THE MEDIATING ROLE OF ATTACHMENT IN THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CAREGIVER EMPATHY AND RESILIENCE IN YOUNG ADULTHOOD

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Abstract: Empathy plays an important mediating role between quality relationships and resilient development. This study examined the relationships between perceived empathy from caregivers/parents, quality of attachment relationships, and resilience in young adults. An online survey was administered to 240 university students measuring their perceptions of caregiver empathy during childhood, attachment styles, and current resilience. Results indicated that secure attachment partially mediated the association between caregiver empathy and resilience.

A cross-sectional online survey design was used. Participants were 240 university students (mean age 21 years, 60% female). Measures included the s-EMBU (Arrindell, 1999) to assess perceptions of caregiver empathy during upbringing, the Experiences in Close Relationships Scale-Short Form (ECR-S; Wei et al., 2007) to measure attachment anxiety and avoidance styles, and the Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale (CD-RISC; Connor & Davidson, 2003) to evaluate resilience. Descriptive statistics and correlational analyses were conducted using SPSS. Mediation analysis using the PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2018) examined whether attachment mediated the association between caregiver empathy and resilience.

Higher s-EMBU scores were associated with lower attachment anxiety ($r=-0.53$) and avoidance ($r = -.14$, $p < .001$) and higher CD-RISC scores ($r = .33$, $p = .001$). Attachment anxiety and avoidance partially mediated the relationship between s-EMBU and CD-RISC (indirect effects for anxiety=.07, anxiety=.12). The secure attachment, characterized by low anxiety and avoidance accounted for a total effect was of .49.

Results indicated that higher perceived empathy from caregivers was associated with more secure attachment relationships and higher resilience.

In summary, this study found that secure attachment partially mediated the association between perceived empathy from caregivers and resilience in young adults. Empathy in caregiving relationships was linked to forming secure bonds, which then supported resilient development. The findings highlight empathy as a key factor fostering quality relationships and resilience from childhood through emerging adulthood. These results suggest that empathy in caregiving relationships may foster secure attachment bonds which in turn support resilient development. Cultivating empathetic parenting could help strengthen relationships and build resilience.

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Introduction

Resiliency plays a crucial role in the lives of emerging adults, who are navigating the transitional period between adolescence and full adulthood. This phase, spanning from the late teens to the twenties, presents unique challenges as individuals strive for independence while still shaping their identities. During this time, emerging adults embark on various milestones such as leaving home, completing education, starting careers, and forming new relationships and social circles. While this period fosters personal growth and change, it also exposes individuals to risks, exploration, and vulnerability.

Factors such as student debt, economic uncertainty, and evolving societal norms surrounding marriage and family dynamics add to the stressors faced by this generation (Arnett, 2014). Resilience encompasses both cognitive tendencies and behavioral characteristics influenced by dispositional traits and experiences over time. Certain traits like optimism, self-efficacy, and hardiness predispose individuals to resilient thought patterns even before encountering adversity. These traits can be nurtured through stable family relationships and the accomplishment of small goals during development.

However, our outlooks and reactions are also heavily influenced by how we have coped with previous challenges. Overcoming difficulties, even from a young age, teaches adaptive skills and mindsets such as flexibility, patience, and seeking support when needed. As we encounter life stressors, our repertoire of resilience-building coping mechanisms expands. Reflecting on prior resilient thought patterns, behaviors, and social supports that have served us well in the past can help us navigate setbacks without being overwhelmed.

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Supportive relationships play a significant role in developing resilience, as parents, mentors, and peers serve as role models for healthy emotional management, responsibility, and problem-solving in times of adversity. This social-contextual influence helps resilience traits take root.

