



# Identifying Pattern of Relationships between Attachment Styles, Life Satisfaction and Perfectionism in University Students

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## Abstract

**Background:** Life satisfaction is a subjective and unique concept to every human being which constitutes an essential component of subjective well-being.

**Objectives:** The purpose of the present study was identifying the pattern of relationship between attachment styles, life satisfaction and perfectionism in university students.

**Methods:** The statistical society included all students of Azad university of Roodehen who were studying at this university in 2014 - 15 academic year. The sample size was 271 undergraduate students who were selected by stratification random sampling from all faculties except faculty of education and counseling and also Psychology. The data were collected using life satisfaction scale, Collins and Reid's adult attachment styles and Terry and Short's positive and negative perfectionism scale.

**Results:** The findings showed that positive and negative perfectionism variables influence on explanation of life satisfaction changes. Anxious attachment through negative perfectionism influences directly and indirectly on explanation of life satisfaction changes. Also avoidant attachment through positive and negative perfectionism influences directly and indirectly on explanation of life satisfaction changes. However, secure attachment neither directly nor indirectly influences on explanation of life satisfaction changes.

**Conclusions:** The results of this study have several important implications for counselors who work with perfectionism. Counselors should consider perfectionism as a multidimensional construct with both healthy and unhealthy dimensions rather than as only problematic construct.

**Keywords:** Attachment, Life Satisfaction, Perfectionism

## 1. Background

Life satisfaction is a subjective and unique concept to every human being which constitutes an essential component of subjective well-being and generally refers to person's overall and cognitive assessments of his/her life (1). Persons with high life satisfaction reveal externalizing behaviors after important stressful experiences of life less likely (2). Increasing of stress and behavioral problems, despair, anxiety and depression are negative effects of dissatisfaction with life that will have consequences such as reducing of social spirit of cooperation, assistance and social trust. Several factors such as personal factors (temperament), quality of family relationships and attachment style, peer groups, university and community status and perfectionism play a role in youth's life satisfaction. However, it seems that quality of family relationships is more important than other variables (3).

One of the issues associated with life satisfaction is attachment. People are influenced by their attachment bonds. Attachment relationships have a very important role in our secure feel (4). Attachment styles are sustainable patterns of relationships and influence on people's behavior. According to studies, secure attachment style relates with positive communication features including intimacy and satisfaction in social relations, insecure avoidant attachment style relates with lower levels of intimacy and commitment in social relationships and insecure anxiety attachment style preoccupation links with worry about social relations and low satisfaction (5). Attachment styles also affect the way you encounter stressful situations. Secure individuals while acknowledging position ask others simply to help them, individuals with avoidance style are encountered problems when they are acknowledging position and seeking help and support and prominent property of anxious is excessive sensitivity to negative emotion

and attachment styles so that they prevent their autonomy (6).

Hamachek (7) believed that there are two types of perfectionism: normal and neurotic perfectionism. Positive perfectionism is said to those cognitions and behaviors aimed at high-level success and progress in order to achieve positive outcomes (8) and negative perfectionism is said to those cognitions and behaviors aimed at high-level success and progress in order to avoid or escape the negative consequences (9).

Since perfectionists constantly have expectations and requirements that they are not able to fulfill them so they aren't satisfied with their performance. In most cases, negative perfectionists see a contrast between neurotic perfectionism requests and real performance so it is believed that the resulting contrast have adverse effects on their anxiety (10).

Studies showed that there is a significant positive relationship between secure attachment style and life satisfaction and there is a significant negative relationship between avoidant attachment style and life satisfaction (11). Also attachment to the mother has most predictability to predict adaptive and maladaptive perfectionism while attachment to father has most predictability to predict academic performance (12). The positive and negative perfectionism has a significant effect on mental health both directly and indirectly. So that person's positive perfectionism had a positive impact on her/his self-concept, thereby his/her positive self-concept improves mental health and on the other hand negative perfectionism with its negative impact on the person's self-concept has been led to the negative self-concept that causes reduction of the person's mental health and emotional problems (13). Studies showed that students who are in the adaptive perfectionist category experience more satisfaction in different aspects of life compared to adolescents who are in the maladaptive perfectionism category (14).

Life satisfaction is one of the most important mental health indicators and also quality of family relationships has an important role in enhancing it. As far as specified, perfectionism is common among family members and anxious parents provide ground for perfectionism in their children probability (15). Therefore, it can be expected that perfectionism and attachment variables are the important factors affecting life satisfaction.

