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The ways of handling stress and the attachment forms to parents of university students

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Abstract

The aim of the study was to determine the ways of handling stress and attachment forms to parents for university students. The content of this research, which has been done in a descriptive manner, covers the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd year students of the department of Nursing in the Faculty of Health Sciences and Faculty of Education (N=795) of a state university in the education year of 2010-2011. For this research, no sampling method has been chosen but the whole environment taken as samples. However, only 711 of the students agreed to participate to the research. Upon receiving the approval from the institutions, the students were told the aim of the research and forms collected after class by the researchers. The tools to collect data; a form including 22 questions, which prepared by the researchers, a scale for Parental Attachment Style Instrument-(PASI; form of mother $\alpha=.87$, form of father=.89), and Ways of Coping Inventory. Ways of Coping Inventory: It has been developed to measure the ways individuals use to handle stress by Folkman and Lazarus(1980). The Turkish adaptation of it has been done by Şahin and Durak (1995). The data have been evaluated through descriptive statistics, chi-square, t test and correlation analysis. 36.4% of the students study at the department of Nursing and 63.6% of them study at the department of Teaching Training. Through PASI, it has been measured that the average for caring mother at low level is 18.71 while the average for controlling/ over protecting mother is 12.63, meanwhile average for caring father is 18.62 but the average for controlling/overprotecting father is 13.67. When we look at the ways to handle stress of the sample group, it has been concluded that subjects use the ways of seeking the most social support, confident approach towards them, optimistic approach, insecure/desperate approach and obedient approach in this order.

Keywords: University students, attachment styles, coping

1. Introduction

Attachment style is a phenomenon that is determined at the early ages of life and is thought to be continuous; it also shapes individual's pattern of establishing relationship (Hamilton 2000, Kesebir 2011).

According to attachment theorists, attachment style shows persistence for lifetime once it is determined either securely or insecurely in infancy. Studies conducted within the scope of attachment theory have shown that positive emotional development in the early years and secure attachment to parents are a significant source for maintaining psychological health for lifetime (Uluman 2011, Kapçı 2006, Kesebir 2011).

While the communication established with the mother serves only as the biological continuation of the child in the beginning, this interaction style (attachment) turns into an interaction style which affects all aspects of individual's life as individual internalizes it (Hamarta 2004, Kesebir 2011, Rice 2000, Wei 2003).

Every child is born from two biological parents and both play an important role in child's personality development. Parents play a key role in the formation of individuals' attachment styles. It is said that individual

differences in attachment styles result from their perceptions about whether caretaker is available when the need arises or whether he/she is responsive. While children whose parents behave sensitively and consistently toward child's needs develop secure attachment style, children whose parents don't provide child's needs emotionally and physically develop insecure attachment style. Attachment relationship established at the early ages affects the relationships which are experienced in the upcoming periods. Children with secure attachment style are self-confident and they have secure attachment behaviors in their social and intimate relationships. As children who develop insecure attachment style regard themselves more worthless and trust other people less, they suffer from problems in personal and interpersonal relationships as well as displaying conformity problems (Collins and Read, 1990; Rice and Mirzadeh, 2000, Kesebir 2011, Wei 2003).

The youth starts to become more critical of their parents and analyze them on an abstract level thanks to their developing abstract thinking skills and motive of questioning the life philosophically. At this point, adolescents with secure attachment don't experience a developmentally notable crisis even though they grow keen on their freedom and their peers because of the desire to be independent, peculiar to adolescence. However, it can lead to various problems for people with insecure attachment especially the ones who are preoccupied and unstable. Anxious attachment accompanied by being deserted, not being loved, not being approved sufficiently, and feelings of inadequacy causes those people to experience loneliness, depression, lack of self-complacency and concentration problems more often by increasing the level of anxiety in intimate relations (Sümer, 2006; Wei, 2003, Uehara, 1999; Rice 2000).

The individual tends to move away from attachment relationships with the parents as he/she gets older and closer to the youth age. The bonding between youngster and the parents are regarded as attachments which are restricting rather than secure attachments to lead on. For this reason, the basic need of the youngster is the need to find his own way in life without being dependent on anybody (Lee, 2003). A new type of attachment starts to emerge during adolescences.

Attachment experiences of childhood determine the success in social relations and adjustment to the difficulties of life of an adolescent (Willemssen, 2011). Contradictions of this sort result from attachment experiences and learning interpersonal relations that the individual had in the past. For example, people whose interactions with other people ended in disappointment may start to mistrust other people and avoid having intimate relations with them (Horowitz, 1993, Ducharme, 2002).

