

Investigating the Relationship between Parent-Child Conflict and Attachment Styles with Future Anxiety in Nursing Students

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The nursing profession constitutes an essential part of the healthcare system and is crucial in providing quality care and improving the quality of life for patients worldwide. This study aimed to investigate the relationship between parent-child conflict and attachment styles with future anxiety in nursing students.

Methods and Materials: The research was applied in terms of its goal, descriptive in terms of data collection, and correlational in terms of data type. The statistical population included all nursing students in Sari County enrolled in the 2023-2024 academic year, from which 200 students were selected through convenience sampling. The research instruments included the Parent-Child Conflict Questionnaire by Murray Strauss (1990), the Attachment Style Questionnaire by Hazan and Shaver (1987), and the Future Anxiety Questionnaire by Zaleski (1996). Data were analyzed using Pearson correlation coefficient, multiple regression, and SPSS-27 software.

Findings: The findings indicated that both parent-child conflict and attachment styles were related to future anxiety ($P < 0.01$), with the ambivalent attachment style being the strongest predictor of future anxiety ($P < 0.01$).

Conclusion: Based on the findings, a secure attachment style can be associated with reduced future anxiety. Insecure attachment styles can act as predictors of future anxiety. These results can be useful for training the necessary skills to control and reduce future anxiety in students, particularly nursing students, and the psychological disorders resulting from it.

Keywords: Future Anxiety, Parent-Child Conflict, Attachment Styles, Students, Nursing.

1. Introduction

The nursing profession constitutes an essential part of the healthcare system and is critical in providing quality care and improving the quality of life for patients worldwide (Manana et al., 2023). This profession is one of the most stressful and emotionally draining jobs, often associated with various stressors such as unfavorable working conditions, long working hours, time constraints, meeting patient needs, irregular schedules, and lack of professional support (Morton et al., 2020). Nursing students, as future nurses, play a vital role in delivering healthcare, and their knowledge and attitudes toward healthcare directly impact the quality of their services (Li et al., 2021). Nursing students face problems such as limited support (DiMattio & Hudacek, 2020), ongoing challenges (Islam et al., 2020), and specific health issues (Karaca et al., 2019), which negatively affect their internal structural components, such as mood (He et al., 2021), leading to long-term stress and, ultimately, decreased clinical and academic performance (Bhurtun et al., 2021). In addition to adhering to stringent academic standards, nursing students must acquire relevant knowledge and skills and learn how to sustain themselves in different and often stressful professional environments. These commitments can significantly impact their mental health (Reverté-Villarroya et al., 2021).

Mental disorders are a common phenomenon in nursing, and there is increasing concern about these disorders among students (Manana et al., 2023). Anxiety is one of the most common mental health problems reported among nursing students (Li et al., 2021; Masha'al et al., 2022). Although anxiety is associated with adverse health outcomes, limited attention and resources have been dedicated to this disorder, especially in the student population (Manana et al., 2023). Anxiety disorders are linked to reduced quality of life and premature death and are considered a risk factor for other comorbidities (Kandola et al., 2018), which can jeopardize disease management and prevention skills (Reis et al., 2022). Specifically, for students, anxiety is associated with decreased academic performance and substance use, increasing the risk of dropout and addiction (Pascoe et al., 2020). Studies have reported contradictory findings regarding the prevalence of anxiety symptoms among nursing students. Some studies report the prevalence below 40% (Li et al., 2021), while others report it above 40% (Masha'al et al., 2022; Savitsky et al., 2020). Many studies also indicate that approximately 2% to 13% of nursing students experience severe anxiety symptoms (Li et al.,

2021; Savitsky et al., 2020). Anxiety symptoms in various domains, such as concern about the future, have become an important issue among students worldwide, negatively impacting their quality of life (January et al., 2018).

