



ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Investigating the Relationship Between Attachment Styles and Self-Compassion Levels in University Students

Üniversite Öğrencilerinde Bağlanma Stillерinin Öz Şefkat Düzeyi ile İlişkinin İncelenmesi

Yusuf GÜREL , Sevgül ÖZKAYA , Havvanur ERDİL , Fadime YAĞIZ , Sofia Bahar LESKOVA 

¹Department of Psychology, Faculty of Economics, Administrative and Social Sciences, KTO Karatay University, Konya, Türkiye

Correspondence

Yusuf GÜREL,
Akabe Mah. Alaaddin Kap. No:130 42020
Karatay/Konya

E-Mail: yusuf.gurel@karatay.edu.tr

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ABSTRACT

Aim: The aim of this study is to examine the relationship between university students' self-compassion levels and attachment styles and to contribute to the literature by revealing whether this relationship differs according to demographic variables such as gender, university type and relationship status.

Materials and Methods: The research involved 272 university students aged 18-26. Data were collected using a sociodemographic form, the Three-Dimensional Attachment Styles Scale, and the Self-Compassion Scale.

Results: The findings indicate that gender plays a significant role in self-compassion and attachment styles ($p < .001$). Men were found to have significantly higher levels of self-judgment compared to women, while women scored higher on secure attachment ($p < .001$). Additionally, avoidant attachment scores were higher in men, whereas anxious attachment scores were higher in women (respectively, $p < .001$, $p = .046$). Regarding university type, state university students were found to have higher levels of self-judgment than private university students ($p = .030$). When relationship status was considered, students without a relationship exhibited higher anxious attachment scores compared to those in a relationship ($p = .002$).

Conclusions: These results suggest that self-compassion and attachment styles vary based on individuals' demographic characteristics, and these differences are significant in the context of psychological well-being and interpersonal relationships.

Keywords: Attachment, self-compassion, university student.

ÖZ

Amaç: Bu araştırmanın amacı, üniversite öğrencilerinin öz-şefkat düzeyleri ile bağlanma stilleri arasındaki ilişkiyi incelemek ve söz konusu ilişkinin cinsiyet, üniversite türü ve ilişki durumu gibi demografik değişkenlere göre farklılaşıp farklılaşmadığını ortaya koyarak alanyazına katkı ve farkındalık sağlamaktır.

Gereç ve Yöntemler: Çalışmaya 18-26 yaş arası 272 üniversite öğrencisi katılmıştır. Veriler, araştırmacı tarafından hazırlanan sosyodemografik bilgi formu, Üç Boyutlu Bağlanma Stilleri Ölçeği ve Öz-Şefkat Ölçeği kullanılarak toplanmıştır.

Bulgular: Cinsiyetin öz-şefkat ve bağlanma stilleri üzerinde belirgin bir rolü olduğunu göstermektedir ($p < .001$). Erkeklerin kadınlara kıyasla anlamlı düzeyde daha yüksek öz-yargılama düzeyine sahip olduğu, buna karşın kadınların daha yüksek güvenli bağlanma puanları elde ettiği tespit edilmiştir ($p < .001$). Aynı zamanda, erkeklerde kaçınan bağlanma, kadınlarda ise kaygılı bağlanma puanları daha yüksektir (sırasıyla; $p < .001$, $p = .046$). Üniversite türü açısından ise, devlet üniversitesi öğrencilerinin özel üniversite öğrencilerine göre daha yüksek öz-yargılama düzeyine sahip olduğu bulunmuştur ($p = .030$). İlişki durumuna bakıldığında, ilişkisi olmayan öğrencilerin ilişkisi olanlara göre daha yüksek kaygılı bağlanma puanları sergilediği saptanmıştır ($p = .002$).

Sonuçlar: Öz-şefkat ve bağlanma stillerinin bireylerin demografik özelliklerine göre farklılık gösterdiğini ve bu farklılıkların psikolojik iyi oluş ve kişilerarası ilişkiler bağlamında önemli olduğunu ortaya koymaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Bağlanma, öz-şefkat, üniversite öğrencisi.

