Individuals having secure attachment, would have more open, trusting and honest relationships with others, hence feeling less lonely compared to individuals with insecure attachments styles; a notion consistent with Bowlby's work [5]. One study gathered data supporting a relationship between loneliness and attachment style in young adults [6]. Another study used a structural equation model to examine how loneliness and depression mediates between attachment theory and smartphone addiction [7]. Though some research has explored links between attachment styles and loneliness, evidence supports secure, ambivalent-avoidant, and anxious-avoidant attachment styles affect loneliness differently [8]. In comparison to attachment style, many studies have demonstrated that perceived social support has a negative correlation with loneliness. Studies have shown those who reported greater perceived social support reported less loneliness [9] and another study reported perceived social support to predict loneliness [10].

According to Mcleod (2017), Attachment is an intimate and enduring emotional bond connecting one individual to another [11]. One of the most influential thinkers of attachment was Bowlby [5]. Being a psychoanalyst, Bowlby's attachment theory was influenced by Freud's idea of the importance of early childhood experiences and infant-mother relationship. However, Bowlby's theory discarded the psychoanalytic drive reduction model with one that gave greater importance to the role relationships play in exploration and competence [12]. Another psychologist,

Mary Ainsworth (1913-1999) and her student Mary Main (1943- present), further developed Attachment Theory. Modern attachment theory is accepted to be the joint contribution of both, John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth [13].

The theory posits that the infant-caregiver bond leads to the formulation of a cognitive framework. The infant then uses this framework as reference point to judge all future relationships in his or her life. If the infant-mother relationship was a positive one i.e. the mother takes appropriate care of the infant, he or she will develop a secure attachment. Otherwise, if the infant-mother relationship was negative i.e. the mother is neglectful of the infant or indulges in abuse; the infant will develop an insecure attachment.

In short, Attachment Theory suggests that individuals form internal models of themselves and of others in close relationships based on experiences with their childhood caregivers [5]. In order to experimentally examine differences in attachment security in infants, Ainsworth and colleagues developed a laboratory method called the Strange Situation [14]. This involved a series of laboratory episodes staged in a playroom, through which the infant, the caregiver, and a stranger interact, and various behaviors of the infant are observed. Attention is given to the infant's behavior upon reunion with his or her caregiver after a brief period of separation. Through this study, Ainsworth was able to identify three distinct styles of attachment. Further work was done by Ainsworth's doctoral student, Mary Main. She did a microanalysis of infant-mother interaction using descriptive language rather than count data, replicating the 'Strange Situation' study on a different sample. She also introduced the disorganized attachment classification. Thus, they are four different attachment styles in modern attachment theory: -

1. Secure attachment – These infants display confidence due to consistent availability of attachment figure. The caregiver acts as a safe space to explore the world and a haven in distress.

2. Anxious-avoidant attachment – These infants demonstrate reduced confidence and remain passive. They are not good at managing stress and isolate themselves and resist seeking help. When the caregiver is absent, they rarely show signs of stress and seem to ignore or avoid the caregiver on their return.

3. Anxious resistant attachment – These infants either appear clingy or distressed when present with caregiver. They lack self-confidence and are considered to be at an opposite spectrum to anxious avoidant. As soon as caregiver leaves, these infants would become highly distressed. On the caregiver's return the infant remains inconsolable and appears as if he or she is punishing the caregiver for leaving and seeking comfort from distress at the same time.

4. Disorganized attachment – As it implies, their behaviour does not seem to fit in any specific category. Rather they deal with stress through aggression, disruptive behaviours and social isolation. It is hypothesized that these infants fail to build any organized coping strategy.

In adults, attachment styles follow more or less the same pattern, with adults having secure attachment being able to maintain intimate and satisfying relationships with their partners [15]. Research supports college students with a secure attachment style have better social skills compared to students with insecure attachment style [16]. Hence, adults with secure attachments would have better supportive relationships, as the quality of supportive relationships is largely decided by the individual's own relational competence and social skills [17]. Insecure attachment is considered to hinder social exploration [5], which might hamper the growth of social skills and significantly affect the establishment of harmonious relationships with peers [18].

