

Attachment Styles in Relation to Leadership Preference Among Adolescents and Adults

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Abstract

This research study investigates the nature of relationship between attachment styles and leadership preference across two developmental stages of human life i.e. adolescents and adults. The study incorporated correlational and comparative research framework 128 individuals (63 adolescents and 65 adults) from educational set-up were comprised as participants. For assessing the attachment style, the CaMir-R scale (Balluerka et al., 2011) was utilized and, for measuring the leadership preference, the Leadership Preference Scale (Singh, 2010), which is adapted from Fieldler's contingency framework was used. The statistical analysis was done using Pearson product-moment correlation and one –way ANOVA to explore the relationships and observe the group differences. The result findings indicated that secure attachment was positively associated with leadership preference, whereas the avoidant attachment style showed a weak but significant negative relationship. Anxious attachment did not demonstrate a significant association. Adolescents reported significantly higher anxious and avoidant attachment in comparison to adults; although, no significant difference in leadership preference was found between the two age groups. These discoveries suggest that even though the leadership orientation may remain relatively stable across these two development stages, attachment-related emotional and mental patterns evolve with time. This study helps to enrich the literature that traces relationships between developmental psychology with leadership research through elucidating the role of early relational schemas in shaping leadership tendencies.

Keywords: *Leadership Preference, Attachment Style, Internal Working Model, Adolescents, Adults, Secure Attachment, Avoidant Attachment*

INTRODUCTION

The shift from adolescence to adulthood is an influential period in which individuals explores leadership roles, by taking part in school activities and portfolios like head boy/girl, house captains. They demonstrated their leadership qualities through peer relationships, and develop their interpersonal identities. Leadership is progressively considered as a relational and vibrant process through which individuals inspire others toward shared goals (Northouse, 2019). Existing research identifies that leadership cannot merely determine by stable personality traits

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rather, it is shaped by psychological development, relational experiences, and interpersonal patterns imprinted on the human psyche across the lifespan (Liden et al., 2025). Among the theories that supports long-term interpersonal functioning, attachment theory offers a convincing lens through which it can be interpreted how early relational experiences may shape later leadership preference.

Attachment theory, which was originally proposed by Bowlby (1969), proposes that the early interaction between infant and primary caregiver leads to the development of internal working models which generates into cognitive-affective schemas of self and others that instigate expectations about relationships, emotional regulation, and interpersonal behavior. Ainsworth et al. (1978) further explored these early interactions and gave three primary attachment patterns through observational research: secure, anxious-ambivalent, and avoidant. Securely attached individuals demonstrate trust and confidence in the proximity of their closed ones. Anxious attachment usually has the fear of abandonment and high sensitivity towards the emotional reaction of others, whereas avoidant attachment reveals emotional distancing and distress with being close to. They are considered relatively stable yet developmentally influenced constructs (Fraley & Shaver, 2000; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016).

Research constantly shows that people who are possess secure attachment demonstrate resilience, pro-social behavior, and good adjustment in the interpersonal relationship, on the other hand insecure attachment patterns are usually linked with protective strategies and relational difficulties (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). Among adolescents, secure attachment has been associated to greater social competence and psychological well-being, whereas insecure attachment is associated with relational conflict and emotional difficulties (Kumar & Raj, 2016; Mónaco et al., 2019; Delgado et al., 2022). Recent empirical studies indicate that insecure attachment and anxiety may negatively affect academic performance among adolescents (Sastre et al., 2025), pointing to the broad reach of early relational schemas across developmental outcomes.

Lately, a lot of focus has been given to study the relationship between attachment orientations and the way leader functions. Doverspike et al. (1997) studied this relationship and found out that secure attachment was associated with a relational leadership orientation, while avoidant attachment was more inclined towards task oriented leadership. Subsequently, Berson et al. (2006) found through his study that securely attached individuals had tendency to evolve as leaders and they were considered as effective leader as they had intrinsic ability to show care and be more sociable. Davidovitz et al. (2007) explored through his empirical study that the military officers who had anxious attachment demonstrated lower efficiency in task, whereas those with avoidant attachment showed shunted emotional efficacy and provided lack of safety to their followers. Popper et al. (2000) examined that the secure attachment exhibited higher link towards transformational leadership, promoting self-awareness, trust, and psychological safety within their teams. But on the other hand, the avoidant attachment was negatively correlated with such leadership. Additionally, Johnston (2000), explored through research that leaders with secure attachment were motivated to delegate tasks, showing the collaborative and inclusive approach to leadership.