## 2. Methods

Statistical population included all students of Islamic Azad University of Roodehen who have were studying at this university in 2014 -15 academic year. Stratification random sampling and Cohen's table for sample size was used.

19 questionnaires of 300 completed questionnaires were excluded from analysis since they were incomplete and finally 271 questionnaires were analyzed. It should be noted that the faculty of Education and Counseling and faculty of Psychology were excluded from the study due to lack of bias of students.

### 2.1. Instruments

Satisfaction life scale (SLS): reliability and validity of SLS have been investigated in several studies. SLS was evaluated in a sample including 176 undergraduate students. Mean and standard deviation of the students' scores was 23.5 and 6.43 respectively and retest reliability coefficient of scores after two months was 0.82 and Cronbach's alpha coefficient was 0.87 (16). This scale has been adapted for use in Iran, Cronbach's alpha coefficient of this scale was obtained 0.80 (17).

Revised adult attachment scale (RAAS): this scale consists of 18 materials with three subscales: Cronbach's alpha of being close subscale (0.69), dependence scale (0.75) and the anxiety scale (0.72). Being close, dependence and anxiety subscales remained stable during a period of 2 months and even 8 months (18). In Iran, reliability was investigated using test-retest and correlation method between two scales conducted on a sample with 100 students. The results of two scales in this questionnaire, with an interval of one month, showed that the difference between the two scales was not significant and the test reliability was 0.95 (19).

Positive and negative perfectionism scale (PANPS): This scale includes 40 questions, and Cronbach's alpha of positive and negative perfectionism was calculated as 0.84 and 0.87 respectively (20). In the Persian version (8), cronbach's alpha was estimated for each questions of subscale in a sample of 212 students; it was reported 0.9 and 0.87 respectively for all the subjects, 0.91 and 0.88 for female students and 0.89 and 0.86 for male students indicating high internal consistency of scale. Correlation coefficient between scores of 90 subjects in two turns with an interval of four weeks was calculated for all the subjects 0.86, for girl subjects 0.84 and for boy subjects 0.87 indicating satisfactory retest reliability of scale.

The method of data analysis was path and regression analysis as well as SPSS 21 software were also used in the study. Path analysis assumptions considered in this study included: relative and interval scale of model's variables, linear relationship between predicting variables and dependent variable, normality of data and absence of multi collinearity.

### 3. Results

Demographic distribution showed that 78 persons were (28.78%) females and 193 persons (22.71%) were males. The age range was 18 to 25 years and mean was ( $23.44 \pm 3.55$ ). 48 persons of the participants were first year high-school students (17.7%), 59 persons were second year (21.8%), 61 persons were third year (22.5%) and 103 persons (38%) were fourth year.

Investigation of Pearson correlation matrix showed that there is a significant correlation between secure attachment and negative perfectionism ( $P < 0.01$ ,  $r = -0.020$ ), avoidant attachment and positive perfectionism ( $P < 0.05$ ,  $r = -0.012$ ), avoidant attachment and negative perfectionism ( $P < 0.01$ ,  $r = 0.19$ ), anxious attachment and negative perfectionism ( $P < 0.01$ ,  $r = 0.54$ ), avoidant attachment and life satisfaction ( $P < 0.01$ ,  $r = -0.015$ ), anxious attachment and life satisfaction ( $P < 0.01$ ,  $r = -0.24$ ), positive perfectionism and life satisfaction ( $P < 0.01$ ,  $r = 0.15$ ) as well as negative perfectionism and life satisfaction ( $P < 0.01$ ,  $r = -0.13$ ) (Figure 1 and Table 1).

The path of secure attachment to life satisfaction isn't statistically significant. But other directions from avoidant and anxious attachment, negative and positive perfectionism to life satisfaction are significant.

The second equation measured the pattern of relationships between the types of attachment styles on positive perfectionism. Explained variance in this equation is 0.22 ( $F(3, 294) = 5.31$ ,  $P < 0.01$ ) (Table 2).

The path of secure and anxiety attachment to positive perfectionism wasn't statistically significant, however; the path of avoidant attachment to positive perfectionism was significant.

The third equation measured pattern of relationships between the types of attachment styles on negative perfectionism. Explained variance is 0.35 in this equation ( $F(3, 294) = 51.72$ ,  $P < 0.001$ ) (Table 3).

