



Original Article

# The effectiveness of attachment-based group training on the of a non-clinical sample of students with psychological well-being preoccupied insecure attachment style

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## Abstract

**Introduction:** The importance of the relationship between attachment patterns in childhood and the quality of close relationships in adulthood is one of the issues that have been of great interest to the researchers in recent decades. In this regard, this study was conducted to evaluate the effectiveness of attachment-based group training on the psychological well-being of a non-clinical sample of students.

**Materials and Methods:** In this clinical trial, through convenient sampling, 16 girl students of Ferdowsi University of Mashhad in the academic year of 2012-2013 with preoccupied attachment style were selected and randomly allocated to two groups. The Relationship Scales Questionnaire (RSQ) and the Ryff Scales of Psychological Well-Being (RSPWB) - short form- were used in this study. The experimental group received 7 sessions of 90-minute attachment-based group training while the control group was on the waiting list. Data were analyzed through descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation) and multivariate analysis of covariance by SPSS software version 19.

**Results:** The results revealed that there was not significant difference between two groups in pre-test also there was not significant difference between two groups in the overall score of the psychological well-being in post-test ( $P>0.05$ ).

**Conclusion:** It seems that the application of attachment-based group training in people with preoccupied insecure style cannot lead to the significant improvement of the overall psychological well-being despite improvement in some variables.

**Keywords:** Attachment, Group therapy, Psychological well-being, Students

## Please cite this paper as:

*Iranian Pahrabad S, Mashhadi A, Tabibi Z, Modarres Gharavi SM. The effectiveness of attachment-based group training on the psychological well-being of a non-clinical sample of students with preoccupied insecure attachment style. Journal of Fundamentals of Mental Health 2016 Mar-Apr; 18(2): 109-15.*

## Introduction

Attachment theory that explains the formation process of the relationship between the child and primary care was developed by Bowlby and was expanded by Ainsworth experimental observations (1). Based on the natural behavioral theory, Bowlby assumed that like other primates, humans have an inherent tendency to develop social communication because in terms of evolutionary this relationship has contributed to the support and protection of humans against risks as well as their survival and reproduction (2). According to Bowlby babies are

born with a set of innate behaviors (attachment behaviors such as crying, laughing, etc.) aimed at proximity seeking and maintaining with others supporting (attachment symbols) (3).

In fact, Bowlby provided a framework that would contribute to understanding the formation of expectations about oneself and others in the initial communication experiences of children (4).

According to Bowlby and Ainsworth, attachment quality and pattern in adulthood relationships can resemble attachment patterns of the individual in relation to his primary caregiver. Therefore, what begins as specific interaction presentations with caregivers during the infancy gradually becomes the main personality traits that form the attachment system performance of an individual in adulthood at new situations (5). Accordingly, Bowlby raised some

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Received: Jun. 01, 2015  
Accepted: Oct. 25, 2015

statements about how the primary communication experiences are involved in psychological well-being or later psychopathology (2).

Despite what is thought, the concept of well-being is a complex structure that is associated with optimal performance. During the last century mental health was defined in negative terms, and this concept was considered as the absence of mental illness. For this reason, psychology focus was on improving psychopathology. This kept the promotion of mental health and care for personal growth in the margin, but in the 1960s as the research approach changed towards the prevention, psychological well-being was also taken into account (6). Accordingly, Ryff brought up a concept named psychological well-being to create a theoretical basis for empirical approach to well-being (7). He offered his own multidimensional model through the convergence of Erikson's psychosocial theory, the concept of Buhler's basic desires of life, Neugarten's personality changes, Maslow's concept of self-actualization, as well as the concepts of the theory of Rogers, Jung and Allport and some other theories. This pattern consists of 6 components related to positive psychological functioning. These components include self-acceptance, positive relationships with others, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life, and personal growth (8,9).

In this regard, some studies have been done on the relationship between psychological well-being and attachment styles including the research conducted on adolescents by Kocayorok. The results of the structural equation analysis showed that attachment to the mother because of the impact on the teenager's eligibility is associated with psychological well-being and compatibility (10). In addition, based on the results of the study conducted by Bayrami, Heshmati, Mohammadpur, Gholamzadeh, and Hassanpour, secure attachment is the main cause of happiness and desire to communicate with others. In fact, students with secure style were happier and felt more satisfied in their relationships than insecure students. In contrast, anxious people showed more concern and stress in their relationship and the avoidant individuals showed less intimacy (11). In another study, the results on a sample of psychiatric inpatients and outpatients showed that only 10% of them had a secure style (12). On the other hand, Ozturk and Mutlu investigated the relationship between attachment and psychological well-being and showed that preoccupied insecure attachment styles (excessive sensitivity towards the separation

of the close relationship), fearful avoidance (fear of rejection and intimacy in close relationships) and dismissing avoidance (apathy towards intimacy in close relationships) show a higher level of social anxiety, and socially anxious people have lower psychological well-being than the others (13). The results of the research by Kafetsios and Sideridis also showed that there is a negative relationship between insecure attachment style and psychological well being (14).

