

# Factors Predicting Psychological Adjustment among University Students in Turkey

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## Abstract

Young adulthood is a period that requires serious transitions. Psychological adjustment during this period might be an important contributor to academic as well as social wellbeing. This study aims at identifying factors that predict psychological adjustment among university students in Turkey. Attachment style and coping strategies were suggested as possible predictors. The data was gathered from 105 undergraduate students. The results reveal attachment and coping styles as significant predictors for psychological adjustment. Implications of the findings are discussed in an attempt to foster better psychological adjustment among young adults.

**Keywords:** young adulthood, adjustment, adaptation, coping

## 1. Introduction

Adolescence or young adulthood is a period that requires serious transitions. In addition to regular burdens of daily life, the young adult has to deal with additional stressors that are unique to that life period. These stressors include university education, obtaining a job for the first time, leaving family, and forming new social and emotional relationships that require the responsibilities of an adult person (Arnett, 2000). It is quite imperative, then, to infer that this period might pose additional psychological burdens for the individual. Extensive literature on this topic in fact suggests that adolescents and young adults face many psychological problems including anxiety, depression, drug addiction, and eating disorders (Costello, Copeland, & Angold, 2011; Lewinsohn, Hops, Roberts, & Seeley, 1993; Merikangas, Nakamura, & Kessler, 2009).

It seems that although many adolescents and young adults face problems, not all of them end up suffering from psychological difficulties; that is, some are better at adapting to their environment. (Dumont & Provost, 1998; Masten, Hubbard, Gest, Tellegen, Garmezy, Ramirez, 1999). This fact brings us to the concept of psychological adjustment. According to Rohner (2004), psychological adjustment is a state characterized by a sense of independence, positive self-esteem and self-adequacy, stability of emotional experiences, high emotional responsiveness, diminished hostility and aggression, and a positive worldview. Poor psychological adjustment has been consistently related to increased psychopathology and also higher prevalence of social and emotional problems among adolescents and young adults (Freitas et al., 2013; Werner & Crick, 1999).

One of the variables that has been studied extensively within adjustment literature is attachment (eg. Mattanah, Hancock, & Brand, 2004; Seiffge-Krenke, 2006). The concept, first proposed by Bowlby (1977), is generally viewed as a continuously functioning, and more or less stable system that serves to maintain the child's sense of security. This system is considered to be persistent throughout life (Ainsworth, 1989; Sroufe & Waters, E., 1977). Research supports the continuity of attachment constellations in adulthood and across different relationships, as well (Hamilton, 2000; Waters, Hamilton, & Winfield, 2000).

Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991) propose a four-category adult attachment classification based on Bowlby's theory. These categories are: secure, dismissing, preoccupied, and fearful. Secure individuals have a positive view of both themselves and others whereas dismissing individuals have a positive view of themselves but a negative view of others. Preoccupied individuals perceive themselves as unworthy and others as valuable. Fearfully attached individuals, on the other hand, perceive both themselves and others negatively. Preoccupied, dismissing, and fearful attachment styles are also collectively labeled as insecure attachment styles.

Research investigating the relationship between attachment and adjustment consistently reveals significant results. Secure attachment style has been found to be related to good psychological adjustment whereas insecure attachment styles have generally been found to be associated with poorer psychological adjustment (Lapsley & Edgerton, 2002; Lopez, Melendez, Sauer, Berger, Wyssmann, 1998; Matttanah, Hancock, & Brand, 2004; Seiffge-Krenke, 2006). The strength of this relationship is maintained across different cultures and ethnicities (Arbona & Power, 2003; Bakker, van Oudenhoven, & van der Zee, 2004; Wang & Mallinckrodt, 2006).

It is generally argued that early life events largely determine the way a person copes with life stressors, and consequently, the way he or she adapts to the environment. Coping is defined as an active and purposeful response to events or situations which are evaluated as demanding or overwhelming in terms of the resources of the individual (Lazarus, 1993). It involves cognitive, emotional, and behavioral attempts to deal with the stressors (Lazarus, 1998).