Individuals with secure attachments also perceive having strong beliefs about being supported by friends, family, and others, known as perceived social support [19]. Perceived social support is linked to positive consequences. For example, one study found perceived social support to be positively correlated with life satisfaction in students from Delhi University [20]. Research has found perceived social support to be a negative predictor of social and emotional loneliness among college students [21] and older adults [22]. Attachment style and social support are connected theoretically [10] and empirically [9] as well. Studies demonstrate that individuals with secure attachment repeatedly report more perceived social support from friends and family [23], as well as from significant others [24], compared to those with insecure attachment styles. Moreover, research on two working models of self and others found late adolescents reporting positive model of self and others (secure attachment), also reporting highest level of perceived social support from parents and friends [23]. One study investigating mediation models found perceived

support mediated the association between avoidant attachment and mental well-being for middle aged adults and seniors [25].

It seems clear that attachment style, loneliness and perceived social support are all inter-related. A research effort investigating factors linked to family, social and romantic loneliness in college students substantiates this [26]. College students were assessed on measures of attachment style, social support and loneliness. Results show students possessing secure attachment experienced less loneliness compared to students with insecure attachment. This relationship was mediated by perceived social support experienced by the students.

2. SCOPE OF RESEARCH

Human beings are social animals driven by a fundamental need to socialize and belong. A deficit of this fundamental need creates loneliness which has a host of negative consequences like mental illness, suicidal ideation, parasuicide etc. In light of this, our research aims to improve our knowledge of loneliness in relation to attachment style and perceived social support in the Indian context. This knowledge will translate in the design of more effective psychosocial interventions on college students and be invaluable to parents, educators and mental health professionals. Based on the existing literature the following objectives and hypotheses were framed for the present research.

2.1 Objectives

- To compare males and females on Loneliness, attachment styles(secure ,ambivalent and avoidant) and Perceived social support (Family ,Friends, Significant others and Total perceived social support)

- to find out the relationship between loneliness, attachment style, and perceived social support among college students

- To examine attachment styles(dimensions) and Perceived social support (dimensions) as predictors of loneliness among college students

2.2. Hypotheses

- Males and Females would differ significantly on loneliness and on the dimensions of attachment styles and perceived social support.

- There would be a significant relationship between attachment style, perceived social support and lonliness.

- Loneliness will significantly be predicted by attachment styles(dimensions) and perceived social support (dimensions)

3. METHOD

3.1 Participants

256 students (128 males and females each) were selected studying in Jamia Millia Islamia and Delhi University were taken as a sample in this study through purposive sampling. They were in the age bracket of 18 to 25 years. The mean age of the sample was 20.35 years.

3.2 Measures

- Attachment Style Questionnaire by Ahmad, Jahan, & Imtiaz (2016). The scale has a Cronbach alpha of 0.80, suggesting good internal consistency [27]

- Measure of Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support by Zimet (1988) [28]. The scale has four dimensions, of which three are distinct (Significant Others, Family and Friends) and the fourth is a composite of all three dimensions (Total). The scale has a total reliability of 0.88.

- Loneliness Scale Revised Version 3 by Russell (1996)[29]. The scale has a Cronbach alpha ranging from 0.89 to .94 and test-retest reliability of 0.73.

3.3 Procedure

The questionnaire was distributed among students of Jamia Millia Islamia and Delhi University. Informed consent was taken from every participant and they were assured of confidentiality. The collected data was analysed with IBM Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS).

4. RESULTS

Analysis was conducted using SPSS version 22.0 before proceeding with the regression analysis, mean, standard deviation of the sample was obtained. Males and females were compared on loneliness, and on dimensions of both attachment styles and perceived social support, it was found that male and female college students differed in regards to loneliness, as indicated by Table 1.

Table 1: *Mean, Standard deviation and results of independent t test(N=256)*

Variable	Gender	Mean	SD	t	Sig	Cohen's D#
Secure Attachment	1 2	22.3281 22.4063	4.23727 5.12280	-.13	.894	
Ambivalent Attachment	1 2	28.7891 29.1875	5.44500 5.40855	-1.18	.241	
Avoidant Attachment	1 2	26.7969 25.7578	4.50260 4.44343	1.86	.064	
Significant Other	1 2	4.5859 4.9199	1.45078 1.53308	-.18	.075	
Friends	1 2	4.8203 5.0313	1.34389 1.34501	-1.26	.211	
Family	1 2	4.5723 4.7090	1.04154 1.35659	-.90	.367	
Total PSS	1 2	13.9785 14.6602	3.09337 3.3095	-1.70	.091	
Loneliness	1 2	49.8438 46.5781	7.60070 7.43752	3.474	.001	0.43*

1=males,2=females, #=Cohen's d calculated for significant differences only, *= Effect Size: High: 0.8 above; Medium 0.5-0.8; Small 0.2-0.5.