According to the assumptions of attachment theory and research that has been done about it, people with insecure attachment have major problems in self-worth, self-esteem and self-efficacy and this leads them towards disappointment and helplessness. In other words, insecure attachment styles have cognitive, social, and emotional aspects that make people prone to psychological incompatibility. This view of the relationship between attachment style and mental health has some applications in psychotherapy and assessment of therapeutic interventions (5). Various research reviews show that people with different types of mental disorders or symptoms of the disorders show insecure attachment patterns in their interactions (5). With regard to this issue, as insecure attachment styles are considered as a risk factor for the development of psychological disorders (15-17), doing necessary interventions contribute to the improvement of the relationship between insecure people and the reduction of the risk of mental illness. Therefore, the aim of this study was to evaluate the effectiveness of attachment-based group training on psychological well-being in students with preoccupied insecure style.

### Materials and Methods

The research is a clinical trial study with pretest-posttest and control group. The research population was comprised female undergraduate students of Ferdowsi University of Mashhad in the academic year of 2012-2013. The study sample included individuals with preoccupied insecure style and after evaluating, 368 students were selected through convenient sampling method. Initially 19 students stated their definite intention to participate in the study, among whom nine subjects were placed in the experimental group and the others in the control group (waiting list). After the intervention, one participant from the experimental group and two participants from the control groups left the study. Therefore, 8 participants finally remained in each group. Group sessions were also held in the Clinic of Faculty of Education and Psychology, Ferdowsi

University of Mashhad. It should be noted that the criteria to enter the training group included preoccupied attachment style (using relationship scales questionnaire (RSQ)) and the lack of essential criteria for the diagnosis of mental illnesses (non-clinical sample). In short, what has been proposed in each session is as follows:

In the first session, the leader of the group introduced the rules of the group and the trend of sessions to the members of the group. Also, the participants' expectations in this group were discussed and amended if necessary. After that, the introduction of the concept of attachment, its functions and its relationship with the existing relations of individuals was expressed.

The second session started with a review of the materials presented in previous session and continued with closer investigation of attachment by providing information on attachment styles in childhood and how to identify them. The leader of the group was trying to pose some questions while explaining the contents to facilitate the activities and the participation of the group members.

It seems that the third session was of particular importance due to the introduction of the features and characteristics of adult attachment styles in it. During this session, for better and more tangible understanding of the contents, the leader asked the members to review and assess their close relations.

In the fourth session, after discussing the previous points and getting the feedbacks and experiences of the members, patterns of internal work and their orientation in each of the styles were discussed. Pursuing the communication situation of each member and a closer look at their experiences by the group leader contributed to deeper understanding of attachment concepts.

In the fifth session, the leader of the group provided some information about the relationship between fear of rejection and insecure attachment styles (which were discussed gradually and indirectly during the previous sessions), and factors affecting it.

The sixth session which was somehow ending attachment-based trainings, continued with the discussion of individual values, the source of their formation, and their relationship with attachment. Moreover, with the participation and activity of group members, some solutions to move towards secure attachment style were discussed.

In the seventh session which was the final one, the contents of previous sessions and the awareness and changes trends of close interpersonal relations of the group members were reviewed the members'

potential questions were answered. At the end, the ending trend of the group was completed and the final evaluation was performed (18).

### **Research instruments**

- *Relationship Scales Questionnaire (RSQ)*: This questionnaire that was designed by Griffin and Bartholomew has 30 questions to measure feelings about close relationships (19). The items of the questionnaire are made based on Hazan and Shaver Scale, Relationship Questionnaire of Bartholomew and Horowitz, and Revised Adult Attachment Scale of Collins and Read. By evaluating two of anxiety and avoidance, Relationship Scales Questionnaire examines preoccupied secure attachment styles, dismissing avoidance and fearful avoidance. Respond to every item is scored on a Likert scale from not at all (1) to very much (5). By calculating the mean of each style items, the score of that style is achieved (20). However, due to dimensional view of Bartholomew the highest score should be considered, if necessary, to determine the individuals' attachment styles.

In the studies conducted abroad, the internal consistency of anxiety and avoidance was obtained in the range of 0.90 to 0.85 (21). Test-retest reliability of the questionnaire ranges from 0.78 to 0.54 and the correlation coefficients of relationship scales questionnaire and relationship questionnaire (RQ) varies from 0.61 to 0.41 (22).