Introduction

Attachment theory, developed by John Bowlby, offers a comprehensive framework for understanding the formation and function of emotional bonds. Early interactions with caregivers play a pivotal role in shaping attachment styles, which, in turn, influence relational patterns throughout the lifespan [1]. Secure attachment is associated with the ability to establish healthy and stable interpersonal relationships, whereas insecure forms of attachment—such as anxious and avoidant styles—are often linked to relational difficulties and vulnerability in emotional regulation [2, 3].

Parallel to attachment theory, the concept of self-compassion has gained increasing attention in recent years as a key determinant of psychological well-being. Self-compassion refers to treating oneself with kindness, understanding, and non-judgment during times of suffering or failure, as opposed to engaging in harsh self-criticism [4, 5]. A growing body of research demonstrates that higher levels of self-compassion are associated with enhanced life satisfaction, motivation, psychological and physical health, as well as lower levels of anxiety and depression [6–8].

A considerable body of empirical work has examined the interplay between attachment styles and self-compassion. Findings consistently suggest that individuals with anxious attachment styles tend to report lower levels of self-compassion, while those with secure attachment styles exhibit higher levels [9–12]. This relationship extends to social functioning, as individuals with greater self-compassion are generally more successful in seeking social support and maintaining healthy interpersonal connections [5, 6]. Studies conducted with university populations, in particular, highlight the detrimental role of anxious attachment on self-compassion [13, 14].

The university years, as a developmental stage of emerging adulthood, are critical for psychological adjustment, social relationship patterns, and emotional well-being. Within this context, attachment styles and self-compassion emerge as two central constructs influencing adaptation. Furthermore, sociodemographic variables such as gender, type of university, and relationship status may shape these dynamics, underscoring the importance of examining them in a comprehensive manner. Accordingly, the present study aims to investigate the relationship between attachment styles and self-compassion among university students, while also exploring the moderating effects of selected sociodemographic factors. Through this investigation, the study seeks to contribute to the literature and offer insights with practical implications for psychological support and intervention.

Materials and Methods

Subjects and Study Design

This study was conducted with university students aged 18–26 (21.9 ± 1.7) who volunteered to participate in order to examine the relationship between attachment styles and self-compassion levels among university students, as well as the effects of

gender, university status and relationship status on this relationship. Data collection for the study was conducted online using Google Forms. The sample size was determined using G*Power 3.1. For a two-tailed correlation analysis with $\alpha = .05$ and 80% power, a minimum of 272 participants was required. With this sample size, the study had sufficient power to detect a minimum correlation of approximately $r = .17$. In this study, the “Sociodemographic Information Form” prepared by the researcher, the Three-Dimensional Attachment Styles Scale, and the Self-Compassion Scale were used for data collection. Ethical approval was obtained from the Human Research Ethics Committee of KTO Karatay University on October 30, 2024, with the approval number 2024/07/25.

Sociodemographic Information Form: The sociodemographic information form was created by reviewing questions from similar studies in the literature and selecting those that were compatible with the purpose of the study. The sociodemographic information form used in the study was prepared to determine the demographic and individual characteristics of the participants, such as age, gender, university attended, and relationship status.

Three-Dimensional Attachment Styles Scale: This scale was developed by Erzen in 2016. The scale consists of 18 items and 3 subscales (Secure Attachment, Avoidant Attachment, Anxious Attachment) and does not contain reverse items. The Cronbach Alpha internal consistency coefficients for the 5-point Likert-type scale were determined as .80, .69, and .71 for the avoidant, secure, and anxious-ambivalent attachment styles, respectively.