Fiedler (1967) gave the Contingency Theory through his empirical research analysis for understanding the fixed leadership orientations. The theory differentiated the preference of leaders either into a relationship-oriented setting or task-oriented set up. He recommended that not every leader is fit for every situation rather, the effectiveness of leadership depends on the match between a leader's style and situational factors. He developed an instrument to evaluate the preference of leadership and named it as Least Preferred Coworker (LPC) scale. Individuals were instructed to evaluate a coworker with whom, they have worked least effectively. The high LPC scores imply a relationship-focused style, while lower scores suggest a task-focused preference. For making it applicable to Indian population, R.N. Singh (2010) developed the Least Preference Scale (LPS), which categorize individuals into relationship-oriented, mixed, or task-oriented leadership style. It has proven satisfactory psychometric properties across diverse Indian samples.

Adolescence and adulthood are two different developmental phases which show difference in their ability to regulate emotions, form stable identity and relationships. Attachment orientation continues to evolve during adolescence (Sastre et al., 2025), meanwhile adulthood portrays relatively better stabilization of internal working models (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). Although leadership tendencies may arise during adolescence and crystallize across adulthood (Tackett et al., 2022, Liu et al., 2020), relatively very limited empirical studies has examined how attachment style and leadership preference are evolving across these two groups, particularly in Indian contexts.

RESEARCH GAP

It is evident that both attachment theory and leadership research have been developed expansively as independent fields, however, their relationship with each other is relatively less researched. Prevailing studies have focused mainly on organizational set-up, in Western contexts, leaving a gap in culturally applicable evidence for Indian settings. Adolescents, despite being in a crucial period of identity formation and peer leadership development, have still received comparatively less empirical attention. Moreover, only few studies have incorporated culturally appropriate instruments such as R.N. Singh's Leadership Preference Scale, or directly compared adolescents and adults on both attachment style and leadership preference within a single comparative research design.

THE CURRENT STUDY

As previously discussed above, the relationship between early relational patterns and leadership tendencies remains less discovered, predominantly across two crucial developmental stages and in culturally diverse populations. The present study attempts to identify the gap by examining the relationship between attachment styles and leadership preference among adolescents and adults, and by comparing these variables across the two age groups. Such analysis may contribute to organizational psychology, counseling set-up, and leadership research by indicating that how attachment –based relationship patterns are associated with leadership preferences across different life stages.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The objective of the present study is to identify the relationship between attachment styles and leadership preference among two developmental stages i.e. adolescents and adults, and to compare their attachment patterns and leadership preferences across these two developmental groups.

METHODOLOGY

SAMPLE

The sample consisted of 128 participants, out of whom 63 were adolescents (aged 10–19 years) and 65 were young adults (aged 20–35 years) which were selected from educational settings. The majority of the participants were females comprising 77.20% of the population, whereas 22.79% were male. In terms of residential locality, 89.70% were from urban areas and 10.29% from rural settings. The majority of the participants belonged to the middle socioeconomic status (88.23%), and 54.41% came from nuclear families. Convenience sampling was utilized based on accessibility and willingness to participate. Participants who provided incomplete responses were not included in the final sample.

MEASURES

A self-constructed demographic information sheet was used to collect background details including age, gender, residential background, socioeconomic status, and family type.

Cartes–Modèles Individuels de Relations – Revised (CaMir-R). The CaMir-R (Balluerka et al., 2011) is a 32-item self-report instrument assessing attachment representations and perceptions of family functioning, rated on a 5-point Likert scale. Developed from the original CaMir (Pierrehumbert et al., 1996), it measures seven dimensions of attachment and relational experience. In the present study, Secure Attachment was indexed by Dimension 1 (Security: Availability and Support of Attachment Figures), Anxious Attachment by Dimensions 2 and 3 (Family Concern and Parental Interference), and Avoidant Attachment by Dimension 6 (Self-Sufficiency and Resentment toward Parents). Cronbach's alpha coefficients range from .60 to .85 across dimensions, supporting the scale's reliability.