One type of anxiety that nursing students experience is future anxiety (Murad, 2020). According to Zaleski (1996), future anxiety refers to attitudes toward the future where negative cognitive and emotional processes outweigh positive ones, with fear dominating over hope. This fear pertains to future events and the feeling that dangerous or undesirable changes may occur in the future. While any type of fear is somewhat related to the future, future anxiety refers to a distant outlook and personal preoccupation, worry, and fear of possible or anticipated undesirable changes in the future, which, in severe cases, may turn into panic (Zaleski, 1996; Zaleski et al., 2019). According to Zaleski (1996), the basis of future anxiety is personality traits that determine how one reacts to fear, personal experiences, and current events (Zaleski, 1996; Zaleski et al., 2019). Support for such an approach can be found in the works of authors like Eysenck (2013) with the concept of hypervigilance or Sorrentino et al. (1992) with the concept of uncertainty (Eysenck, 2013; Sorrentino et al., 1992); therefore, future anxiety refers to unhealthy thinking about the future, where individuals fear and dread undesirable changes in their future (Zaleski, 1996; Zaleski et al., 2019). This type of anxiety can be caused by factors such as a large gap between dreams and motivations. Different knowledge, behavioral, biological, and environmental systems play a role in the emergence and persistence of future anxiety (Spence & Rapee, 2016). Future anxiety can disrupt cognitive processes and communication skills, leading to poor clinical decision-making and increased risk of medical errors in practice (Aloufi et al., 2021).

One factor affecting future anxiety and students' mental health is the family system and related issues, which is a small social unit and the main axis of protecting traditions (Zarnaghash et al., 2013). The family, as the first social institution, plays a fixed and determining role in shaping individuals' behavior, thoughts, and personality. A child's interaction with others and society in later life is influenced by experiences gained from the family environment. Researchers have identified the type of interaction between children and parents as one of the most important family factors predicting their mental health and social behavior (Elhami et al., 2019). In the family, parents can improve the quality of their relationship by providing a warm and trustworthy environment for their children (Pinquart, 2021)

and by reducing parent-child conflict, which is a factor that undermines peace in the family, thereby reducing their children's future anxiety (Kiel et al., 2021). In general, parent-child conflict is a type of incompatibility and disagreement (Mastrotheodoros et al., 2020) that affects the emotional relationship between parents and children (Bountress et al., 2020). Parent-child conflict can result in consequences such as children's aggression (Aloia & Solomon, 2016), harm to the mental health of family members, and overall well-being (Segrin & Flora, 2016). For example, individuals who have conflicts with their mother report more anxiety than those who have conflicts with their father (Curran & Andersen, 2017; Curran et al., 2019).

Another family factor affecting nursing students' anxiety is attachment styles. Parents, through their parenting and behavioral methods, lead to the formation of three types of attachment styles (secure, insecure-avoidant, and insecure-ambivalent) (Welsh, 2017), which in 80% of cases, the attachment style of children can be predicted by identifying the parents' attachment style (Ward et al., 2020). Poor parenting results in an insecure attachment style in children, leading to mental health problems, including future anxiety (Risi et al., 2021), while creating a secure attachment style in children can lead them to believe that life problems are solvable, and thus, with a constructive attitude, they can manage and cope with anxiety-provoking situations in the future (Pascoe et al., 2020). The results of the research by Guain et al. (2009) indicate that individuals with a secure attachment style are better able to resolve anxiety-related issues (Gouin et al., 2009).

Future anxiety in students is of great importance because it has a strong connection with their psychological complications and psychological well-being (Onieva-Zafra et al., 2020). The level of future anxiety in nursing students can vary according to their physical health (Bujnowska et al., 2019), individual differences, and emotional aspects (Twivy et al., 2021). Since anxiety is the basis of most mental disorders (Ghassemzadeh et al., 2019), future anxiety can be considered a significant negative factor in individuals' lives, especially nursing students, because the fear of not achieving future ambitions makes them vulnerable to many important life issues, such as family relationships, and makes them pessimistic and hopeless about the future (Jumah & Al-Khamra, 2022). On the other hand, considering the very high prevalence of anxiety problems and the importance of family, understanding the relationship between attachment styles and parent-child conflict with nursing students' future anxiety helps to understand their psychological

characteristics and provides a foundation for improving their mental health. Therefore, given the above, this research aims to answer the question: Is there a relationship between parent-child conflict and attachment styles with nursing students' future anxiety?

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

The research method was applied in terms of its goal, descriptive in terms of data collection, and correlational in terms of data type. The statistical population included all undergraduate nursing students studying at Nasibeh Nursing Faculty and the Nursing Group of Azad University, Sari Branch, in the 2023-2024 academic year, from which 250 individuals were selected based on GPower sample size calculation software using convenience sampling. After data screening, 50 questionnaires were excluded due to data corruption, and finally, 200 samples were analyzed. The inclusion criteria were being an enrolled student and willingness to participate in the study by completing the consent form. The exclusion criterion was the unwillingness to participate in the research.

