

The Relationship Between Self-Report Adult Attachment Dimensions and Depressive  
Symptoms: A Meta-Analysis

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This thesis is presented in the fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of  
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## **Declarations**

### **Statement of Originality**

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. I give consent to this copy of my thesis, when deposited in the University's Digital Repository\*\*, subject to the provisions of the copyright Act 1968.

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### **Acknowledgement of Collaboration**

I hereby certify that the work embodied in this thesis has been done in collaboration with other researchers. I have included as part of this thesis a statement clearly outlining the extent of collaboration, with whom and under what auspices.

I contributed to the development of the research question, the database search, the statistical analysis, the interpretation of results and editing of the manuscript. Associate Professor Ross Wilkinson contributed to the development of the research question, the peer review process relating to the selection of articles included, the interpretation of results, and editing of the manuscript. Karen Watson assisted during the peer review process relating to the selection of articles excluded.

01/12/2017

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Melinda Vardanega

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Date

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## Structured Abstract

**Scope.** Depression is a debilitating mental health condition which is the leading cause of disability worldwide. Adult attachment research is an extension of Bowlby and Ainsworth's early attachment theory and aims to understand how attachment phenomena apply to adult romantic relationships. Adult attachment theory has proven to be a useful framework in understanding the importance of close interpersonal relationships for psychological health and adjustment. To date, a large amount of studies using self-report measures of adult attachment have consistently reported associations between attachment dimensions in romantic relationships and the presence of depressive symptoms in both clinical and non-clinical samples.

**Purpose.** Given the large amount of studies reporting these associations and the fact that to date there are only general reviews of the literature, the aim of the current study was to conduct a meta-analysis on the extant empirical literature reporting statistical relationships between self-reported attachment dimensions and self-reported depressive symptoms in a range of clinical and non-clinical populations. In addition to overall effect sizes we also aimed to explore potential moderating factors to these relationships including a number of sample and study design characteristics.

**Methodology.** A literature search of online databases resulted in an initial 2,512 articles being identified as potentially relevant. Following a thorough screening process, there were 104 studies remaining for inclusion in the meta-analysis. To meet eligibility criteria articles must have been published in peer reviewed journals in the English language. Participants had to be aged 17 years and over and the study must have reported a bivariate relationship between self-report attachment styles/dimensions and depression symptoms as measured by well-known and validated self-report measures. The computer software program

“Comprehensive Meta-Analysis” was used to conduct the analysis. Three separate analyses for secure attachment, avoidant attachment and anxious attachment were conducted using the random-effects model, with Pearson’s  $r$  correlation coefficients as the effect sizes. Subgroup analysis was applied to explore potential moderating factors such as gender, type and language of attachment measure, clinical and non-clinical samples and the use of student and non-student samples.

**Results.** Results demonstrated that secure attachment is negatively correlated with depression with a medium effect size ( $r = -.28$ ), and both avoidant and anxious attachment are positively correlated with depression with medium and large effect sizes ( $r = .27$  and  $r = .40$ , respectively). No significant differences were found between gender, or clinical and non-clinical samples. Studies using the RSQ to measure attachment avoidance resulted in significantly larger effect sizes compared to studies using other measures. The relationship between avoidant attachment and depression was shown to be significantly weaker in students than in non-students. Finally, studies using translated measures of adult attachment resulted in significantly weaker effect sizes compared to studies using English measures in the secure and avoidant attachment analyses.

**General Conclusions and Implications.** Overall, this meta-analysis provides robust evidence that, as measured by common self-report instruments of adult attachment, secure attachment in close relationships is associated with fewer self-reported depressive symptoms and insecure attachment in close relationships, both attachment avoidance and more so attachment anxiety, are associated with more self-reported depressive symptoms. It was also found that these associations were influenced by a number of factors including the use of the RSQ to measure attachment avoidance, the use of student samples when measuring attachment avoidance and the use of translated measures of adult attachment, particularly when measuring attachment security and attachment avoidance. The findings of this study

have a number of both research and clinical implications. Firstly, the findings suggest that more work needs to be done to develop sound measures of adult attachment in languages other than English. Secondly, it is suggested that caution should be applied to the use of student populations in adult attachment research, particularly if the focus of the study is attachment avoidance. Thirdly, the findings indicate that adult attachment measures should not be used interchangeably in attachment research and that an understanding of the underlying constructs of the measure is required to ensure they are being used appropriately. This is particularly relevant when using the RSQ. In terms of clinical implications, the findings of the current study support the use of self-report measures of adult attachment in clinical practice and suggest that addressing insecure attachment thoughts and behaviours may be useful in the psychological treatment of depression.