The paths of anxious and avoidant attachment to negative perfectionism is significant (Figure 2).

The positive and negative perfectionism variables affect the explanation of life satisfaction changes. Anxious attachment, both directly and through negative perfectionism affect the explanation of life satisfaction changes. Also avoidant attachment both directly and through positive and negative perfectionism affect the explanation of life satisfaction changes. But secure attachment style doesn't impact on the explanation of life satisfaction changes neither directly nor indirectly (Table 4).

Investigation of total effects demonstrated that anxious attachment has the most effect on the life satisfaction and avoidant attachment variables and perfectionism are in the next category.

### 4. Discussion

The present study identified the pattern of relationships between attachment styles, perfectionism and life satisfaction. Consultants shouldn't consider perfectionism as a problematic construct but consider it as a multidimensional construct that has two dimensions both healthy and unhealthy.

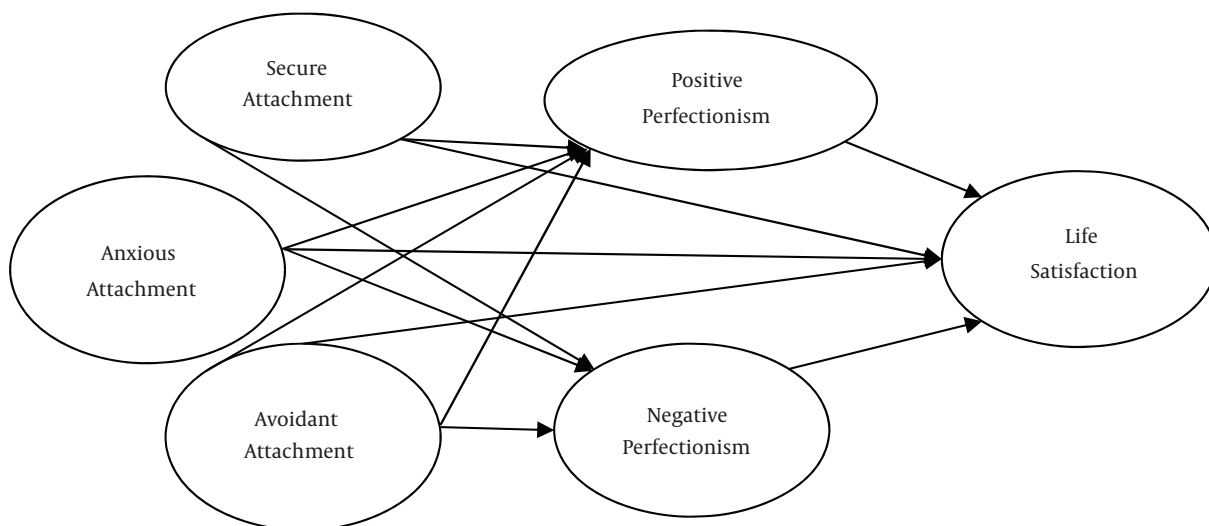
The results suggest relationship between insecure attachment and life satisfaction with negative perfectionism mediation. The increase in insecure attachment increases negative perfectionism and this matter lead to decrease the level of life satisfaction. Individuals who have negative perfectionism approach in their life, live with the fear of failure, and insecure attachment style may increase it and lead to the reduction in person's life satisfaction (7).

Positive perfectionism plays a mediating role between avoidant attachment and life satisfaction. Positive perfectionism may reduce the desire to leave intimate relationships in avoidant persons and this reduces person's despair feeling and leads to increase in the individual's life satisfaction. In fact, individuals who have positive perfectionism are trying to achieve high personal criteria without self-criticism and they don't have negative characteristics such as anxiety to achieve their goals (7, 9). As a result, they focus on their goals and interpersonal relationships more calmly.

The results suggest no significant relationship between secure attachment and positive perfectionism but there is a significant negative relationship between secure attachment style and negative perfectionism. There are two opinions in explanation of this finding. First, it may be concluded that secure attachment style does not have any effect on different dimensions of perfectionism (21); and second is considering mother's secure attachment and mother's perfectionism and violence of parents in relation to the child have more impact on the girl child (22). In this study, the number of girl participants was less than half of the boys. Equal number of boy and girl participants and also other attachment tools investigating attachment to parents separately might be considered as another result.

