

# The Effects of Parent Attachment and Parenting Styles on Decision-Making in College Students

## Introduction

Throughout their time in college, students face many decisions that have the potential to shape the course of their future life. There are individual differences in decision-making styles which can affect the quality of students' choices. Although the role of personality in decision-making has been studied, little research has explored the role of parent attachment and parenting styles in later decision-making.

Attachment refers to the level of security an infant has with its mother or father. Secure attachments reflect warm and responsive parenting and allow the child to move into the world with confidence (Petegem, Beyers, Brenning & Vansteenkiste, 2012). Anxious attachments reflect inconsistency in parental responses when the child is stressed and "leave the child uncertain of his or her own worth and competence..." (Brenning, Soenens, Braet & Bal, 2011, p. 805). Avoidant attachments reflect lack of parental warmth and support, and leave the child believing they must take care of themselves.

Bednar and Fisher (2003) describe authoritative parents as demanding and responsive to their children, actively helping with problem-solving when the children need help and allowing them to take on greater responsibility as they become more mature. Authoritarian parents are extremely controlling and rarely let their children make decisions for themselves, leaving them with no experience in thinking through their own decisions. Permissive parents, though warm and loving, are unlikely to offer any guidance for the choices their children face, leaving them without any models of decision-making.

One personality trait that influences decision-making is conscientiousness: the habit of carrying out tasks correctly and to the best of one's ability (Hou, Wu, & Liu, 2013). Those who are conscientious are likely to consider their actions and decisions carefully. Another is impulse control: the ability to delay gratification to achieve a later reward (Bechara, 2005). Those who lack impulse control may not make thoughtful decisions.

These findings suggest that parent attachment and parenting styles, as well as personality, may influence the decision-making styles students adopt when they leave home. In the current study, we explored the impact of parent attachment, parenting styles, conscientiousness, and impulse control on decision-making styles in college students.

## Method

Participants included 80 students (65 females, 15 males) from psychology classes at a small rural liberal arts college. Participants completed a survey including a demographics section and five previously published measures. The International Personality Item Pool (IPIP; Goldberg, 1999) provided scales for conscientiousness and impulse control. Experiences in Close Relationships-Relationship Structures (ECR-RS; Fraley, Heffernan, Vicary, & Brumbaugh, 2011) measured attachment anxiety and avoidance (each parent). The Parent Authority Questionnaire (PAQ; Buri, 1991) measured authoritative, authoritarian, and permissive parenting (each parent). The General Decision-Making Scale (GDMS; Scott & Bruce, 1995), measured avoidant, dependent, intuitive, rational, and spontaneous decision-making. Preliminary analyses consisted of correlations for age and independent (student) and paired (parent) t-tests for gender. Primary analyses consisted of stepwise regressions (entry = .10, removal = .15) on each of the decision-making styles, with attachment anxiety and avoidance, parenting styles, and the personality variables as predictors.

## Hypotheses and Results

### Means

Means for conscientiousness and impulse control were slightly below the midpoint, with a fairly restricted variance ( $SD$ 's < .50). Means for parent anxiety and avoidance were all below the mean, although the variance for fathers was fairly wide ( $SD$ 's = 1.71, 1.67). Means for parent authoritarianism and authoritarianism were above the midpoint for both parents; means for permissiveness were below the midpoint. Variance in parenting styles were less than that for parent attachment ( $SD$ 's = .58-.93). Means for avoidant and spontaneous decision-making were above the midpoint; means for the other decision-making variables were lower. Rational decision-making had the lowest scores. Variance was fairly narrow ( $SD$ 's = .60-.83).

### Preliminary Analyses

Age had no effect on any of the variables. Males were more conscientious and reported more permissive fathers than females. Males reported more rational decision-making than females; females reported more avoidant decision-making. Students reported more attachment anxiety and avoidance with fathers than with mothers. They also reported that their fathers were more authoritarian and their mothers more authoritative.

### Primary Analyses

Because *conscientiousness* is associated with being right-minded, thoughtful, and efficient, conscientiousness should predict more rational decision-making and less avoidant decision-making (Bechara, 2005; Hou et al, 2013). These predictions were supported.

Because *impulse control* is associated with the ability to carefully consider alternatives, impulse control should predict more less spontaneous and perhaps less avoidant and dependent decision-making (Bechara, 2005; Hou et al, 2013). These predictions were supported.