The study was conducted on 200 students. After obtaining approval from the research council and ethical code, visits were made to Nasibeh Nursing Faculty of Mazandaran University of Medical Sciences and the Nursing Group of the Islamic Azad University, Sari Branch. After introducing the researcher and providing necessary explanations such as study objectives, non-recording of identification details, and the right to withdraw, questionnaires were distributed to the students and collected after completion. Fifty questionnaires were excluded due to invalid responses.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Parent-Child Conflict

This questionnaire was designed by Murray Strauss (1990) to assess conflicts between a child and mother, consisting of 15 items. Participants indicate their level of agreement with each item on a five-point Likert scale: never (0), once a year (1), two or three times a year (2), often but less than once a month (3), about once a month (4), and more than once a month (5). A high score on this scale indicates greater parent-child conflict. The scale has three subscales: reasoning, verbal aggression, and physical aggression, with two sections for self and mother. Five items (1, 2, 3, 4, 5) represent reasoning, five items (6, 7, 8, 9, 10) assess verbal

aggression, and five items (11, 12, 13, 14, 15) evaluate physical aggression. The reliability of this scale, using Cronbach's alpha method, was 0.88 for verbal aggression and 0.96 for physical aggression, with Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.74 obtained in Zaboli et al. (2004) (Saadati, 2020). In the present study, Cronbach's alpha coefficients for reasoning, verbal aggression, and physical aggression were 0.73, 0.82, and 0.89, respectively. The overall Cronbach's alpha coefficient was 0.70.

2.2.2. Attachment Style

Designed by Hazan and Shaver (1987), this questionnaire assesses attachment styles and consists of 15 items. Participants indicate their level of agreement with each item on a four-point Likert scale: never (0), randomly (1), sometimes (2), often (3), always (4). A high score on each subscale indicates the predominance of that style. The scale has three subscales: secure attachment style, avoidant attachment style, and ambivalent attachment style. Five items (1, 2, 3, 4, 5) represent secure attachment style, five items (6, 7, 8, 9, 10) assess avoidant attachment style, and five items (11, 12, 13, 14, 15) evaluate ambivalent attachment style. The reliability of this scale, using Cronbach's alpha method, was 0.78, with Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.88 obtained in Hatami (2010) (Sadri Damirchi & Nosrati Begzadeh, 2018). In the present study, Cronbach's alpha coefficients for secure, avoidant, and ambivalent attachment styles were 0.71, 0.71, and 0.75, respectively.

2.2.3. Future Anxiety

Designed by Zaleski (1996), this questionnaire assesses future anxiety and consists of 29 items. Participants indicate

their level of agreement with each item on a seven-point Likert scale: strongly disagree (0), disagree (1), somewhat disagree (2), no opinion (3), somewhat agree (4), agree (5), strongly agree (6). A high score indicates a high level of future anxiety. The scale has five subscales: tendency to think about the future, anxiety, uncertainty, catastrophe, and anticipation. The reliability of this scale, using Cronbach's alpha method, was 0.92, with Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.71 obtained (Aloufi et al., 2021; Jumah & Al-Khamra, 2022). In the present study, the overall Cronbach's alpha coefficient was 0.88.

2.3. Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Pearson correlation coefficient, multiple regression, and SPSS-27 software.

3. Findings and Results

Two hundred individuals participated in this study, with results indicating that 42% (84 individuals) were female and 58% (116 individuals) were male. The average age of the nursing students was 21.1 ± 2.63 years. Among the students, 182 individuals (91%) were single, and 17 individuals (8.5%) were married. Additionally, 15 individuals (7.5%) were only children, while 185 individuals (92.5%) had more than one sibling. Regarding the studied variables, the average scores of participants were as follows: avoidant attachment style 14.73 ± 3.80 , secure attachment style 15.36 ± 3.16 , ambivalent attachment style 12.74 ± 3.73 , child conflicts 22.73 ± 6.07 , mother conflicts 22.07 ± 6.47 , and future anxiety 91.26 ± 26.53 . Significant relationships were found between avoidant attachment style, ambivalent attachment style, child conflicts, mother conflicts, and future anxiety ($p < 0.001$) (Table 1).