Coping skill which is defined as individual's cognitive and behavioral reaction to impasses is an important factor in individual's health. Initiatives taken with the aim of coping with the problem might be in the form of "aiming at the problem" when it is about personal and environmental change or in the form of "emotional orientation" towards change in ideas and attention. When emotional anxiety can be transformed appropriately into problem-solving strategy physical and psychological stress diminish and sense of self and resistance to frustration increase thanks to the feeling of self-sufficiency which comes after solving the problem (Uehara, 1999, Rohder, 1990, Kaya 2009). Confident individuals consider stressful events less threatening when compared to less confident ones. These people have confidence in themselves in relation to coping with the factors that cause stress. They express their feelings openly. They use consultancy as a strategy to regulate emotions in order to cope with the conditions that can create stress. They discuss the the situations openly and find solutions to contradictions rather than avoid them. Moreover, confident individuals are aware of the symptoms of anger. They take part in problem solutions in the line of conformity. They express their anger in control and in a friendly manner. Positive feelings about life will create problem solving in individuals with secure attachment styles (Kesebir, 2011, Belsky, 2002). To sum up, it is of great importance to know parents-child attachment styles in increasing adolescents' coping skills with stress.

2. Method

This study was conducted in order to determine the correlation between parent attachment styles and coping strategies in university students. It is a descriptive and correlation seeking study.

Population and Sample of the Study: The population of the study consists of students at Marmara University whereas the sample group consists of 711 students who study in Institute of Educational and Medical Sciences.

Study questions:

What are university students' attachments styles like?

What are university students' coping strategies with stress like?

Is there any correlation between university students' attachment styles and coping strategies with stress?

Data Collection Tools

In the study, Personal Information Form was used in order to define participants' specifications about personal information, and Parents Attachment Scale was used to determine parent attachment styles and lastly Scale of Coping with Stress to determine coping strategies.

Parents Attachment Scale (PAS): It was instrumented by Parker et. al who took Bowlby's attachment theory as basis in order to determine individual's perception style of relations with his parents retrospectively. The scale consisting of 23 items includes attention and control/protection dimensions as well. Perceived parent behavior can be scored separately according to these two dimensions, and also it is possible to make an evaluation for quadruplet categorization. The scale was adapted to Turkish culture by Kapçı and Küçükler; its reliability and validity features were studied. Its coefficient for test-retest was found to be 0.91 and 0.90 for mothers and father respectively in attention/control dimension. It was determined as 0.64 and 0.78 for mothers and father respectively in protection dimension. Coefficient for total score was 0.90 in mothers' form and 0.89 in fathers' form (Kapçı&Küçükler, 2006).

Scale of Coping Strategies with Stress

The validity and reliability studies of Coping Strategies with Stress Scale adapted from 'Ways of Coping Inventory' scale, developed by Folkman and Lazarus, were done by Hisli and Durak for our country. This scale has two dimensions namely effective ways toward the problem and ineffective ways toward emotions. These two dimensions are reflected in five factors: self-confident, optimistic, unconfident, obeying and seeking social help. This scale consists of 30 items and is scored between 0 and 3. Seeking social help is measured by inverse scoring of questions 1 and 9. Scores for each factor is calculated separately and total score is not calculated. Items for each factor are given below (Öner 1997)

- Confident approach (8, 10, 14, 20, 23, 26).
- Optimistic approach (2, 4, 6, 12, 18).
- Insecure approach to oneself (3, 7, 11, 19, 22, 25, 27, 28).
- Obeying approach (5, 13, 15, 17, 21, and 24).
- Seeking social support (1, 9, 29, 30)

3. Results

67, 2 % of the students who participated in the study were female and 32, 5 % were male. 36, 4 % of the students study nursing and the rest studies teaching. 61, 3 % of mothers and 54 % of fathers are primary school graduates. 69, 9 % of the students stated their economic status as mediocre. 86 % of mothers are housewife and 85, 2 % of them did not work while their children were 0-6 years old. 52,7 % of students said that they were taken after only by their mothers and 33,9 % of them said that they were taken after by both parents. 14 % of them stated that they were away from their mother because of a certain reason. When asked about their family structures, they answered as the following: 64, 82 % democratic, 14,1 % over-protective, and 7,3 % strict and rule-setting. 47, 5 % marked their school success as moderate, 39, 5 % as good and 7,7 % as bad. 81 % of the students said they did not smoke and 53 % said they have difficulties while entering a new social environment. 56 % of them found themselves sociable and 31, 8 % of them shy.

Table 1: The effect of parents on students making or giving up decisions about their own lifes

	n	%
Making decisions about their own lifes		
About any topic, I ask my mother and father	127	17,9
I make all the decisions myself	74	10,4
I ask only the important issues	510	71,7
The effect of parents on giving up decisions		
I would give up my decision if my mother got upset	162	22,8
I would give up my decision if my father got upset	69	9,7
I fulfil my decision, but I am unhappy after wards	417	58,6
I fulfil my decision without thinking about it	63	8,9

Total

711

100,0

When asked about their parents' effect on decision-making and abandoning a decision, 71,7 % of the students said they consult to their parents only for important decisions and 17,9 % of them said that they consult to their parents whatever the situation is (Table 1).