Because securely attached children (*low attachment anxiety*) become confident adults (Petegem et al, 2012) and *attachment anxiety* is associated with dependence and worry about what others think (Brenning et al, 2011), attachment anxiety should predict less rational and intuitive decision-making and more dependent decision-making. These predictions were not supported.

Because securely attached children (*low attachment avoidance*) become confident adults (Petegem et al, 2012) and *attachment avoidance* is associated with the need to be self-sufficient and with avoidance in later relationships (Brenning et al, 2011), attachment avoidance should predict less rational and intuitive decision-making and more avoidant decision-making. These predictions were partially supported, but for fathers only. Attachment avoidance toward fathers predicted less rational and more avoidant (but not less intuitive) decision-making. Attachment avoidance toward mothers predicted more dependent and spontaneous decision-making.

Because *authoritative parents* are involved, responsive, and scaffold their children's problem-solving skills (Bednar & Fisher, 2003), authoritative parenting should predict more rational and intuitive decision-making and less avoidant, dependent, and spontaneous decision-making. These predictions were not supported. Unexpectedly, authoritative mothering predicted less rational and intuitive decision-making and more spontaneous decision-making.

Because *authoritarian parents* make children's decisions for them and don't scaffold their children's problem-solving skills (Bednar & Fisher, 2003), authoritarian parenting should predict more avoidant and dependent decision-making. These predictions were partially supported, but for mothers only. Authoritarian mothering predicted more dependent (but not more avoidant) decision-making. Unexpectedly, authoritarian fathering predicted more rational decision-making.

Because *permissive parents* are extremely accepting and involved but do not help their children with problem-solving (Bednar & Fisher, 2003), permissive parenting should predict more dependent decision-making. This was not supported.

Table. Regressions on Decision-Making

	R	R <sup>2</sup>	Adj	df	F	p	Predictors	StdB	t	p
Avoidant	0.61	0.35	3,71	13.98	***		Impulse Control	-0.30	-2.23	*
							Conscientiousness	-0.30	-2.02	*
							Attachment Avoidance toward Father	0.17	1.75	t(.08)
Dependent	0.51	0.23	3,71	8.38	***		Attachment Avoidance toward Mother	0.44	4.11	***
							Impulse Control	-0.21	-2.30	*
							Authoritarian Mothering	0.18	1.75	t(.08)
Intuitive	0.25	0.05	1,73	4.93	*		Authoritative Mothering	-0.25	-2.22	*
Rational	0.63	0.36	4,70	11.30	***		Conscientiousness	0.49	4.84	***
							Attachment Avoidance toward Father	-0.33	-3.05	**
							Authoritative Mothering	-0.22	-2.30	*
							Authoritarian Fathering	0.18	1.69	t(.09)
Spontaneous	0.51	0.23	3,71	8.41	***		Attachment Avoidance toward Mother	0.55	3.69	***
							Impulse Control	-0.36	-3.44	***
							Authoritative Mothering	0.40	2.62	*

Note: Stepwise regressions with entry at .10 and removal at .15.  
 $p < .001$  \*\*\*,  $p < .01$  \*\*,  $p < .05$  \*,  $p < .10$  t

## Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore the effects of parent attachment and parenting styles on decision-making in college students. Our hypotheses were not consistently supported and a few were contradicted, but there were unanticipated results that were consistent with our hypotheses and with the literature we reviewed for the study. Overall, the idea that parent attachment and parenting styles, as well as personality, could influence later decision-making styles was well supported: we explained 23%-36% of the variance for four of the five decision-making styles.

Conscientiousness, impulse control, avoidant attachment, and authoritative and authoritarian parenting all emerged as significant predictors of decision-making styles. Anxious attachment and permissive parenting did not emerge in any of the regressions. Of note is that mothers and fathers influenced decision-making in different ways. Avoidant decision-making was predicted by avoidance toward fathers; independent, intuitive and spontaneous decision-making were predicted by avoidance toward the mother and/or by maternal parenting styles; rational decision-making was predicted by parent variables involving both parents. While some of these relationships were consistent with expectations, others are hard to explain. Authoritative mothering, for example, predicted less intuitive and less rational decision-making, and authoritarian fathering more rational decision-making. This does not, however, negate the importance of these variables in predicting decision-making. It suggests that the relationships are complex and need to be further explored.

Limitations of our study included a small sample size from a limited population (college students), over-representation of females, and a limited selection of personality variables. We believe the impact of parent attachment and parenting styles on decision-making warrants further exploration with a larger and more diverse population and a wider range of variables.