- *Ryff's Scales of Psychological Well-Being (RSPWB)*: This scale was designed by Ryff in the original form of 120 questions with 6 subscales including self-acceptance, positive relationships with others, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life, and personal growth. The answer to each question varies from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (6) (23). Higher scores indicate higher levels of psychological well-being. It should be noted that in the next studies, 84, 54, and 18-item forms of the scale were presented, too. In this study, the short form of 18 questions that was summarized by Ryff and Keys was used. Ryff and Keys reported that the correlation between the subscales of 18-item and 120-item questionnaires ranged from 0.70 to 0.89 (9).

The research conducted by Baiani, Kouchaki and Baiani indicated the acceptable reliability and validity of Persian version of 84 questions (24). In their study using Cronbach's alpha method, the internal reliability of the scale was 0.82 and its subscales Alpha ranged from 0.70 to 0.80. Its Positive correlation with Life Satisfaction Scale, Oxford Happiness Inventory, and Rosenberg Self-Esteem Inventory indicates its convergent validity

(25). In another study, Cronbach's alpha coefficients for each of the subscales of this form were 0.60, 0.77, 0.73, 0.74, 0.75, and 0.78 respectively (26). In addition, in validating the 18-item questionnaire of Ryff's Scales of Psychological Well-Being on the students of Qazvin University of Medical Science, Sefidi and Farzad reported the internal consistency of the total test and the subscales as 0.65 to 0.75 (27). The obtained data were analyzed using SPSS 19 software and univariate and multivariate analysis of covariance.

## Results

The participants in this study included 368 female undergraduate students with an average age of 20.28 among whom 16 students were selected to participate in attachment-based group training. The mean age of experimental group and control group was 19.63 and 19.25, respectively. The mean and standard deviation of psychological well-being and its subscales are displayed in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Descriptive statistics of total score of psychological well-being and its subscales in abridged form of Ryff's scale

Standard deviation	Mean	Group	Time	Dependent variable
12.37	72.38	Experimental	Pretest	Psychological well-being
12.85	79.25	Control		
10.50	71.38	Experimental	Posttest	Autonomy
7.86	74.88	Control		
2.13	10.00	Experimental	Pretest	Environmental mastery
2.96	12.75	Control		
3.05	10.25	Experimental	Posttest	Personal growth
2.64	10.88	Control		
2.06	12.63	Experimental	Pretest	Positive relationships with others
2.13	14.00	Control		
3.05	12.25	Experimental	Posttest	Purpose in life
2.74	12.87	Control		
3.45	13.25	Experimental	Pretest	Self-acceptance
2.47	15.13	Control		
3.35	11.88	Experimental	Posttest	
2.38	13.63	Control		
3.80	12.25		Pretest	
3.58	12.00		Posttest	
2.50	13.38			
4.12	12.13			
2.86	12.25		Pretest	
2.97	13.50		Posttest	
1.69	13.00			
2.72	13.00			
3.66	12.00		Pretest	
4.15	11.88		Posttest	
2.72	10.63			
2.66	12.38			

In order to test the hypothesis, the ANCOVA was used to assess total score of psychological well-being. Therefore, the assumptions of the test were examined first. Kolmogorov-Smirnov test showed the normal distribution of psychological well-being variable ( $P>0.05$ ). Levine test results confirmed the consistency of the variance in both experimental and control groups ( $P>0.05$ ,  $F_{(1, 14)}=0.77$ ). Also examining the slope of the regression line showed its similarity in both groups ( $P>0.05$ ,  $F_{(1, 12)}=0.94$ ).

In this analysis, the "group" as the independent variable and "overall psychological well-being score" as the dependent variable entered into the model. In addition, in order to control the effect of pre-test, the pre-test score of the variable entered the model as the covariate.

**Table 2.** The inter-subject effects of attachment-based training group on psychological well-being scores

Rate of effect	Significance level	F	Mean square	Degree of freedom	Sum of squares	Source	Dependent variable
0.10	0.23	1.56	129.41	1	129.41	Pretest	Psychological well-being
0.01	0.70	0.15	12.53	1	12.53	Group effect	
			82.71	13	1075.34	Error	

As it can be seen in Table 2, psychological well-being score has no significant effect in the posttest step ( $\eta^2=0.10$ ,  $P>0.05$ ,  $F_{(1, 13)}=7.10$ ). Moreover, after controlling pretest scores, the effect of group in posttest is not significant ( $\eta^2=0.52$ ,  $P>0.05$ ,  $F_{(1, 13)}=7.10$ ). Therefore, there is no significant difference between the experimental and control groups in post test in terms of psychological well-being scores.