There was a significant negative relationship between insecure attachment styles and positive perfectionism and a significant positive relationship between insecure attachment and negative perfectionism. This finding is consistent with the result of Behroozi et al. (12) and Besharat et al. (23).

Individuals with negative perfectionism have negative internal working models of self and others that are shown with avoidant and anxiety attachment style. Insecure attachment styles with distrust features to oneself and others and unrealistic expectations of oneself and others help



**Figure 1.** Proposed Model of Pattern of Relationships Between Attachment Style and Perfectionism on Life Satisfaction

**Table 1.** Regression Analysis of Life Satisfaction on Attachment and Perfectionism Subscales<sup>a</sup>

Predictors	B	S.E	$\beta$	T	Significance
Constant	15.80	4.98		3.17	0.002
Secure attachment	-0.03	0.13	-0.01	-0.23	0.82
Avoidant attachment	-0.38	0.13	-0.17	-2.89	0.004
Anxious attachment	-0.15	0.79	-0.13	-1.9	0.005
Positive perfectionism	0.12	0.03	0.21	3.48	0.001
Negative perfectionism	-0.15	0.05	-0.21	-2.90	0.04

<sup>a</sup>P < 0.001.

**Table 2.** Regression Analysis of Positive Perfectionism on Attachment Subscale<sup>a</sup>

Predictors	B	S.E	$\beta$	T	Significance
Constant	8.80	0.20	-	8.80	0.001
Secure attachment	0.35	0.24	0.08	1.47	0.14
Avoidant attachment	-0.71	0.23	-0.18	3.09	0.002
Anxious attachment	-0.29	0.12	-0.15	-2.48	0.06

<sup>a</sup>P < 0.001.

to reinforcement of negative perfectionism in insecure individuals. These individuals are incapable of accepting personal limitations, they describe themselves perfect and in order to conceal worthless feelings they make themselves and others ideal (23). In other words, when individuals with negative perfectionism encounter a challenging issue, they faced with negative emotions such as lack of confidence and fear of failure, also they suffer from dissat-

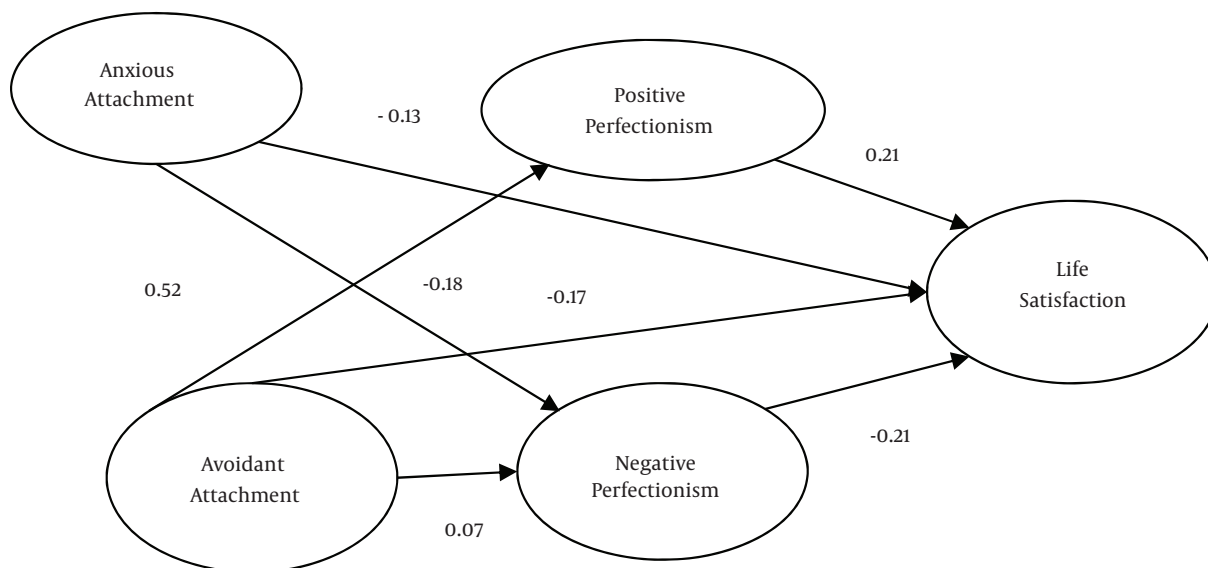
isfaction and fear of rejection by others. Since they think that if they fail once, they always will be ignored by others. Of course, this issue is the characteristic of the individuals with negative perfectionism and it is referred by various theorists (22).