Although there is universality in terms of the diverse repertoire of coping strategies among different cultures, there seem to be certain cross-cultural differences with respect to the extent to which each strategy is used. In a study comparing Indian, Italian, Hungarian, Swedish and Yemenite adolescents in terms of their coping strategies, for instance, Oláh (1995) found that, regardless of culture and ethnicity, adolescents with higher anxiety levels used more avoidance-based coping strategies whereas those with low and medium anxiety employed more constructive and adaptive coping strategies. In addition, European adolescents more frequently utilized assimilative coping strategies whereas those from Yemen and India used emotion-focused solutions more often. The results of another study comparing Turkish and American university students revealed that, with respect to coping, Turkish students were more likely to use strategies including reallocating their time and energy, and cognitive restructuring. American students, on the other hand, were more willing to engage in acceptance, self-disclosure, and health-promoting physical activities (Matheny, Curlette, Aysan, Herrington, Gfoerer, Thompson, & Hamarat, 2002).

Problem-focused, active coping strategies have generally been associated with better outcomes with respect to psychological functioning whereas avoidant coping strategies have been associated with poorer psychological outcomes (eg. McNamara, 2000). In a study investigating the relationship between coping and psychological adaptation among university students, for instance, Dyson and Renk (2006) found that avoidant coping strategies (including mental and behavioral disengagement, avoidance through drugs and use of humor) significantly predicted depressive symptomatology among this group. In a similar study, active coping strategies were found to be associated with better psychological adjustment (as indicated by lower levels of depressive symptomatology) whereas avoidant coping strategies were found to be associated with poorer psychological adjustment (as indicated by higher levels of depressive and anxiety symptomatology) (Crockett, Iturbide, Stone, McGinley, Raffaelli, & Carlo, 2007).

Cross-cultural literature in general points to a universality in terms of the relationship between coping strategies and adjustment. A study comparing Turkish and American university students, for example, found that the use of active coping strategies (including active problem solving, receiving emotional support, and positive reframing) was associated with positive psychological adjustment whereas strategies such as substance use, behavioral engagement, and denial were associated with poorer psychological adjustment. Although there were minor differences with respect to the extent to which each strategy was more dominantly used, this relationship was observed for both samples (Tuna, 2003).

This study aims to understand psychological adjustment among university students in Turkey, mainly in relation to attachment and coping. Based on previous findings, we expect attachment and coping to be significantly related to psychological adjustment. Specifically, we expect a positive relationship between secure attachment and adjustment in addition to a negative relationship between insecure attachment and adjustment. With respect to coping, we expect that use of active coping strategies would be associated with a better adjustment whereas avoidant strategies would be associated with poorer psychological adjustment.

## 2. Method

### 2.1 Participants

105 undergraduate students (10 men and 95 women) from a university in Istanbul participated in the study. The age of the participants ranged from 19 to 27 years ( $M = 21.98$ ,  $SD = 1.56$ ). 43.8 % of the participants were sophomore, 14.3 % were junior, and 41.9 % were seniors.

The majority of the participants (78.1 %) were living with their families. Among 95 students whose parents were both alive, 85.26 % reported that their mother and father are together. 84.6 % has one or more siblings.

Less than half of the sample (44.8 %) was involved in a relationship. Among this group the mean duration of the current relationship was 25.62 months ( $SD = 25.16$  months). The mean amount of time (in terms of hours) the sample reported spending for social activities was 16.23 hours per week ( $SD = 11.61$  hours).

## 2.2 Materials

### 2.2.1 Relationship Scales Questionnaire (RSQ)

This is a 30-item self-report questionnaire that assesses adults' attachment patterns (Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994). The respondents are asked to rate how much they agree with each of the statements on a 7-point Likert scale. The results indicate four scores with respect to four attachment styles: *secure*, *preoccupied*, *dismissive*, and *fearful*. In addition, the category that receives the highest score is acknowledged as the person's dominant attachment style.

Griffin and Bartholomew (1994) found that internal consistency score of RSQ ranged from .41 for secure type to .70 for dismissing type. In terms of convergent validity, RSQ was compared to The Relationship Questionnaire (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991), which is another attachment measure. The validity coefficients were found to range between .22 and .50.