Self-Compassion Scale: The Self-Compassion Scale was developed by Neff (2003) to assess individuals' levels of self-compassion. The scale consists of 26 items and includes six core dimensions: self-kindness, self-judgment, common humanity, isolation, mindfulness, and over-identification. These dimensions are designed to measure individuals' positive and negative attitudes toward themselves, their connections with others, and their levels of mental mindfulness. The scale is answered using a 5-point Likert-type rating system. The scale was adapted into Turkish by Akin and Abacı (2007). The internal consistency coefficients of the scale ranged from .72 to .80, while the test-retest reliability coefficients ranged from .56 to .69.

Statistical Analysis

The data from the study were analyzed using SPSS v.23 statistical software. Percentage distributions were obtained to examine descriptive characteristics, and measures of central tendency and dispersion (mean, standard deviation) were calculated for continuous variables. In advanced analyses, statistical significance was set at $p < 0.05$ with a 95% confidence interval.

The normality of continuous variables was assessed using the Shapiro-Wilk test. Student's t-test was used to determine whether there were differences in continuous variables showing normal distribution for sociodemographic variables. Pearson correlation

analysis was used to determine whether there was a relationship between attachment scale subscores, self-compassion scale subdomains, and total scores.

Results

Of the 272 participants in our study, 193 (71%) were female and 79 (29%) were male. 151 students (55.5%) were enrolled at a state university, while 121 students (44.5%) were enrolled at a private university. 77 students (28.3%) reported a relationship, while 195 students (71.7%) reported having no relationship (Table 1).

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Socio-demographic Variables

Variable	Category	N	%
Gender	Female	193	71,0
	Male	79	29,0
University Type	Public University	151	55,5
	Private University	121	44,5
Relationship Status	Relationship	77	28,3
	No relationship	195	71,7

N: 272. Percentages are based on total sample

When comparing female and male participants in terms of self-compassion levels and attachment styles, men had significantly higher levels of self-

judgment than women ($M = 16.89$, $SD = 3.57$; $M = 15.36$, $SD = 2.68$; $p < .001$). On the other hand, women have significantly higher secure attachment scores than men ($M = 17.99$, $SD = 1.77$; $M = 16.72$, $SD = 2.68$; $p < .001$). In terms of avoidant attachment levels, men's scores are significantly higher than women's ($M = 16.42$, $SD = 4.91$; $M = 14.39$, $SD = 3.73$; $p < .001$). Additionally, anxious attachment scores were found to be significantly higher in women than in men ($M = 16.40$, $SD = 4.45$; $M = 15.18$, $SD = 4.81$; $p = .046$). When comparing state and private university students in terms of self-compassion levels and attachment styles, a significant difference was found between the groups in the self-judgment variable ($p = .030$). The self-judgment levels of state university students ($M = 16.16$, $SD = 3.07$) were significantly higher than those of private university students ($M = 15.36$, $SD = 2.95$). When comparing relationship status in terms of self-compassion levels and attachment styles, a significant difference was found between the groups only in terms of anxious attachment ($p = .002$). The anxious attachment score was higher in the "no relationship" group ($M = 16.58$, $SD = 4.34$), while it was lower in the "relationship" group ($M = 14.68$, $SD = 4.92$). The comparison of self-compassion and attachment variables according to gender, university type, and relationship status is shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Comparison of Self-Compassion and Attachment Variables According to Gender, University Type, and Relationship Status