The foundation of resilience is laid in the early years of a child's life and development. Childhood is pivotal in building the capacity to adaptively cope with challenges throughout life. A secure parent-child attachment provides the young child with the assurance that a supportive network exists during difficult times, activating internal resilience mechanisms. Resolving minor problems and facing age-appropriate fears within a nurturing environment helps develop coping skills from the earliest years. Role-playing life scenarios allows children to learn about emotions, relationships, and constructive stress management in a fun and stimulating manner that aligns with their developing brains. Parental role models who respond appropriately to stress and frustration provide children with firsthand exposure to effective problem-solving strategies. Encouraging exploration within safe boundaries builds self-efficacy and adaptability to change, which are crucial in managing challenges (Masten & Monn, 2015).

Secure attachment is a fundamental factor in fostering resilience in children. The type of attachment formed during the early years profoundly impacts how individuals cope with future challenges. According to Bowlby's research, secure attachment entails a child feeling safe to explore the world, knowing there is a secure base to return to in times of stress. It fosters self-confidence, encouraging the belief that they deserve and can receive help when needed. Secure attachment teaches children to regulate their emotions and seek support appropriately. It helps shape their perception of the world as a predictable and protective place, rather than a threatening one. They develop expectations of good relationships that provide reliable support (Holmes, 2020).

As children grow, these characteristics of secure attachment become internalized as a positive mental self-representation and worldview. They trust in their ability to cope and believe in the existence of a supportive network during challenging situations. Thus, parental secure attachment lays a strong foundation for resilience.

Empathy plays a vital role in nurturing resilience in children and is exemplified by strong and nurturing parental role models. Key aspects of empathy's role include parents being attuned to their child's emotional world, taking the time to understand experiences from their perspective, and conveying the message that feelings matter and will be validated. This builds trust and reassurance. When children face difficulties, empathic parents can empathize with their challenges in a comforting manner, rather than minimizing their experiences. This helps children learn that they do not have to cope alone, and that vulnerability is acceptable at times. Displaying empathy also teaches children to recognize, label, and regulate their own emotions appropriately. They observe and mirror prosocial behaviors such as compassion and caring for others. Setting reasonable expectations with empathy takes individual factors into account, avoiding a one-size-fits-all approach. This approach prevents children from feeling constantly judged or inadequate if they struggle. Resolving conflicts empathetically, through open communication of feelings, models healthy ways of navigating hardships within close relationships. Over the long term, individuals who have experienced empathic parenting report greater self-confidence and stronger relationships, recognizing that empathy has paved the way for their resilience. In essence, parents who prioritize empathy as the foundation for understanding and supporting their child's emotional needs provide the secure base necessary for developing adaptive coping skills and bouncing back from life's difficulties. Their compassion fosters resilience (Eisenberg et al., 2015).

Research design

This study employed a correlational approach to examine the relationships between perceived parental empathy, attachment styles (anxious and avoidant), and resilience among university students. The first hypothesis posited that higher parental empathy would be associated with higher resilience. The second hypothesis proposed that attachment styles would mediate the relationship between parental empathy and resilience

Research participants

The statistical population included all students enrolled in psychology programs at Hyperion University of Bucharest for the 2023-2024 academic year. A sample of 240 students was recruited through convenience sampling. Of the participants, 112 were men and 128 were women. The maximum age was restricted to 26 years old. Participation was voluntary, with informed consent obtained from all

participants. To ensure confidentiality, data were analyzed anonymously. The participants ranged in age from 19 to 26, with an average age of 22.41 years (SD=2.2).

Procedure

Participants were allocated a total of twenty minutes to complete the questionnaires and the informed consent form. Throughout the process, they were consistently reminded that their responses would be kept anonymous and confidential. The study protocol received approval from the Ethics Review Committee of the Psychology Department at the Hyperion University of Bucharest. All questionnaires were designed to maintain participant anonymity, and participation in the study was entirely voluntary. Data collection took place between January and February of 2024.

