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Negative Parenting and Adult Romantic Relationship Quality: The Potential Mediating Role of Insecure Attachment

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Abstract. Adult romantic relationship quality is an important indicator of psychological adjustment, interpersonal functioning, and subjective well-being. Previous studies have shown that early family experiences are related to romantic relationship outcomes in adulthood. However, how parenting is related to adult romantic relationship quality, and through which psychological mechanisms this relationship may develop, still needs further clarification. Based on contemporary attachment theory and recent empirical studies, this review examines whether insecure attachment may play a potential mediating role between two types of negative parenting—parental psychological control and parental rejection—and adult romantic relationship quality. Two different theoretical pathways are proposed. First, parental psychological control may make love and approval feel conditional, which may increase concerns about rejection, abandonment, and relationship instability and therefore be related to attachment anxiety. Second, parental rejection may reduce trust in close relationships and make individuals more likely to use emotional distance as a way of protecting themselves, which may be related to attachment avoidance. Emotion regulation is also discussed as an additional mechanism to explain the link between insecure attachment and negative patterns of interaction in romantic relationships.

Keywords: parenting, psychological control, parental rejection, romantic relationship quality, emotion regulation

1. Introduction

Adult romantic relationships are an important part of psychological health and social functioning. A systematic review and meta-analysis showed that relationship satisfaction, as an important dimension of relationship quality, has a complex developmental pattern across adulthood and different relationship stages. This suggests the need to understand its development from a developmental perspective [1]. In recent years, researchers have paid increasing attention to how romantic relationship quality develops and why some adults repeatedly experience insecurity, conflict, or emotional distance in close relationships. One important area of research concerns how early family experiences are developmentally related to later functioning in intimate relationships. Parenting may help shape children's basic expectations about whether they are worthy of love and

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whether being close to others is safe and reliable. These expectations may be activated again in adult romantic relationships.

Attachment theory provides an important framework for understanding this process. Contemporary attachment research suggests that early caregiving experiences contribute to the development of internal working models about the self and others. These models are not completely fixed, but they may show some continuity across development and influence how individuals judge a partner's availability, emotional safety, and their own lovability in adult romantic relationships. Thompson et al., in their review of key questions in attachment theory, also noted that internal working models, stability and change in attachment security, and the measurement of attachment relationships remain important issues in current attachment research [2]. From this perspective, negative parenting does not necessarily directly determine romantic relationship outcomes in adulthood. More specifically, it may be related to adult romantic relationship quality through attachment-related psychological mechanisms.

However, an important limitation of existing research is that many studies discuss negative parenting as a broad concept without clearly distinguishing the different attachment pathways that may be linked to different parenting practices. Parental psychological control and parental rejection are both forms of negative parenting, but their psychological meanings are different. Parental psychological control involves intrusion into children's psychological autonomy through guilt induction, love withdrawal, emotional manipulation, and similar practices. It may therefore be more closely related to attachment anxiety. Parental rejection, in contrast, involves coldness, neglect, criticism, hostility, or a lack of emotional acceptance, and may be more closely related to attachment avoidance. Distinguishing these two pathways may help explain more precisely how early family experiences are related to difficulties in adult romantic relationships.

Therefore, this narrative review attempts to investigate the possible mediation function of insecure attachment between poor parenting and the quality of adult romantic relationships based on attachment theory and current empirical data. More specifically, the review focuses on two pathways. First, it considers whether parental psychological control may be related to lower adult romantic relationship quality through attachment anxiety. Second, it considers whether parental rejection may be related to lower adult romantic relationship quality through attachment avoidance. In addition, emotion regulation is discussed as an additional mechanism that may explain how insecure attachment further affects patterns of interaction in adult romantic relationships. The theoretical contribution of this review is that it does not treat negative parenting as one single risk factor, but distinguishes two types of negative parenting and their possible attachment pathways.

2. Conceptualising adult romantic relationship quality

Romantic relationship quality is a multidimensional concept. It usually includes relationship satisfaction, intimacy, trust, commitment, communication quality, emotional support, conflict management, and relationship stability [3, 4]. A high-quality romantic relationship does not only mean having positive feelings towards a partner. It also involves open communication, constructive ways of dealing with disagreements, emotional support, and a basic sense of security in the relationship. Bühler, et al. suggest that relationship satisfaction is not static, but changes with age, relationship duration, and developmental stage [1]. This indicates that adult romantic relationships are developmental and dynamic, and that their development and changes may be related to both past relationship experiences and current interactions with a partner. Therefore, this review understands adult romantic relationship quality as a dynamic and multidimensional state of relationship functioning rather than a single measure of subjective satisfaction.