Variable	Women M (SS)	Man M (SS)	p	Public University M (SS)	Private University M (SS)	p	Relationship M (SS)	No relationship M (SS)	p
Over-identification	12.01 (2.39)	12.08 (2.90)	.836	11.86 (2.64)	12.23 (2.42)	.234	11.87 (2.37)	12.09 (2.62)	.527
Self-Kindness	15.05 (2.96)	14.67 (3.38)	.356	14.90 (3.03)	14.99 (3.17)	.809	15.31 (2.88)	14.79 (3.16)	.214
Self-Judgment	15.36 (2.68)	16.89 (3.57)	<.001	16.16 (3.07)	15.36 (2.95)	.030	15.32 (2.40)	15.99 (3.24)	.104
Isolation	12.26 (2.22)	12.42 (2.60)	.624	12.39 (2.11)	12.21 (2.59)	.519	11.96 (2.11)	12.45 (2.41)	.123
Mindfulness	12.72 (3.33)	12.86 (3.54)	.748	12.51 (3.15)	13.07 (3.65)	.179	13.16 (3.32)	12.60 (3.41)	.223
Common Humanity	12.44 (3.50)	11.75 (3.67)	.145	12.20 (3.37)	12.29 (3.80)	.835	12.44 (3.71)	12.16 (3.51)	.556
Self-Compassion	79.83 (3.93)	80.66 (4.84)	.144	80.02 (4.52)	80.14 (3.82)	.815	80.06 (3.97)	80.08 (4.32)	.983
Secure Attachment	17.99 (1.77)	16.72 (2.68)	<.001	17.45 (2.19)	17.84 (2.09)	.135	17.95 (1.65)	17.50 (2.31)	.119
Avoidant Attachment	14.39 (3.73)	16.42 (4.91)	<.001	14.96 (4.44)	15.00 (3.90)	.938	14.42 (3.90)	15.20 (4.31)	.166
Anxious Attachment	16.40 (4.45)	15.18 (4.81)	.046	15.91 (4.58)	16.21 (4.60)	.583	14.68 (4.92)	16.58 (4.34)	.002

Table 3. Relationship between age, self-compassion subdimensions (self-kindness, self-judgment, isolation, Mindfulness, common humanity, over-identification), total self-compassion score, and attachment styles (secure, avoidant, anxious).

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Age	—										
2. Self-Compassion	-.03	—									
3. Self-Kindness	-.02	.24**	—								
4. Self-Judgment	.04	.32**	-.50**	—							
5. Isolation	.03	.28**	-.56**	.48**	—						
6. Mindfulness	-.02	-.06	.08	-.37**	-.45**	—					
7. Common Humanity	-.08	.36**	.56**	-.34**	-.22**	-.37**	—				
8. Over-identification	.02	.33**	-.61**	.46**	.54**	-.16**	-.39**	—			
9. Secure Attachment	.01	-.16**	.03	-.34**	-.18**	.35**	-.11	-.05	—		
10. Avoidant Attachment	-.05	.06	.12†	-.10	-.01	-.01	.13*	-.10	-.18**	—	
11. Anxious Attachment	-.16**	.05	.33**	-.19**	-.13*	-.28**	.47**	-.25**	-.16*	.27**	—

When examining the relationship between age, self-compassion subdimensions (self-kindness, self-judgment, isolation, Mindfulness, shared humanity, and over-identification), total self-compassion score, and attachment styles (secure, avoidant, anxious). A negative and low-level significant relationship was found between age and anxious attachment ($r = -.16, p < .01$). Self-kindness, mindfulness, and common humanity showed positive and significant relationships with each other, while self-judgment, isolation, and over-identification showed negative and significant relationships. The negative correlation between self-compassion and excessive identification ($r = -.61, p < .01$). Various levels of significant relationships were also observed between attachment styles and self-compassion. For example, secure attachment is positively related to mindfulness ($r = .35, p < .01$). Anxious attachment, on the other hand, shows significant relationships with variables such as self-judgment ($r = -.19, p < .01$), mindfulness ($r = -.28, p < .01$), and common humanity ($r = .47, p < .01$).

Discussion

The present study examined the relationship between self-compassion, attachment styles, and demographic variables such as gender, type of university, and relationship status among university students. Several noteworthy findings emerged, which both align with and extend the existing literature.