The data analysis was performed using SPSS v.26.0 software (IBM Corp, 2019). Prior to conducting the analysis, the data were checked to ensure they met the assumptions for parametric testing. Specifically, normality was examined using Shapiro-Wilk tests and homogeneity of variance was verified through Levene's test. Descriptive statistics including means and standard deviations were calculated for all variables. Additionally, mediation analyses were conducted following the causal steps approach outlined by Baron and Kenny (1986) to determine if the relationship between caregiver empathy and resilience is influenced by avoidant and anxious attachment styles. This method involves conducting three regression analyses: 1) regressing the dependent variable on the independent variable, 2) regressing the mediator on the independent variable, and 3) regressing the dependent variable on both the independent variable and the mediator. If the effect of the independent variable is less in the third equation than in the first, mediation can be established.

Measures

The s-EMBU (Arrindell, 1999) is a widely used and effective measurement tool in psychological research. It assesses individuals' perceptions of their upbringing and the parenting styles they experienced during their formative years. The questionnaire, which stands for "Swedish version of the Egna Minnen Beträffande Uppfostran" or "Own Memories of Upbringing" in English, consists of three subscales: Rejection, Emotional Warmth, and Overprotection.

The Experiences in Close Relationships Scale-Short Form (ECR-S; Wei et al., 2007) is designed to evaluate individuals' experiences and attitudes in their close relationships. It is a condensed version of the original Experiences in Close Relationships Scale (ECR), which was developed by Brennan, Clark, and Shaver in 1998. The ECR-S comprises 12 items that capture two dimensions of attachment: anxiety and avoidance. The anxiety dimension measures an individual's fear of rejection, abandonment, and concerns about the availability and responsiveness of their partners. The avoidance dimension assesses an individual's discomfort with intimacy, preference for independence, and avoidance of closeness in relationships.

The Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale (CD-RISC; Connor & Davidson, 2003) is a psychometric tool created by Connor and Davidson in 2003. Its purpose is to assess an individual's level of resilience, which refers to their ability to adapt and recover from adversity and stress. The CD-RISC consists of 25 items that cover various domains related to resilience, including personal competence, tolerance of negative emotions, positive acceptance of change, and the ability to seek support.

Results

Small gender differences were found in perceived parental empathy and resilience (Table 1), and it was concluded that gender influences anxious attachment and perceived empathy, but not resilience and avoidant attachment.

Table 1. Gender differences in s-EMBU (caregiver Empathy), Attachment, Resilience

	Men $\bar{X}$ (SD)	Women $\bar{X}$ (SD)	p	Cohen's d
Rejection	13,24 (3,4)	15,42 (3,1)	0,000	-0,97
Emotional warmth	16,01 (2,7)	14,51 (2,93)	0,000	0,53
Overprotection	19,47 (3,1)	18,02 (2,8)	0,000	0,49
s-EMBU (empathy caregiver)	16.24 (3.07)	15.98 (2.9)	0,000	0,684
Attachment avoidance	23,55 (10,3)	24,69 (10,2)	0,392	-0.111
Attachment anxiety	23,11 (10,3)	24,87 (11,31)	0,002	-0.162
Resilience	78,29 (8,3)	72,22 (9,4)	0,000	0,684

Source: Authors

The results indicate that men score slightly higher in terms of emotional warmth, overprotection, perceived empathy, and resilience, while women score higher in rejection and attachment anxiety. Regarding avoidant attachment, both groups showed similar results.

The partial correlations between parental empathy, resilience, and avoidant/anxious attachment are presented in *Table 2*.

Anxious attachment was negatively correlated with empathy (r=0.51**) and resilience (r=-0.46**), while avoidant attachment was negatively correlated with resilience (r=−0.54**) and empathy (r= 0.52**). Caregiver empathy and resilience showed a strong positive correlation coefficient (r=0.64**), while the attachment styles are positively correlated (r=0.26).