Leadership Preference Scale – L.P.C. (Singh, 2010). It is a 16-item self-report measure derived from Fiedler's (1967) LPC framework. Respondents mark a least-preferred coworker on 16 pairs of contrasting adjectives on a scale of 1 to 8. Higher total scores (≥ 64) indicate a relationship-oriented leadership style; lower scores (≤ 57) indicate a task-oriented preference; and scores between 58 and 63 reflect a mixed style. Reported split-half reliability ranges from .79 to .89, and test-retest reliability from .80 to .89 across diverse Indian samples including students, teachers, and government employees.

PROCEDURE

The purpose and voluntary nature of the study were clearly communicated to all participants before letting them fill the questionnaire, and informed consent was obtained. Rapport was established for developing trust that their information would be used for research purpose only. Questionnaires were **administered** individually in a proper setting. The standardized

instructions were provided before each instrument. Confidentiality and anonymity of response were maintained throughout the research process. If any participants had any query related to questionnaire, they were suggested to use their discretion and proceed with it.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The present study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional, correlational research design to investigate the relationship between attachment styles and leadership preference as well as to compare these variables across adolescents and adults population. Since the study aimed to observe naturally occurring psychological variables without experimental manipulation, a non-experimental survey method was considered appropriate.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Prior to data collection, informed consent was procured from all participants, and it was made sure to them that their personal details would be treated with utmost confidentiality and used exclusively for academic and research-related purposes.

STATISTICAL ANALYSIS

The collected data were processed and analyzed using SPSS (version 27). Descriptive statistics measures, including mean and standard deviation, were computed for each variable. To assess the association between attachment styles and leadership preference, Pearson product-moment correlation was applied. One-way ANOVA was used to compare adolescents and adults on the study variables.

RESULTS

The present study examined the relationship between attachment styles and leadership preference among adolescents and adults. In table 1, the results of descriptives statistics and ANOVA analysis for leadership preferences and attachment styles among adolescents and adults is shown.

TABLE – 1 Descriptive Statistics and ANOVA for Leadership Preference and Attachment Styles among Adolescents and Adults (N = 128)

Variable	Group	N	M	SD	F	p
Leadership Preference	Adolescents	63	86.20	20.83	0.083	.774
	Adults	65	85.11	22.29		
Secure Attachment	Adolescents	63	24.96	5.27	0.040	.841
	Adults	65	24.78	5.06		
Anxious Attachment	Adolescents	63	34.44	4.95	5.635*	.019

	Adults	65	32.36	4.94		
Avoidant Attachment	Adolescents	63	14.68	2.58	5.963*	.016
	Adults	65	13.46	3.04		

Note. M = Mean; SD = Standard Deviation; F = One-Way ANOVA value; p = significance level.

*p < .05 indicates a significant group difference.

Descriptive analysis revealed comparable mean scores in leadership preference between adolescents (M = 86.20, SD = 20.83) and adults (M = 85.11, SD = 22.29). Scores for secure attachment were similarly close across groups. However, adolescents reported higher levels of anxious attachment (M = 34.44) and avoidant attachment (M = 14.68) compared to adults (M = 32.36 and M = 13.46, respectively).

ANOVA results indicated no significant group difference in leadership preference (F = 0.083, p = .774) or in secure attachment (F = 0.040, p = .841). Significant differences emerged for anxious attachment (F = 5.635, p < .05) and avoidant attachment (F = 5.963, p < .05), indicating that adolescents and adults differ significantly in their levels of insecure attachment.

Table 2 is showing the correlations between leadership preference and attachment styles

TABLE – 2 Pearson Correlations between Leadership Preference and Attachment Styles (N = 128)

Variable	r	p
Secure Attachment	.383**	.000
Anxious Attachment	.095	.285
Avoidant Attachment	-.181*	.041

Note. r = Pearson Correlation; p = significance level.

*p < .05; **p < .01 (2-tailed).

Pearson correlation analysis revealed a moderate positive relationship between secure attachment and leadership preference (r = .383, p < .01), indicating that individuals with higher levels of attachment security tend to demonstrate stronger leadership orientation.