Gender differences were observed in both self-compassion and attachment styles. Men reported higher levels of self-judgment, suggesting a greater tendency toward self-criticism. This finding is consistent with prior research emphasizing the influence of traditional gender roles, whereby men may evaluate themselves more harshly when coping with emotional difficulties [6]. However, the absence of significant gender differences in the overall self-compassion score and in other subdimensions suggests that self-compassion may represent a more stable, gender-independent construct. With respect to attachment, women scored significantly higher on secure and anxious attachment, while men scored higher on avoidant attachment. These results support prior evidence that women are generally more adept at seeking and maintaining social support [14], yet also more prone to relational anxiety and fear of rejection. Men's elevated avoidant attachment scores, in contrast, may reflect societal expectations that discourage emotional vulnerability in males [15]. University type also emerged as a meaningful factor. Students at state universities demonstrated higher self-judgment scores compared to those at private universities. This pattern may reflect the more competitive academic environments and higher performance-related stress often observed in state institutions [16]. Nevertheless, no significant differences were observed in other dimensions of self-compassion or in attachment styles, suggesting that these constructs are more strongly shaped by early developmental experiences than by contextual factors such as institutional environment. Relationship status was another variable associated with attachment patterns. Students without a romantic

relationship reported significantly higher anxious attachment scores than their peers in relationships. This supports the notion that anxious attachment—characterized by fear of abandonment and constant need for reassurance—may impair the ability to initiate or maintain stable romantic bonds [17]. The absence of significant differences in other variables underscores the specific role of anxious attachment in shaping relational functioning.

In addition to these demographic findings, the study revealed a negative association between age and anxious attachment, suggesting that individuals may adopt more mature attachment strategies and experience lower relational anxiety with increasing age. This developmental trajectory is consistent with previous findings reporting a decline in attachment-related anxiety over time [18, 19].

Correlational analyses further highlighted meaningful associations among the subdimensions of self-compassion, in line with Neff's theoretical model [6]. Positive components such as self-kindness, mindfulness, and common humanity were positively interrelated, while negative components such as self-judgment, isolation, and over-identification correlated negatively with them. These results mirror prior research showing that self-kindness and mindfulness contribute to psychological well-being, whereas self-judgment and over-identification are linked to depression and anxiety [20, 21].

Finally, significant relationships were found between attachment styles and self-compassion. Secure attachment was positively associated with mindfulness, indicating that securely attached individuals are more likely to approach internal experiences with awareness and acceptance. This finding supports the view that secure attachment functions as a protective factor in the development of self-compassion [13, 22]. Conversely, anxious attachment was associated with higher self-judgment and lower mindfulness, suggesting that individuals with this style tend to be more self-critical and less able to adopt an accepting stance toward their experiences [23]. These results highlight the importance of evaluating attachment theory and self-compassion in an integrated manner, as both play pivotal roles in shaping emotional regulation and interpersonal functioning.

Conclusion

Taken together, the findings underscore the interrelated nature of self-compassion and attachment styles and their sensitivity to certain demographic variables. The study highlights the significance of these constructs in understanding psychological well-being and interpersonal relationships in young adulthood, and it points to promising avenues for future research and practical applications.

Despite its contributions, the present study has several limitations. First, as the sample consisted solely of university students, the findings may not be generalizable to other populations or developmental stages. Second, data collection through online

surveys limited control over response accuracy and the influence of factors such as social desirability bias. Third, the cross-sectional design prevents causal interpretations; thus, it remains unclear whether, for example, higher self-judgment fosters avoidant attachment or vice versa.

Future research could address these limitations in several ways. Studies with more heterogeneous samples, including different age groups and socioeconomic backgrounds, would enhance the generalizability of findings. Longitudinal designs could shed light on the developmental course and causal directions of the relationship between self-compassion and attachment styles. Moreover, intervention studies aimed at enhancing self-compassion or modifying insecure attachment patterns could provide practical implications for clinical and educational settings. Finally, qualitative approaches, such as in-depth interviews, could enrich the quantitative findings by offering deeper insights into individuals' lived experiences of self-compassion and attachment.

Conflict of interest

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest concerning the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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