Table 2. Correlations Between Empathy, Resilience and Attachment

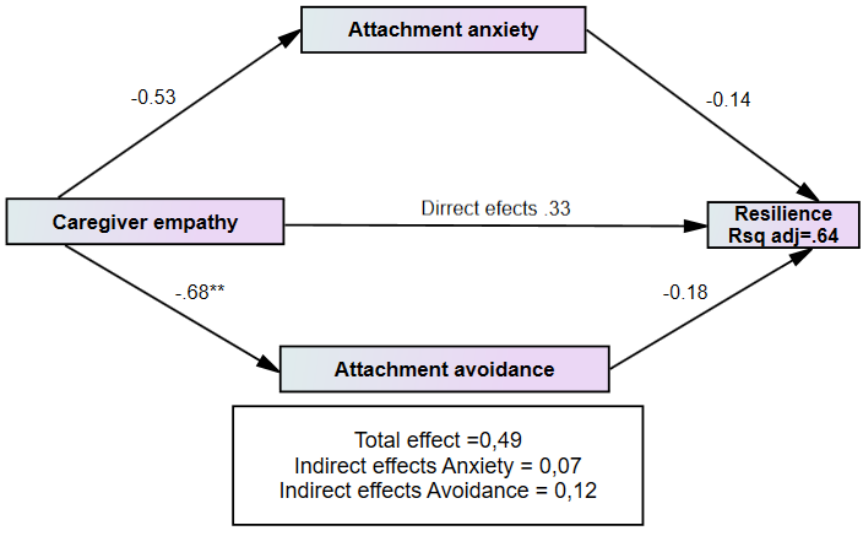
	Caregiver empathy	Resilience	Attachment anxiety
Resilience	0,64**	-	
Attachment anxiety	-0,51**	-0,46**	-
Attachment avoidance	-0,52**	-0,54**	0, 26

Source: Authors

To assess whether the relationship between empathy and resilience is mediated by attachment quality, mediation analyses were conducted. The Process 3.0 macro in SPSS (version 26.0) developed by Hayes (2018) was used. The mediation analysis considered gender and age, and neither variable was found to have a significant impact on the relationship between empathy and resilience.

To test the statistical significance of mediation, bootstrapping (10,000 simulations) and the Sobel test were used. Both tests indicated that both anxious and avoidant attachment mediate the relationship between empathy and resilience. The results showed an effect of empathy (the independent variable) on attachments as mediating variables (MV), -0.51 for anxious attachment (ANX) and -0.68 for avoidant attachment (AV), p<0.001 in both cases. Additionally, the impact of attachments on resilience (the dependent variable) was -0.14 for ANX and -0.18 for AV, p<0.001 in both cases. The 95% bootstrap confidence interval did not include zero [0.001–0.002], and the Sobel test also indicated that the value of c was statistically significant (z = 2.86; p = 0.005); thus, we can conclude that there is full mediation (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Mediation model for the effect of attachment (anxious and avoidant) on the relationship between caregiver empathy and resilience



Source: Authors

In line with our hypothesis, caregiver empathy had a direct positive effect on resilience of 0.33 ($p < 0.001$), with a total mediated effect through attachments of 0.49 ($p < 0.001$). The proportion of variance in resilience explained by the model was $R^2 = 0.64$.

Conclusion

The current study analyzed the effect of perceived caregiver empathy on resilience, evaluating the potential mediating role of anxious and avoidant attachment in this relationship. The survey presents some descriptive data regarding caregiver empathy as an outcome of the parental model, resilience, and attachment. The results show that males scored higher on warmth, overprotection, and caregiver empathy. These findings may be connected to the tendency for men in individualistic Western cultures to interpret overprotective parenting as restrictive, as identified in a meta-analytic study by de Roo, Veenstra, and Kretschmer (2022). Other studies have found that the influence of parental attitudes toward gender roles explains the differential treatment of girls and boys (van Polanen et al., 2016).