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics and Correlations of Study Variables with Future Anxiety

| Variable | M | SD | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
|-----------------------------|-------|-------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---|
| Avoidant Attachment Style | 14.73 | 3.80 | 1 | | | | | |
| Secure Attachment Style | 15.36 | 3.16 | -0.279 | 1 | | | | |
| Ambivalent Attachment Style | 12.74 | 3.73 | 0.308 | -0.074 | 1 | | | |
| Child Conflicts | 22.73 | 6.07 | 0.057 | 0.051 | 0.248 | 1 | | |
| Mother Conflicts | 22.07 | 6.47 | 0.046 | 0.049 | 0.221 | 0.634 | 1 | |
| Future Anxiety | 91.26 | 26.53 | 0.418** | -0.167* | 0.441** | 0.210** | 0.210** | 1 |

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$

The Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was used to check the normality of the data. The results showed that the

distribution of scores for avoidant attachment style, secure attachment style, ambivalent attachment style, child

conflicts, mother conflicts, and future anxiety was normal. Another assumption of regression analysis is the absence of high correlations between predictor variables (no multicollinearity). Tolerance and variance inflation factor statistics indicated no multicollinearity among the

attachment styles and parent-child conflict variables. The independence of the predictor variables was tested using the Durbin-Watson test, which yielded a result of 1.84, indicating independence of the predictor variables.

Table 2

Role of Attachment Styles and Parent-Child Conflicts in Predicting Future Anxiety in Students

| R | R ² | Adjusted R ² | Standard Error of Estimate |
|-------|----------------|-------------------------|----------------------------|
| 0.551 | 0.304 | 0.286 | 22.42 |

The results of the simultaneous regression analysis indicated that parent-child conflict and attachment styles significantly predicted future anxiety in nursing students. The R² value, or the coefficient of determination of the

multiple regression, was 0.304. This indicates that 30.4% of the variance in students' future anxiety was accounted for by the predictor variables (Table 2).

Table 3

Significance of the Regression Model Based on Analysis of Variance Test

| Model | Sum of Squares | df | Mean Square | F | Significance Level |
|------------|----------------|-----|-------------|--------|--------------------|
| Regression | 42575.22 | 5 | 8515.045 | 16.937 | 0.000 |
| Residual | 97532.65 | 194 | 502.746 | | |
| Total | 140107.87 | 199 | | | |

To determine the significance of the regression, the analysis of variance test was used. According to Table 3, the

F statistic was 16.937 with $p < 0.001$, indicating that the selected regression model was significant.

Table 4

Simultaneous Regression Analysis for Predicting Future Anxiety in Nursing Students

| Variable | B | Standard Error | Beta | t | p |
|-----------------------------|--------|----------------|--------|--------|-------|
| Avoidant Attachment Style | 2.065 | 0.457 | 0.296 | 4.524 | 0.000 |
| Secure Attachment Style | -0.584 | 0.524 | -0.070 | -1.115 | 0.266 |
| Ambivalent Attachment Style | 2.196 | 0.463 | 0.309 | 4.743 | 0.000 |
| Child Conflicts | 0.266 | 0.342 | 0.061 | 0.776 | 0.439 |
| Mother Conflicts | 0.381 | 0.319 | 0.093 | 1.194 | 0.234 |

The beta coefficients of the study variables showed that among the variables included in the equation, avoidant and ambivalent attachment styles predicted future anxiety, with ambivalent attachment style being the strongest predictor of future anxiety among students (Table 4).

research is the first study to examine the relationship between parent-child conflict and attachment styles with future anxiety.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

This study aimed to investigate the relationship between parent-child conflict and attachment styles with future anxiety in nursing students. The findings showed that both parent-child conflict and attachment styles are related to future anxiety. A review of the literature indicates that this

The findings indicated that parent-child conflict is related to future anxiety in students. These findings align with Pilowsky et al. (2014) regarding the relationship between parent-child conflict and anxiety. Their studies showed that individuals reporting anxiety have more parent-child conflict, which can be a strong predictor of children's mental health (Pilowsky et al., 2014). These findings are also consistent with Curran and Aro (2018), who found that conflicts between parents and children and verbal aggression predict higher levels of anxiety (Curran & Andersen, 2017;

Curran et al., 2019). The study by White et al. (2014) also examined the relationship between parental behaviors and adolescent anxiety, providing relatively consistent evidence for the relationship between anxiety and perceived parental control and anxious parenting (Waite et al., 2014). Theoretical models emphasize the importance of family factors in the development and maintenance of anxiety in children and adolescents (Creswell et al., 2011; Draisey et al., 2020).