Table 2: Coping Strategies With Stress Of Students' (N= 711)

Coping Strategies With Stress	Mean	S. D
Confident Approach	1,78	0,68
Optimistic Approach	1,52	0,67
Insecure/Desperate Approach	1,09	0,60
Obedient Approach	0,75	0,52
Seeking social support	1,98	0,62

When coping strategies with stress of the sample group is considered, the following findings were gathered respectively: seeking social support (1,98±0,62), confident approach(1,78±0,68), optimistic approach (1,52±0,67), insecure/hopeless approach to oneself (1,09±0,60), and obeying approach (0.75±0,52) (Table 2).

Table 3: Coping Strategies With Stress According To Gender (N=711)

	Gender	N	Mean	S. D.
Confident Approach (t=-1,040;p=.299)	Female	480	1,76	,70827
	Male	231	1,82	,61858
Optimistic Approach (t=-2,809; p=.005)	Female	480	1,47	,68633
	Male	231	1,62	,61987
Insecure/Desperate Approach (t=-1,668; p=.096)	Female	480	1,06	,61461
	Male	231	1,14	,56752
Obedient Approach (t=-2,697;p=.007)	Female	480	,71	,52241
	Male	231	,82	,51855
Seeking social support (t=4,863;p= ,000)	Female	480	2,05	,60015
	Male	231	1,82	,62926

When coping strategies with stress is considered according to sex, optimistic approach (t: 2.809, p=0.05) and seeking social support approach (t: 4.863, p=0.00) were found to be statistically significant difference. While girls adopt seeking social support approach more than boys, boys adopt optimistic approach more (Table 3).

Table 4: University Students' Coping Strategies With Stress According To Their Department

	Department	N	Mean	S. D.
Confident Approach (t: 3.067; p:0.02)	Nursing Faculty	259	1,67	,80842
	Education Faculty	452	1,84	,58790
Optimistic Approach (t:-1,953; p:051)	Nursing Faculty	259	1,45	,77361
	Education Faculty	452	1,56	,59821
Insecure/Desperate Approach (t: -2,887; p:096)	Nursing Faculty	259	1,00	,60630
	Education Faculty	452	1,13	,59227
Obedient Approach (t: -1,231;p:0.07)	Nursing Faculty	259	,71	,54934
	Education Faculty	452	,76	,50776
Seeking social support (t: 3.035; p:0.02)	Nursing Faculty	259	2,07	,59514
	Education Faculty	452	1,92	,62737

When we look at university students' coping strategies with stress according to their department, students at education faculty were found to adopt confident approach more (t:3.067; p:0.02) while nursing students were found to adopt more seeking social support approach than those of education faculty. A statistically significant difference was obtained between these two sub-dimensions according to the departments (Table 4).

Table 5: Average Score For Students' Parent Attachment Styles

	N	Mean±SD
Caring mother	711	18,71±3.74

Controlling/ over protecting mother	711	12,63±5.39
Caring father	710	18,62±4.61
Controlling/ over protecting father	711	13,67±5.83

When the average score for students' parent attachment styles is considered it was found that average score regarding mothers was (18.71,78±7.74); for fathers it was (18.62±4.61); mother/controlling protective average score (12,63±5.39) and lastly father/controlling protective average score was (13.67±5.83) (Table 5).

Table 6: According To Gender For Students' Parent Attachment Styles

Gender	Mother				Father			
	Caring		Controlling/ over protecting		Caring		Controlling/ over protecting	
	n	Mean	n	Mean	n	Mean	n	Mean
Female	480	19,0	480	12,1	480	19,1	480	13,1
Male	231	18,0	231	13,5	231	17,5	231	14,7
	t: 3.06; p:0.02		t:-3,143; p 0.02		t: 4,468; p:0.00		t:-3,564; p:0.00	

According to the findings, average score regarding mothers was found to be higher in female students while average score regarding controlling/protective mother was found to be higher in male students. Likewise, average score regarding fathers was higher in female students than male students while the score for controlling father was higher in male students than female students (Table 6).