Table 2 reports the correlations between different dimensions of attachment style and perceived social support and loneliness. Insecure attachment (ambivalent and avoidant) is positively correlated with loneliness whereas secure attachment and perceived social support is positively correlated with loneliness.

Table 2: *Correlation analysis results*

	Secure	Ambivalent	Avoidant	Significant Other	Friends	Family	Total PSS	Loneliness
Secure		-.06	-.32**	.25**	.24**	.25**	.30**	-.18*
Ambivalent			-.01	-.07	-.18**	-.17**	-.17**	.35**
Avoidant				-.19**	-.006	-.12*	-.14*	.17**
Significant Other					.42**	.47**	.81**	-.11
Friends						.46**	.77**	-.23**
Family							.78**	-.15**
Total PSS								-.19**
Loneliness								

Two tailed correlation significant at **p< 0.01 level, *p<.05, Total PSS= Perceived Social Support total

Table 3 reports the regression coefficients for each variable except the significant others subscale. This dimension was excluded from analysis due to being collinear with the total perceived social support subscale.

Table 3: *Regression coefficients results from multiple regression analysis*

Predictors	β	t	Sig
Secure	*-.085*	-1.369	.172
Ambivalent	*.336*	5.840	.000*
Avoidant	*.160*	2.680	.008*
Friends	*-.160*	-1.546	.123
Family	.016	.165	.869
Total Perceived Social Support	-.019	-.132	.895

*Dependent variable: Loneliness, variable mode: enter, variable excluded: Significant others, *p<.05*

Ambivalent attachment style and avoidant attachment style emerged as the significant predictor of loneliness (Table 3) The R square is .217 which means that our model explains 21.7 % of all variance in loneliness is explained by the predictors. The effect size is 0.425 which means that our attachment style and perceived social support has a medium effect on loneliness. F value was found to be highly significant. (Table 4)

Table 4: *Model Summary of Multiple Regression Analysis*

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	R Square Change	F	Sig	Cohen's F
1	.466ᵃ	.217	.198	6.87871	.217	11.493	0.00	0.425 (MEDIUM)

Predictors: Attachment style (dimensions), perceived social support (dimensions),excluded variable:significant others

5. DISCUSSION

The aim of the present research was to make a comparison between male and female college students on attachment styles, perceived social support and loneliness and examine whether loneliness is predicted by attachment style and perceived social support. The notion that loneliness is linked to both attachment and social support was first conceived by Weiss [4]. In his relational theory of loneliness, he draws a fundamental distinction between loneliness due to lack of a close emotional relationship, and loneliness due to lack of social support [4]. Bowl by too postulated that loneliness due to loss of a significant other may persist despite of support from family and friends in the context of mourning [5]. These concepts of 'social loneliness' and 'emotional loneliness' are supported by research and empirical evidence [8][18].

Our study found that males experience higher loneliness than females which is in line with current research [30]. Ang explains this difference on account of women having a greater affinity for socializing and thus forming more cohesive bonds than men [31].This study also revealed that people who are insecurely attached (ambivalent and avoidant) tend to experience more loneliness. This is in line with previous studies which find attachment style is linked with loneliness [6]. On the other hand, high levels of secure attachment and perceived social support predict low levels of loneliness among college students. Individuals with avoidant attachment style often push others away which results in emotional loneliness, while individuals with ambivalent attachment style have a strong need for attention; failure to meet this need creates anxiety and feelings of loneliness. In contrast, individuals with high levels of secure attachment are able trust others, build strong interpersonal relationships and subsequently experience lower levels of loneliness. Perceived social support also plays an important role; the more friends and family you have the merrier. However, our findings clearly indicate that insecure attachment style is better at predicting loneliness than secure attachment style or perceived social support among college students in New Delhi.

6. CONCLUSION

As stated earlier, loneliness is an invisible epidemic; it has no visible symptoms but dire consequences. Thus, the study of loneliness and its associations is of prime importance. Our research indicates that attachment style and perceived social support predict levels of loneliness among college students from Jamia Millia Islamia and New Delhi. Our study demonstrates that both quality and quantity of relationships are important. This has important implications for developing psychosocial interventions aimed at reducing loneliness.

AS Rook stated that ,*"loneliness is an enduring condition of emotional distress that arises from deficits from appropriate social partners for desired activities and/or lack of opportunities for emotional intimacy"* [32]*.* From this perspective the following strategies can be implemented to reduce loneliness among college students.