Anxious attachment showed a weak and non-significant correlation with leadership preference (r = .095, p > .05), suggesting that anxiety-based attachment patterns do not substantially influence leadership orientation as measured in this study.

Avoidant attachment demonstrated a weak but significant negative correlation with leadership preference ($r = -.181$, $p < .05$), signifying that individuals who has avoidant relational tendencies may show lower leadership orientation.

DISCUSSION

This current study researched the relationship between attachment styles and leadership preference among adolescents and adults. It also compared these variables across the two developmental groups. The significant positive correlation between secure attachment and leadership preference is aligned with the theoretical suggestions given by Bowlby (1969) and other expanding body of empirical studies. The securely attached individuals have healthy internal working models that support trust, emotional regulation, and interpersonal competence which exhibits qualities that are essential for effective leadership. This result is in consistent with the findings of Berson et al. (2006) research study, who reported that securely attached individuals were inclined to appear as leaders in group settings, and by Doverspike et al. (1997), who also found that the secure attachment correlated with the relational leadership style.

The negative value of Pearson correlation between avoidant attachment and leadership preference implies the intrinsic tendency of avoidant individuals toward emotional distancing, lowered interpersonal trust, and inclination for autonomy. These relational patterns often hinder the communication, cooperation, and factors that built relationships which are imperative for leadership. This finding is consistent with the research study done by Popper et al. (2000), who found avoidant attachment inversely associated with transformational leadership, and Johnston (2000), who also reported that leaders having avoidant attachment orientation, proved less delegation and idealized more centralized authority.

In this study, the absence of a significant relationship between anxious attachment and leadership preference is important to note. Though anxiously attached individuals usually display excess emotional sensitivity and preoccupation with relational stress, these attributes do not give the idea to translate directly into leadership orientation as measured by the present instrument. This outcome needs further investigation, particularly using instruments which can capture detailed dimensions of leadership behavior and style.

The ANOVA results indicated that there is no significant difference in leadership preference across these two age groups i.e. adolescents and adults, which suggest that leadership orientation may arise relatively early and it stays stable during these developmental periods. But, on the other hand, the result showed that adolescents have significantly higher levels of both anxious and avoidant attachment compared to adults, which is in consistent with developmental literature that portray adolescence as a period of ongoing emotional instability and identity confusion (Sastre et al., 2025; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). These findings suggest that though the leadership preference may be consolidated and stabilized early, but the emotional and relational patterns which support it is still evolving to mature into the adulthood.

CONCLUSION

The present study helps in understanding the underlying psychological constructs that support leadership preference by elucidating the role of attachment orientations along different

developmental stages. Secure attachment was positively associated with leadership orientation, while avoidant attachment showed a negative relationship with leadership preference. Although adolescents and adults differed significantly in insecure attachment patterns, but the leadership preference itself remained relatively stable across the two groups. These findings emphasize the impact of early relational experiences and emotional sensitivity in shaping the interpersonal and leadership behavior, and also highlight the value of integrating developmental psychology perspectives into leadership research.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

The study highlights the importance of investigating the attachment styles in educational, counseling, and organizational settings. Promoting secure relational environments through emotionally responsive caregiving, school-based attachment-informed programs, and peer supported initiatives like having an emotional buddy, may enhance both mental well-being and leadership potential in young people. Counseling interventions aiming to resolve the insecure attachment patterns in adolescents could help in developing the leadership skills through emotional regulation, trust, and interpersonal effectiveness. In the context of organizational set up, such findings related to attachment-based interpersonal behavior may help in improving the leadership training and team development programs.

LIMITATIONS

The study depended completely on self-reported questionnaires, which could be impacted by participant's nature to provide socially desirable responses. Convenience sampling limits the applicability of the findings to wider and more diverse population. Additionally, the cross-sectional nature of the study restricts the ability to draw causal inferences regarding the direction of the relationships between attachment styles and leadership preference. Furthermore, cultural, contextual, and personality-based factors that may influence both attachment orientations and leadership tendencies were not examined. Subsequent research could adopt longitudinal methods, comparative cross-cultural perspective, and multi-research approaches to more comprehensively investigate these constructs.

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Data Availability: the data will be available with the authors

There is no conflict of interest between authors.

Informed consent was obtained from all the participants.

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