RSQ was adapted to Turkish by Sümer and Güngör (1999). Test-retest reliability of the Turkish version was found to vary between .54 and .78. Internal consistency coefficients, on the other hand, ranged between .27 and .61. In the present study, Cronbach alphas for *secure*, *preoccupied*, *dismissing*, and *fearful* attachment scores were .68, .49, .65, and .78, respectively.

### 2.2.2 Coping Questionnaire

This questionnaire was developed by Özbay (1993) in order to measure coping styles of international students living in the United States. The original scale consists of 56 items, each to be ranged on a 5-point Likert scale. The questionnaire intends to measure five main coping strategies: active planning, seeking external help, turning to religion, acceptance/cognitive restructuring, and avoidance/disengagement. The questionnaire was later adapted to Turkish language by Özbay and Şahin (1997) in an attempt to devise a scale to identify coping patterns of the Turkish population. The Turkish version consists of 43 items, each ranged on a 5-point Likert scale. Factor analytic studies yielded 6 factors in this version: *active planning*, *seeking external help*, *turning to religion*, *avoidance/disengagement (emotional-behavioral)*, *avoidance/disengagement (biochemical)*, and *acceptance/cognitive restructuring*. Each subscale score is calculated by summing the scores on items relevant to that scale.

*Active planning* includes 10 items that indicate actively seeking solutions for one's problems, and making rational plans and decisions in an attempt to solve them. *Seeking external help* is composed of 9 items that evaluate the extent to which a person is likely to seek emotional, cognitive, and physical support from others when the person is faced with a problem. *Turning to religion* refers to one's tendency to turn to religious or spiritual practices as a way of reducing and dealing with stress. This factor is represented by 6 items in the scale. *Avoidance/disengagement (emotional-behavioral)* involves the extent to which the individual is likely to emotionally and behaviorally disengage himself from distressing situations or events. It is represented by 7 items. *Avoidance/disengagement (biochemical)*, on the other hand, is composed of 4 items and includes attempts to create physiological changes in the body (through drugs, alcohol, smoking, etc.) as a way of reducing stress. Finally, *acceptance/cognitive restructuring* is characterized by the acceptance of the problem and mentally attempting to deal with the problem in different ways. This coping style is represented by 7 items in the Turkish version.

In order to establish the validity of the Turkish version, Özbay and Şahin (1997) compared the scale with the Turkish version of Scale of Coping with Stress (SCS; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; adapted to Turkish by Şahin & Durak, 1995) and found the overall validity coefficient around .54. The authors found Cronbach alpha values as .76 for *active planning*, .79 for *seeking external help*, .90 for *turning to religion*, .65 for *avoidance/disengagement (emotional-behavioral)*, .75 for *avoidance/disengagement (biochemical)*, and .57 for *acceptance/cognitive restructuring* dimensions. In the current study, alpha values for *active planning*, *seeking external help*, *turning to religion*, *avoidance/disengagement (emotional-behavioral)*, *avoidance/disengagement (biochemical)*, and *acceptance/cognitive restructuring* dimensions were calculated as .79, .87, .96, .61, .52, and .68, respectively.

### 2.2.3 Personality Assessment Questionnaire (PAQ)

PAQ is a self-report inventory that was developed to assess an individual's personality with respect to seven dimensions: *hostility and aggression*, *dependency*, *self-esteem*, *self-adequacy*, *emotional responsiveness*,

*emotional stability*, and *world view* (Rohner, Saavedra, & Granum, 1978). Participants are asked to rate the extent to which they agree with 63 items on a 4-point Likert scale. The total score of PAQ represents the person's overall psychological adjustment, with higher scores indicating higher maladjustment. The total score in PAQ can range between 63 and 252. In this study, each item was reverse coded so that higher total PAQ score indicates better psychological adjustment.

PAQ was adapted to Turkish by Varan (2003). Internal consistency coefficients for the subscales were found to range between .68 and .82 whereas overall Cronbach alpha value for the questionnaire was found as .91. In this study, the Cronbach alpha value for total PAQ score was found as .94.