1. Developing satisfying interpersonal ties: This can be done by changing how they relate to others through modification in attachment style.

2. One strategy could be to schedule pleasant activities or alternatives preventing loneliness from becoming a serious problem.

3. "Prevention is better than cure": Colleges and universities can develop programs that help new students' foster friendships and find those with similar interests. This will help the student build a strong social support network.

However, no research is perfect and there is always a scope of improvement, the study was confined only to Delhi university and Jamia Millia Islamia. Future researches can be directed on the larger population as well as can consider socio demographic factors such as age, gender and so on.

REFERENCES

[1] Ernst, J. M., & Cacioppo, J. T. (1999, December). Lonely hearts: Psychological perspectives on loneliness. Applied and Preventive Psychology, 8(1), 1-22. Retrieved from http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0962-1849(99)80008-0.

[2] Stravynski, A., & Boyer, R. (2001). Loneliness in Relation to Suicide Ideation and Parasuicide: A Population-Wide Study. *Suicide and life-threatening behavior, 31*(1), 32-40. doi:10.1521/suli.31.1.32.21312

[3] Fidler, J. (1976). Loneliness: The problems of the elderly and retired. *Royal Society of Health Journal*, 39-41.

[4] Weiss, R. S. (1973). *Loneliness: The experience of emotional and social isolation.* Cambridge, Massachusetts, United States of America: The MIT Press.

[5] Bowlby, J. (1980). Attachment and loss. Vol. III. Loss, sadness and depression. London: Tavistock/Routledge.

[6] Hecht, D. T., & Baum, S. K. (1984, January). Loneliness and Attachment Patterns in Young Adults . *Journal of Clinical Psychology, 40*(1), 193-197. Retrieved from https://doi.org/10.1002/1097-4679(198401)40:1%3C193::AID-JCLP2270400136%3E3.0.CO;2-2

[7] Kim, E., Cho, I., & Kim, E. J. (2017). Structural equation model of smartphone addiction on adult attachment theory: mediating effects of loneliness and depression. *Asian Nursing Research, 11*, 92-97. doi:http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.anr.2017.05.002

[8] DiTommaso, E., & Spinner, B. (1997, March). Social and emotional loneliness: A re-examination of weiss' typology of loneliness. *Personality and Individual Differences, 22*(3), 417-427. Retrieved from https://doi.org/10.1016/S0191-8869(96)00204-8

[9] Davis, M. H., Morris, M. M., & Kraus, L. A. (1988). Relationship-specific and global perceptions of social support: Associations with well-being and attachment. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 74*(2), 468-481. Retrieved from http://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1037/0022-3514.74.2.468

[10] Sarason, B. R., Pierce, G. R., & Sarason, I. G. (1990, January). Social support: The sense of acceptance and the role of relationships. In B. R. Sarason, I. G. Sarason, & G. R. Pierce, *Social support: An interactional view* (pp. 97–128). New York: Wiley.

[11] Mcleod, S. (2017). *Attachment Theory*. Retrieved from Simply Psychology: https://www.simplypsychology.org/attachment.html

[12] Waters, E., Crowell, J., Elliot, M., Corcoran, D., & Treboux, D. (2002). Bowlby's secure base theory and the social/personality psychology of attachment styles: Work(s) in progress. *Attachment and Human Development*, 230-242. doi:https://doi.org/10.1080/14616730210154216

[13] Ainsworth, M. D., & Bowlby, J. (1991). An Ethological Approach to Personality Development . *American Psychologist, 46*(4), 333-341. Retrieved from http://www.psychology.sunysb.edu/attachment/online/ainsworth_bowlby_1991.pdf

[14] Ainsworth, M. D., Blehar, M. C., Waters, E., && Wall, S. (1978). *Patterns of attachment: A psychological study of the strange situation.* Hillsdale, New Jersey: Erlbaum.

[15] Ackerman, C. (2018, April 27). *Attachment Theory in Children and Adults: Bowlby & Ainsworth's 4 Types.* Retrieved from Positive Psychology Program: https://positivepsychologyprogram.com/attachment-theory/

[16] Deniz, M. E., Hamarta, E., & Ari, R. (2005). An investigation of social skills and loneliness levels of university students with respect to their attachment styles in a sample of Turkish students. *Social Behavior and Personality, 33*(1), 19-32. doi:10.2224/sbp.2005.33.1.19

[17] Sarason, B. R., Sarason, I. G., Hacker, T. A., & Basham, R. B. (1985). Concomitant of social support : Social skills, physical attractiveness, and gender. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 49*(2), 469-480. Retrieved from http://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1037/0022-3514.49.2.469

[18] Cassidy, J., Kirsh, S. J., Scolton, K. L., & Parke, R. D. (1996, September). Attachment and representations of peer relationships. *Developmental Psychology, 32*(5), 892-904. doi:http://dx.doi.org/10.1037//0012-1649.32.5.892

[19] Cotterell, J. (2007). *Social networks in youth and adolescence.* New York: Routledge.