Table 7: The Correlation Between Parents' Attitudes And Students' Coping Strategies with Stress (N=711)

Students' Parent Attachment Style	Caring mother		Controlling/ over protecting mother		Caring father		Controlling/ over protecting father	
	r	p	r	p	r	p	r	p
Coping Strategies With Stress								
Confident Approach	,06	,074	-,17	,000	,05	,137	-,22	,000
Optimistic Approach	,00	,831	-,12	,001	,02	,561	-,15	,000
Insecure/Desperate Approach	,01	,728	,19	,000	-,04	,219	,20	,000
Obedient Approach	-,04	,236	,10	,004	-,04	,286	,10	,007
Seeking Social Support	,06	,069	-,24	,000	,07	,051	-,22	,000

According to correlation analysis which was done in order to study the correlation between parents' attitudes and students' coping strategies with stress, a significant correlation was identified between being an attentive parent and coping strategies with stress. In attachment to mother scale, a negative and statistically significant correlation was identified between the sub-dimension of controlling/protective mother and secure approach to oneself (r:-,17, p:,00), one of the coping strategies, and optimistic approach (r:-,12, p:,001). On the other hand, a positive and statistically positive correlation was found between the sub-dimension of insecure (r:, 19, p:,000) and obeying (r:,10, p:,004) approach. In attachment to father scale, a negative and significant correlation was found between controlling/protective father and optimistic approach (r:-, 15, p:,000), the only strategy among coping strategies (Table 7).

4. Discussion

The study was conducted to determine the correlation between attachment styles to parents and coping strategies with stress in university students. As attention/control dimension was high both in mothers and fathers - also the total score was high as well- it refers to the safe area parents provide and that the child is taken good care and also positive attachment styles during development period.

Parents' not paying enough attention and generally having negative attitudes and behaviors pose a risk for coping strategies children have. A correlation was identified between parent attachment styles and coping strategies. Mother model, perceived as protective/controlling and self-confident and optimist approach display a negative correlation, which indicates ineffective coping strategies. It also indicates that the youngsters feel that such an attitude by their parents do not provide safe area for them. When viewed from this aspect, it can be concluded that controlling/protective parent model is not effective in developing positive coping strategies. There was a negative correlation between controlling/protective father model and optimistic approach, one of the coping strategies. The children cannot be self-confident because of controlling/protective attitudes of parents, who play a great role in social development of children. Also, they cannot use positive coping strategies, something very important in coping strategies.

Positive parent attitudes and behaviors such as spending time with children, establishing physical and emotional closeness, respecting their personal rights might prove very dominant in establishing health relationships and solving problems effectively in the future. Lope (2001) and Wei (2003) informed that coping strategies with the problem mediate in correlation between attachment styles and negative stress reaction. Mikulincer and Sheffi (2000) studied the effects of positive feelings on creative problem solving and also looked at the mediator role of attachment styles. When the results are considered, people with secure attachment reacted to positive emotions with an increasing performance in creative problem solving task. On the other hand, people unstable and anxious attachment showed an opposite cognitive reaction and had a decreasing performance. Berenbaum and James (1994) indicated that children who see themselves in a physically and emotionall insecure and unsafe environment and who are not encouraged to express their feelings cannot cope with their emotional problems successfully. Other studies also show that individuals with alexithymia display insecure attachment style in an avoiding manner more (Wearden et al. 2003; Batıgün, 2008). The findings about secure attachment to parents and positive coping skills regarding attachment were observed to resemble the findings of this study (Erözkan, 2011; Akyüz, 2011; Ducharme, Doyle ve Markiewicz'in 2002; Becker, 2008; Lee, 2003; Seifke, 2008; Kaya 2009).

As a result of the fact that controlling/protective parent attachment was found among male students, it can be related to our traditional customs in which male children are paid more attention. Moreover, parents' control behaviors are seen a part of over-protective parents pattern whereas it is seen as a part of attentive parent behavior in our culture (Kapçı, 2006).

Students at nursing faculty were found to display less secure approach than those at education faculty. Kaya pointed out that nursing students use rather passive methods in herstudy in2007. The findings of this research resemble to those of the study. Moreover, girls adopted seeking social help approach more than boys in the research; the fact that boys adopted optimistic approach more than the girls shows resemblance to other research findings (Kaya, 2007; Muris, 2001).

As a result, it was found out that parents' not paying enough attention and generally adopting controlling/protective attitude and behavior have influence on students' coping skills. Preventive healthcare personnel are responsible for protecting individuals' health and increase their coping skills with difficulties. However, healthcare personnel is not enough for this task, parents should take part in this process. If parents are educated about this issue before having children and their awareness is increased, the children they are going to raise are expected to be individuals with stronger coping skills. At this point health healthcare personnel of primary services and teachers who have the opportunity to contact with parents have great responsibility. Our findings highlight the importance of family attachment style in terms of preventive action. What is more, university administrations and departments serving for healthcare at the university should collaborate in order to conduct studies which reinforce coping strategies.

The study has some limitations. First of all, only scales of self-report were used. It is put forward that estimations which depend on personal statement could not represent attachment styles or dimensions objectively due

to the reasons such as individuals' being open to protective approaches. For this reason, it can be said that estimations can be more helpful if supported by other evaluation techniques such as interview. Also, the sample group only consists of students at nursing and education faculty. Therefore, it cannot be generalized; other departments should be included in the sample making the study more comprehensive.

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