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3. Negative parenting and attachment development

3.1. Parental psychological control and attachment anxiety

Parental psychological control refers to a form of parenting that intrudes into children's psychological and emotional experiences. It often includes guilt induction, love withdrawal, emotional manipulation, shaming, denying children's feelings, and requiring children to think, feel, or behave according to parental expectations. It is different from behavioural control. Behavioural control mainly involves setting rules and monitoring behaviour, while psychological control targets children's internal world and psychological autonomy.

Parental psychological control may be related to attachment anxiety because it can make children feel that parental acceptance is unstable and conditional. When children experience parental love as depending on obedience, achievement, or emotional compliance, they may become uncertain about whether they will continue to be loved and accepted. This uncertainty may increase their sensitivity to signs of rejection and their need for reassurance from others. Over time, individuals may develop an anxious expectation of relationships in which they strongly desire close connections yet perceive them as unstable, believing that important others may withdraw love and approval when their expectations are not met.

Recent studies provide some empirical support for this pathway. A longitudinal study by Choe, Lee, and Read showed that parental psychological control perceived during adolescence was related to jealousy towards romantic partners in emerging adulthood through insecure attachment [5]. Choe, et al. further found longitudinal associations between parental psychological control during adolescence, insecure attachment, and psychological intimate partner violence in emerging adulthood. The pathway involving attachment anxiety was more consistent than the pathway involving attachment avoidance [6]. Mullinax et al. also found that parental psychological control was related to both anxious and avoidant romantic attachment in emerging adults, and that early maladaptive schemas played a role in these relationships [7].

These studies suggest that the relationship between parental psychological control and difficulties in adult romantic relationships may not only come from direct imitation of behaviour. It may also partly operate through insecure attachment and expectations about relationships.

3.2. Parental rejection and attachment avoidance

Parental rejection refers to parental behaviour that involves emotional coldness, hostility, criticism, neglect, lack of care, or lack of acceptance. According to interpersonal acceptance-rejection theory, parental rejection does not only include obvious aggression or hostility. It also includes emotional unavailability, lack of warmth, and children's subjective feeling that their parents do not really care about them. Rohner describes interpersonal acceptance-rejection theory as an evidence-based theory of socialisation and lifespan development. The theory emphasises that experiences of acceptance or rejection by important others may be related to psychological adjustment at different stages of development [8].

Parental rejection may be related to attachment avoidance because it can reduce children's trust in close relationships. If children repeatedly experience caregivers as cold, rejecting, or emotionally unavailable, they may develop the expectation that seeking comfort is ineffective and that depending on others is unsafe. To protect themselves from further disappointment, they may reduce emotional expression, suppress attachment needs, and depend more on themselves than on others. In

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adulthood, this pattern may appear as discomfort with intimacy, resistance to depending on a partner, emotional withdrawal, and avoidance of showing vulnerability.

Recent research based on interpersonal acceptance-rejection theory also supports this direction. Aracı-İyiaydın, et al. found that adults' memories of parental acceptance and rejection in childhood were related to fear of intimacy in adulthood, with psychological maladjustment and interpersonal anxiety mediating this association [9]. It should be noted that these studies do not always directly measure attachment avoidance. Therefore, they are more appropriate as indirect evidence for the relationship between parental rejection and difficulties with intimacy in adulthood, rather than as direct evidence for the full pathway of parental rejection–attachment avoidance–romantic relationship quality.

Both are forms of negative parenting, but they may lead to different types of attachment insecurity and may then be related to different aspects of adult romantic relationship quality.

4. Adult attachment and romantic relationship quality

Adult attachment is usually understood in terms of two dimensions of insecurity: attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance. Attachment anxiety reflects fear of abandonment, doubts about one's own lovability, and strong concern about whether a partner will continue to be available. Attachment avoidance reflects discomfort with intimacy, resistance to depending on others, and a preference for emotional self-reliance.

Both dimensions are related to lower romantic relationship quality, but they may appear in different ways. Attachment anxiety may reduce relationship quality through "hyperactivating" strategies. Hyperactivating strategies involve increasing emotional signals, frequently seeking reassurance, monitoring a partner's behaviour, and reacting strongly to threats to the relationship. In romantic relationships, these behaviours may lead to jealousy, increased conflict, emotional exhaustion, and unstable relationship satisfaction.

Attachment avoidance may reduce relationship quality through "deactivating" strategies. In romantic relationships, this may lead to lower emotional intimacy, less communication, limited support seeking, and weaker responses to a partner's needs. A dyadic study of 405 Spanish young adult couples \showed close relationships between adult attachment, conflict resolution styles, and relationship quality. Attachment avoidance had a stronger negative relationship with relationship quality than attachment anxiety. A partner's attachment insecurity was also related to dysfunctional conflict resolution and lower relationship satisfaction [10].