Explaining this finding, parent-child conflict can generally lead to anxiety in both children and their parents, with strong evidence supporting the relationship between parental and child anxiety (Lawrence et al., 2019; Sydsjö et al., 2018). This anxiety can cause them to behave in ways that increase intergenerational anxiety associations and conflicts (Trzaskowski et al., 2012). The literature on parents and children's anxiety is typically divided into two broad dimensions: control and rejection (McLeod et al., 2007; Waite et al., 2014). The parental control dimension is characterized by excessive involvement and conflict, where efforts to protect the child from harm discourage granting the child autonomy, encouraging strong dependence on parents. In such a conflict-laden environment, parents do not encourage the child to develop their own opinions and make decisions (Rapee, 1997). Parenting behavior that limits autonomy and models anxious responses is associated with increased symptoms of anxiety and anxiety disorders in young children, which may also have a maintaining role (Waite et al., 2014). The second dimension, parental rejection, involves withdrawal or hostility toward the child and a lack of intimacy, involvement, emotional support, or reciprocal behavior with the child. This is assumed to undermine the child's emotional regulation, thus increasing their sensitivity to anxiety. Parental rejection is believed to increase children's risk of developing anxiety problems (McLeod et al., 2007). Therefore, students with such conflicts with their parents, which hinder their autonomy, or who do not experience parental support, warmth, and intimacy, are more vulnerable and perceive more future anxiety.

Overall, parent-child conflict, which refers to the degree of conflict and incompatibility in parent-child relationships, can act as a contributing factor to students' future anxiety, leading to a lack of trust in parents and avoidance of intimate relationships with them. In contrast, having healthy and stable relationships can provide support and care for students, helping them solve future problems and transitions, thus reducing future anxiety (Cowan et al., 2019).

The results also showed that among attachment styles, ambivalent and avoidant attachment styles have a positive and significant relationship with future anxiety, while secure attachment style has a negative relationship. This means that increasing insecure attachment style scores is associated with higher future anxiety scores, putting students at greater risk of mental health problems. These findings align with prior research (Brown & Whiteside, 2008; Sadri Damirchi & Nosrati Begzadeh, 2018). These studies show that individuals with a secure attachment style exhibit less anxiety than those with an insecure attachment style, and avoidant and ambivalent attachment styles significantly correlate with anxiety symptoms.

Explaining these findings, students with a secure attachment style trust themselves and others and can establish healthy and stable relationships. They generally have the ability to solve problems and face future transitions, enjoying life; thus, a secure attachment style can act as a protective factor against future anxiety (Wedekind et al., 2013). On the other hand, insecure attachment styles are usually associated with increased future anxiety in students. The insecure-avoidant attachment style means avoiding close relationships and distrusting others. Students with this attachment style may struggle with future problems and transitions, avoiding various issues to maintain personal comfort, increasing their future anxiety (Altmann et al., 2020). The insecure-ambivalent attachment style also implies a tendency for revenge and using relationships to meet personal needs. Students with this attachment style may seek power and control in relationships and often focus on personal gain, usually experiencing more future anxiety as they may create problems in their relationships and tend to solve their issues alone (Draisey et al., 2020).

In conclusion, a secure attachment style in nursing students can be associated with reduced future anxiety, while parent-child conflict can increase future anxiety. Insecure attachment styles in nursing students can act as predictors of future anxiety and are associated with increased future anxiety. These results can help train the necessary skills to control and reduce future anxiety in students, especially nursing students, and address related psychological disorders, providing a roadmap for developing interventions and treatments to reduce their future anxiety.

5. Limitations & Suggestions

The primary limitation of this study is its external validity, as the research was conducted only on nursing

students in Sari. Therefore, generalizing the results to other populations requires further studies in this field. Additionally, correlations between the variables may be due to other causes (e.g., heredity, socio-cultural factors), which can only be identified through further investigations.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants. Ethical considerations, such as informed consent and confidentiality, were observed in conducting this study. The

study has been approved by the Ethics Committee of the Islamic Azad University, Sari Branch, with the ethics code IR.IAU.SARI.REC.1402.370.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

Authors' Contributions

All authors made substantial contributions to the research process, covering various aspects from study design to data handling and manuscript preparation.

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