To verify the findings related to psychological well-being scales, the multivariate analysis of covariance was used. Before running this test, the assumption of equal variances was examined by Levine test which confirmed the homogeneity of variances (autonomy  $P=0.70$ ,  $F_{(1, 14)}=0.15$ ; environmental mastery  $P=0.34$ ,  $F_{(1, 14)}=0.93$ ; personal growth  $P=0.15$ ,  $F_{(1, 14)}=2.26$ ; positive relationships with others  $P=0.88$ ,  $F_{(1, 14)}=0.02$ ; purpose in life  $P=0.96$ ,  $F_{(1, 14)}=4.09$ ; self-acceptance  $P=0.90$ ,  $F_{(1, 14)}=0.01$ ). Moreover, Box test was used to examine the default of covariance matrix consistency. The results indicated that the matrices of covariance were equal ( $P=0.40$ ,  $F=-1.04$ , Box  $M=42.42$ ).

**Table 3.** The results of multivariate covariance analysis on dependent variables

Rate of effect	Significance level	Error df	df hypothesis	F	Value	Test name
0.91	0.23	2.00	6.00	3.63	0.91	Pilai effect
0.91	0.23	2.00	6.00	3.63	0.08	Wilks' lambda
0.91	0.23	2.00	6.00	3.63	10.88	Hotling effect
0.91	0.23	2.00	6.00	3.63	10.88	Largest Root

Table 3 shows that there is no significant difference between the posttest scores of experimental and control groups ( $P>0.05$ ,  $F=3.63$ , Wilks' Lambda test=0.08).

**Table 4.** Multivariate analysis of covariance to compare the scores of both experimental and control groups in the subscales of psychological well-being

Rate of effect	Significance Level	F	Mean square	df	Sum of squares	Dependent variable	Source
0.07	0.46	0.59	2.83	1	2.83	Autonomy	Group
0.07	0.47	0.58	4.10	1	4.10	Environmental mastery	
0.04	0.57	0.34	1.70	1	1.70	Personal growth	Group
0.20	0.22	1.74	8.42	1	8.42	Positive relationships with others	
0.17	0.26	1.47	8.30	1	8.30	Purpose in life	Group
0.07	0.46	0.59	2.40	1	2.40	Self-acceptance	

As it can be seen in Table 4, the comparison of experimental and control groups shows no significant difference in any subscales of psychological well-being. In other words, according to Table 1, although the mean of some variables (autonomy, positive relationships with others, and purpose in life) has increased in the posttest, the change has not been statistically significant.

## Discussion

The results of the present research showed that attachment-based group training did not lead to the increase of psychological well-being score in general. Moreover, the intervention did not increase the scores of psychological well-being subscales significantly. The review of the conducted studies revealed that so far no study has been conducted to investigate the effect of attachment-based interventions on psychological well-being components and in many studies the relationship

between attachment styles and psychological wellbeing has been emphasized. For instance, Leak and Cooney stated in their study that secure style is associated with autonomy in the relations and selecting objectives such as self-acceptance and personal growth while preoccupied styles and fearful avoidance reflect less autonomy (28).

Moreover, in another study conducted by Bairami et al., it was found that the relations of people with secure style are associated with positive communication features such as intimacy and happiness, but people with preoccupied insecure style (anxiety) experience more concern and thrill and less happiness in their relations (11).

As mentioned in previous studies, depression and psychological well-being, as well as two dimensions of self-acceptance and environmental mastery are inversely related to all aspects of psychological well-being (9,29,30). On the other hand, according to the results of the research conducted by Iranian et al., since attachment-based group training has not led to the reduction of depression and anxiety, it cannot increase psychological well-being (31) and it is necessary to pay attention to a few points. It should be noted that attachment theory is a subset of psychoanalytic approaches. The reason for this can be found in what Weston found. On the other hand it is necessary to pay attention to a few points. It should be noted that attachment theory is a subset of psychoanalytic approaches. The reason for this can be raised in what Weston found. He believed that one of the common aspects of theories of psychological mobility is that childhood experiences play a significant role in shaping adulthood character and psychological aspects of self and others are the fundamental components of personality in social situations. On the other hand, based on the theories of psychological mobility and object relationships, emotional regulation functions (such as what occurs in the activation of the attachment system) is done by the parents at first and gradually becomes a part of the person (32). Since the foundation of attachment styles and internal work patterns are formed and perpetuated over several years, these patterns are considered as complicated cognitive-emotional structures. As Bowlby believed that changing or improving these patterns requires more time, this achievement can be explained. The lack of boy samples to evaluate the attachment and different populations can be among the challenges considered in this study. The small size of the sample under study and lack of investigating the attachment-based training group in boys and different populations are some of the

challenges of the present research.

### Conclusion

According to the findings of our study, it seems

like that the application of attachment-based group training in people with preoccupied insecure style cannot lead to the treatment of mental trauma in such people.

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