Also, no significant relationship was observed between secure attachment and life satisfaction that is inconsistent with findings of Nazari et al. (11). It can be noted that the

**Table 3.** Regression Analysis of Negative Perfectionism on Attachment Subscale<sup>a</sup>

Predictors	B	S.E	$\beta$	T	Significance
Constant	0.65	0.03	-	0.25	0.0001
Secure attachment	-0.38	-0.16	-0.11	-2.31	0.16
Avoidant attachment	0.24	0.16	0.07	1.47	0.04

<sup>a</sup>P < 0.001.



**Figure 2.** The Final Model of Pattern of Relationship Between Attachment Style and Perfectionism on Life Satisfaction

**Table 4.** Direct, Indirect and Total Impact of Attachment and Perfectionism Variables on life Satisfaction

Variables	Direct	Indirect	Total
Anxious attachment	-0.13	0.1-	-0.24
Avoidant attachment	-0.17	-0.05	-0.22
Positive perfectionism	0.21	-	0.21
Negative perfectionism	-0.21	-	-0.21

number of girls was lower than boys in this study. Studies have shown that attachment to parents is more in girls than boys (24), also girls act stronger than boys in pursuit of their friendship with girls, therefore they have other supportive sources in addition to their parents (such as friends) (25). Accordingly, it can be said that the number of individuals with secure attachment was likely lower than those with anxiety and avoidance attachment in this study. In addition, the tool used for life satisfaction in this study measures general life satisfaction, and perhaps if this sat-

isfaction is limited to particular dimensions (such as job, family, friends etc.), we see a significant relationship in some dimensions.

There is a significant negative correlation between avoidant attachment and life satisfaction and there is a significant negative correlation between anxious attachment and life satisfaction. Lack of trust to themselves and others is the key feature of avoidant individuals. Distrust reduces their ability to encounter stressful situations and imposes psychological helplessness on insecure individuals. Meanwhile, the insecure individuals are not satisfied of their relationships with other, show less supportive behaviors and seek less support, this cause breaking off their relationships with other and social networks leading to reduce life satisfaction in turn (11). Also, the insecure attachment through emotionally non-adaptive strategies leads to doing maladaptive behaviors, such as alcohol, cigarettes or drug use by them when they face with problems or stress in their life for escape or relief. This method, however, is soothing but it is self-destruction strategy and ultimately

reduces mental health and life satisfaction.

As observed in the findings part, there is a significant positive correlation between positive perfectionism and life satisfaction and there is a significant negative correlation between negative perfectionism and life satisfaction. Positive perfectionism are individuals who feel good about their successes; also, they are flexible about their failures and mistakes and accept them. Positive perfectionism focuses on expectations related to progress, competition, ability and excitement related to experience of a job and satisfaction (26). On the contrary, people who have negative perfectionism have a very limited range of accepting their performance and never think that their efforts are good enough. These individuals evaluate criteria and their performance based on biased methods. Such biases include selective attention to the “defeat” and not considering the “success”. After failing to achieve their goals, they blame and criticism themselves and after success, they think these criteria and goals were accessible and interpret them as the goal that wasn’t difficult enough. As a result, these people are never satisfied; thus, life satisfaction score in various aspects and general life satisfaction in them are lower than the individuals with positive perfectionism. In fact, individuals who are thinking more about their achievements have higher life satisfaction than those who evaluate difference between goals and their performance.

Maladaptive perfectionism and insecure attachment reduce life satisfaction. In these cases, counselor may explain to the client that how quality of the person’s intimate relationships may affect his/her perfectionism type and thus reduce his/her life satisfaction. Of course clients who have a combination of insecure attachment and negative perfectionism may have difficulty in making a positive relationship with their counselor. These individuals may have irrational expectations of the consultation process for example; they expect to have significant progress in a short time. To help the clients with unrealistic criteria, it would be better that counselor explains consultation process, reasonable goals and valuable expectations to the clients in the early meetings.

Limited generalization of the results is regarded as one of the limitations of the present study. Other limitations include: first, the results of the study such as many other studies may persuade participants to use approaches for social approval due to the use of self-report instruments (rather than actual behavior), and second, the participants only consisted of Roodehen University students not the students from other universities. Also, it is recommended to examine the study in different ages and occupational groups.

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