### 2.3 Procedure

Participants were recruited via announcements made during class hours of undergraduate psychology courses. Interested students signed up for participation at a predetermined time and place. Students received an extra course credit in exchange for their participation.

All questions and surveys used in the study were written in Microsoft Word format, printed, and given the participants at a predetermined date and time. The ordering of the questionnaires was counterbalanced.

The questionnaires were distributed to students in class hours. Each student received course credit in exchange for participation.

## 3. Results

### 3.1 The Relationship between Sociodemographic Characteristics of the Sample and Psychological Adjustment

Descriptive statistical information including means, standard deviations, and ranges of all the continuous variables that are included in the analyses are provided in Table 1. In order to determine whether the sociocultural variables provided in Table 1 are related to overall adjustment score in PAQ, a series of Pearson correlation analyses were carried out. None of the correlations turned out to be statistically significant ( $p > .01$ ). The results are given in Table 2.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for the Continuous Variables that are Included in the Analyses

<b>Variables</b>	<b>Mean (<i>M</i>)</b>	<b>Standard Deviation (<i>SD</i>)</b>	<b>Range</b>
<b>Sociocultural Variables</b>			
Age	21.98	1.56	19-27
Current GPA	3.09	0.46	1.81-3.94
Average time spent for weekly social activities (hrs)	16.23	11.61	2-55
<b>RSQ Variables</b>			
Secure attachment score	41.16	8.25	18-62
Preoccupied attachment score	23.30	5.44	9-38
Dismissing attachment score	28.60	6.86	15-49
Fearful attachment score	30.36	9.86	10-59
<b>Coping Variables</b>			
Active planning	28.53	5.66	14-40
Seeking external help	25.92	6.24	5-36
Turning to religion	10.60	8.35	0-24
Avoidance/disengagement (emotional/behavioral)	12.96	4.57	2-24
Avoidance/disengagement (biochemical)	2.57	2.72	0-10
Acceptance/cognitive restructuring	15.90	4.42	6-25
<b>PAQ Variables</b>			
Psychological Adjustment	185.38	24.95	93-236

RSQ: Relationships Scale Questionnaire, PAQ: Personality Assessment Questionnaire.

Table 2. Intercorrelations between Continuous Sociodemographic Variables and Overall PAQ Score

<b>Sociodemographic Variables</b>	<b>Adjustment Score</b>
Age	.058
Current GPA	.117
Average time spent for weekly social activities (hrs)	.123

In addition to correlational analyses, two Mann-Whitney U tests were conducted in order to assess whether gender and currently being involved in a romantic relationship had an effect on overall adjustment score. The results turned out to be nonsignificant for both gender ( $U = 296, p = .431$ ), and relationship status ( $U = 942, p = .132$ ); indicating that these two variables did not have an effect on participants' adjustment scores.

### 3.2 Relationships between Attachment, Coping, and Psychological Adjustment

Table 3 reports correlations between RSQ attachment scores and adaptation. Mean adjustment score was found to be significantly correlated to secure attachment score ( $r(95) = .624, p < .01$ ), dismissing attachment score ( $r(95) = -.465, p < .01$ ), and fearful attachment score ( $r(95) = -.620, p < .01$ ). The correlation between adjustment and preoccupied attachment score, on the other hand, was nonsignificant. These findings suggest a positive

relationship between secure attachment and adjustment and a negative relationship between insecure attachment and adjustment.

Table 3. The Relationship between RSQ Attachment Scores and PAQ Adaptation Score

Attachment Scores	Adjustment Score
Secure attachment score	.624**
Preoccupied attachment score	-.175
Dismissing attachment score	-.465**
Fearful attachment score	-.620**

\*\*  $p < .01$

Another set of correlational analyses were conducted to assess the relationship between different coping strategies and adjustment (See Table 4). The results indicate significant correlations between adjustment score and the following coping measures: active planning ( $r(97) = .240, p < .05$ ), avoidance/disengagement through drugs or alcohol ( $r(92) = -.354, p < .01$ ), and acceptance/cognitive restructuring ( $r(96) = .230, p < .05$ ); indicating that using active planning and cognitive restructuring strategies are associated with a better psychological adjustment whereas avoidance through biochemical means is associated with decreased psychological adjustment.