[20] Mahanta, D., & Aggarwal, M. (2012, September). Effect of perceived social support on life satisfaction of university students. *European Academic Research, 1*(6), 2286-4822.

[21] Salimi, A., & Bozorgpur, F. (2012). Perceived Social Support and Social-Emotional Loneliness. *Procedia Social and Behavioral Sciences, 69*, 2009-2013. doi:10.1016/j.sbspro.2012.12.158

[22] Schnittger, R., Wherton, J., Prendergast, D., & Lawlor, B. A. (2011, November). Risk factors and mediating pathways of loneliness and social support in community-dwelling older adults. *Aging & Mental Health, 16*(3), 335-346. doi:10.1080/13607863.2011.629092

[23] Blain, M. D., Thompson, J. M., & Whiffen, V. E. (1993, April). Attachment and perceived social support in late adolescence: The interaction between working models of self and others. *Journal of Adolescent Research, 8*(2), 226-241. Retrieved from https://doi.org/10.1177%2F074355489382006

[24] Collins, L., N., & Feeney, B. C. (2004). Working Models of Attachment Shape Perceptions of Social Support:Evidence From Experimental and Observational Studies. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 87*(3), 363–383. doi:10.1037/0022-3514.87.3.363

[25] Kafetsois, K., & Sideridis, G. D. (2006). Attachment, Social Support and Well Being in Younger and Older Adults. *Journal of Health Psychology, 11*(6), 863-875 . doi:10.1177/1359105306069084

[26] Bernardon, S., Babb, K. A., Hakim Larson, J., & Gragg, M. (2011). Loneliness, attachment and perception and use of social support in university students. *Canadian Journal of Behavioral Science, 43*(1), 40-51. doi:10.1037/a0021199

[27] Ahmad, N., Jahan, A., & Imtiaz, N. (2016). Measure of Attachment Style. *The International Journal of Indian Psychology, 3*(4), 48-60. Retrieved from https://ijip.in/Archive/v3i4/18.01.082.20160304.pdf

[28] Zimet, G. (1988). The multidimensional scale of perceived social support. *Journal of Personality Assessment, 52*(1), 30-41. doi:10.1207/s15327752jpa5201_2

[29] Russell, D. W. (1996). UCLA Loneliness Scale (Version 3): Reliability, Validity, and Factor Structure. *Journal of Personality Assessment, 66*(1), 20-40. doi:10.1207/s15327752jpa6601_2

[30] Fujimori, A., Hayashi, H., Fujiwara, Y., Matsusaka, & Taisuke. (2017). Influences of Attachment Style, Family Functions and Gender Differences on Loneliness on Japanese University Students. *Psychology, 8*, 654-662. Retrieved from http://file.scirp.org/pdf/PSYCH_2017033114273761.pdf

[31] Ang, C.-S. (2016). Types of Social Connectedness and Loneliness: the Joint Moderating Effects of Age and Gender. *Applied Research in Quality of Life, 11*(4), 1173-1187. doi:10.1007/s11482-015-9428-5

[32] Rook, K. S. (1984). Promoting Social Bonding: Strategies for helping the lonely and socially isolated. *American Psychologist, 39*(12), 1389-1407.

AUTHORS' BIOGRAPHY

Sushsma Suri, Sr. Assistant Professor, Department of Psychology, JMI, New Delhi (India) is currently teaching social psychology, health psychology, counseling, research method etc. Her work spans on different areas of research within psychology: Health. Social and Counseling. She has contributed 35 research papers, 02 books and 01 dictionary and presented 40 research papers in India and Abroad, participated in different workshops, delivered lectures, guided 07 doctorate and 45 master students and directed a research project sponsored by ICSSR.

Siddharth Garg, is a postgraduate psychology student currently enrolled at the Department of Psychology, Jamia Millia Islamia. His areas of interest are organizational behavior and otaku culture.

Geetikatholia , research scholar, Department of Psychology Jamia Millia Islamia. New Delhi.

Her areas of interest: are Social Pychology and Health Psychology