The results indicated that females in the sample scored significantly higher on measures of parental rejection, anxious attachment, and avoidant attachment compared to males. There are several psychological theories explaining why females on average obtain higher scores on dimensions of anxious and avoidant attachment in standardized questionnaires. Society encourages the expression of emotions in girls and inhibits them in boys from a young age. As a result, women may be more open to voicing needs for connection and fears of separation (Chaplin et al., 2005). Typical gender roles also place more pressure on women to have close interpersonal relationships to feel safe and valued. Lacking these can lead to greater attachment anxiety (Cross & Madson, 1997). The patriarchal society presents more risks and threats to the physical and emotional safety of women, which could more readily activate anxious attachment styles (Jinyao et al., 2022).

The aim was to analyse the potential mediating effect of attachment (anxious and avoidant) in the relationship between caregiver empathy and resilience. The value of caregiver empathy in predicting resilience was demonstrated, as was the mediating role of anxious and avoidant attachment. Caregiver empathy was found to impact anxious attachment, which in turn negatively influenced participants' resilience. There is a complex relationship between anxious attachment and resilience. On one hand, anxious attachment can dampen resilience in the following ways: Anxiously attached individuals tend to have negative cognitive perspectives on their own worth and others, which undermines self-efficacy and self-confidence (Collins, 1996). Their coping strategies often center on avoiding problems or excessive proximity-seeking rather than constructively tackling challenges (Wei et al., 2005). They have difficulty soliciting support from others adaptively and can experience burnout through emotional exhaustion. On the other hand, anxious attachment can also be a resilience resource in certain contexts. Anxious individuals tend to be vigilant to signs of danger, helping them identify problems early (Mikulincer & Florian, 1995). Their need for closeness can motivate expanding their social support network and seeking help when truly needed. Difficult experiences can trigger maturation processes that decrease emotional dependence and foster more realistic perspectives. Therefore, resilience is not precluded by anxious attachment but depends on effectively managing one's fears and maladaptive strategies through ongoing growth.

The research has shown that caregiver empathy has a significant impact on avoidant attachment, which, in turn, influences resilience. There are several ways in which caregiver empathy can shape avoidant attachment and resilience:

Children who experience unempathetic caregiving develop a fear of emotional intimacy due to the unpredictable nature of their parental figures. As a result, they adopt an avoidant attachment style as a means of self-protection. This avoidant style hinders their ability to effectively seek support during times of stress, thereby diminishing their long-term resilience.

In contrast, empathic parents provide children with a sense of emotional security and predictability, creating an environment that promotes trust and encourages the development of healthy relationships. By modelling empathy, parents teach children how to regulate their own emotions and offer support to others in challenging circumstances (Moretti & Peled, 2004).

Caregivers who are attuned to the needs of their children make them feel seen, validated, and capable of handling life's challenges. Consequently, parental empathy plays a crucial role in preventing the development of an avoidant attachment style that could impede long-term resilience.

In conclusion, caregiver empathy is instrumental in shaping attachment patterns and fostering resilience in children. By providing empathic and supportive care, parents can establish a strong foundation for healthy emotional development and equip children with the tools to effectively navigate life's obstacles.

Caregivers who exhibit empathy by being emotionally attuned and responsive to their children's distress may promote resilience by modelling effective emotion regulation strategies and helping children overcome setbacks. For instance, an empathetic parent may use emotional mirroring to validate their child's sadness over a failed test and suggest constructive coping methods like journaling, exercise, or seeking academic support. This scaffolding around adaptive thinking patterns and behaviour in the face of adversity provides children with tools to manage stress and bounce back from challenges throughout life.

In their study on parental empathy and children's coping and resilience, Eisenberg and colleagues (1998) found parental empathetic reactions to children's negative emotions were positively associated with children's social functioning, emotion regulation, and lower internalizing/externalizing of problems. They argue parental empathy is integral to children internalizing resilience-promoting coping strategies. Thus, higher caregiver empathy seems to fortify children's capacity to effectively problem-solve and persist through difficulties - founding blocks for resilience.

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