Table 4. Intercorrelations between Adaptation and Coping Scores

Coping Styles	Adjustment Score
Turning to Religion	.093
Seeking External Help	.009
Active Planning	.240*
Avoidance/Disengagement (emotional-behavioral)	-.195
Avoidance/Disengagement (biochemical)	-.354**
Acceptance/Cognitive Restructuring	.230*

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$

### 3.3 Predicting Psychological Adjustment

A stepwise multiple regression analysis was conducted in order to identify variables that predict adjustment score. Three attachment scores (secure, dismissing, and fearful), and three coping scores (active planning, biochemical avoidance, and acceptance/cognitive restructuring), which were found to be related to overall adjustment score in previous analyses were included in the model.

Table 5 illustrates the results of multiple regression analysis for variables predicting adjustment score. The major predictor of adjustment was secure attachment score, which explained approximately 39 % of the overall variance. Biochemical avoidance/disengagement, fearful attachment, and active planning were other significant predictors. Adjustment score increased as secure attachment and active planning scores increased; and it decreased as fearful attachment and biochemical avoidance/disengagement scores increased. These variables together explained 57 % of the overall variance.

Table 5. Summary of Stepwise Multiple Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Total Adjustment Score

Variables	B	SE B	$\beta$	$\Delta R^2$
Secure Attachment Score	.228	.051	.404	.389
Avoidance/Disengagement (Biochemical)	-.461	.122	-.269	.115
Fearful Attachment Score	-.154	.043	-.325	.058
Active Planning	.132	.058	.161	.025

Adj.  $R^2 = .568, (p < .05)$

#### 4. Discussion

This study aimed at identifying factors predicting psychological adjustment among Turkish university students. In line with our expectations, variables related to attachment style and coping were revealed as significant predictors.

With respect to attachment, secure and fearful attachment scores were identified as significant predictors for adjustment. Specifically, secure attachment was associated with better psychological adjustment whereas fearful attachment was associated with poorer psychological adjustment. Secure attachment is characterized by a worldview in which the person considered both himself and others as valuable and loveable. Fearful attachment, on the other hand, is characterized by a negative sense of self and a view of others as unresponsive and rejecting. Fearfully attached individuals, as a result, fear and avoid close relationships (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). It is then possible to make the inference that a positive view of self and the other helps the person better adjust to personal and environmental stressors, which has also been suggested by previous research (Cooper, Shaver, & Collins, 1998; Lapsley & Edgerton, 2002; Lopez et al., 1998; Mattanah, Hancock, & Brand, 2004).

Regarding coping, among six coping strategies, two were found as significant predictors of adjustment: biochemical avoidance/disengagement and active planning. This finding has also been largely in line with previous literature on this topic (Dyson & Renk, 2006; Ebata & Moos, 1991). It seems that, when faced with stress, taking an active coping attitude helps the individual better adjust to his environment. Using a passive or avoidant strategy, on the other hand, might bring together a poorer adjustment.

Certain limitations of this study should be taken into account while interpreting the results. First of all, this study was carried out with a relatively small sample size. This is especially the case when the ratio of male participants to female participants is considered. It is possible that our findings represent more of psychological adjustment patterns for females than males. Therefore it is crucial to replicate these findings with a more gender-balanced group. It is also important to replicate these findings with different cultural and ethnical groups in order to make more universal assumptions. Second, the data collected in this study relies exclusively on self-report of the participants, which might shed some doubt upon the objectivity of the data. Finally, since the design of this study was not longitudinal, the findings can provide only a limited insight into adjustment literature. Longitudinal studies are warranted in order to gain a deeper understanding of the possible causality between attachment and coping, and adjustment.

This study has possible implications with respect to both counselors and therapists working with young adults and for psychoeducational programs focusing on increasing adjustment to university. Given the significant relationship between attachment, coping and psychological adjustment; we suggest that adolescents and young adults could highly benefit from attachment-oriented intervention and treatment programs focusing on development of adaptive coping strategies.

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