5. The potential mediating role of insecure attachment

In the conceptual model proposed in this review, insecure attachment is considered a potential mediating mechanism linking negative parenting with adult romantic relationship quality. This review does not argue that negative parenting determines adult relationship outcomes. Instead, it suggests that negative parenting may be related to difficulties in adult romantic relationships through insecure internal working models.

5.1. Pathway 1: parental psychological control, attachment anxiety, and relationship quality

The first pathway suggests that parental psychological control may be related to lower romantic relationship quality in adulthood by shaping anxious expectations about relationships. Conditional acceptance created by psychological control may make individuals more likely to interpret unclear

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behaviour from a partner as rejection or emotional distance. They may then try to maintain a sense of security through repeated reassurance seeking, jealousy, or emotional reactions. Recent longitudinal research supports an important role for attachment anxiety in the relationship between parental psychological control and difficulties in adult romantic relationships. More specifically, Choe et al. found that parental psychological control perceived during adolescence was related to insecure attachment in emerging adulthood, which was further related to jealousy towards romantic partners [5]. Choe et al. later extended this developmental pathway to psychological intimate partner violence. They found that parental psychological control during adolescence was related to later risk of psychological intimate partner violence through insecure attachment in emerging adulthood [6]. Together, these two studies suggest that the relationship between parental psychological control and difficulties in adult romantic relationships may not mainly result from direct imitation of behaviour. Instead, insecure attachment functions as a psychological mechanism that partially accounts for this association.

Although these findings cannot be understood as evidence of a definite causal chain, they provide empirical support for considering attachment anxiety as a possible mediating mechanism between parental psychological control and difficulties in romantic relationships.

5.2. Pathway 2: parental rejection, attachment avoidance, and relationship quality

The second pathway suggests that parental rejection may act as an early relationship risk factor. It may reduce individuals' trust in close relationships and contribute to the development of attachment avoidance, which may then be related to lower romantic relationship quality in adulthood.

Parental rejection may lead children to understand close relationships as unreliable or unsafe. They may develop defensive attachment avoidance by reducing emotional needs and depending less on others. In adult romantic relationships, this avoidant tendency may appear as emotional distance, withdrawal during conflict, avoidance of vulnerable expression, and lower levels of support seeking. These patterns may then be related to lower intimacy, trust, and relationship satisfaction.

Recent research on parental rejection and fear of intimacy is consistent with this pathway. Studies show that adults' memories of rejection from both mothers and fathers are related to psychological maladjustment and fear of intimacy in adulthood [9]. This suggests that parental rejection may be related to difficulties in adult romantic relationships by shaping defensive expectations about close relationships. However, more research is still needed to directly test whether attachment avoidance mediates the relationship between parental rejection and multidimensional romantic relationship quality.

5.3. Emotion regulation as an additional mechanism

Emotion regulation may further explain how insecure attachment is related to romantic relationship quality. Attachment anxiety is usually related to emotional hyperactivation, while attachment avoidance is more often shown through emotional deactivation and reduced interpersonal emotion regulation.

Recent studies provide some support for this mechanism. A meta-analysis found a small but significant negative relationship between parental psychological control and emotion regulation ability in adolescents [11]. Research by Mosannenzadeh et al. on adult attachment and emotion regulation flexibility in romantic relationships further showed that attachment insecurity corelates with individuals' flexibility in deploying interpersonal and intrapersonal emotion regulation under relationship-related stress. Higher attachment avoidance was related to less use of interpersonal

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emotion regulation, while higher attachment anxiety was related to a weaker ability to flexibly adjust interpersonal regulation strategies according to a partner's availability [12].

6. Conclusion

This review examines the potential mediating role of insecure attachment between negative parenting and adult romantic relationship quality. It proposes two different developmental pathways. First, parental psychological control can render love and approval conditional, contributing to attachment anxiety and subsequently poorer romantic relationship quality. Second, parental rejection may erode interpersonal trust and foster emotional detachment, which is linked to attachment avoidance and likewise diminished romantic relationship quality. The main contribution of this review is that it distinguishes two types of negative parenting and their related attachment pathways, rather than simply suggesting that negative parenting generally leads to poorer romantic relationships. Parental psychological control may be more closely related to anxiety about abandonment and relationship instability, while parental rejection may be more closely related to distrust, avoidance of intimacy, and emotional distance. This distinction provides a more specific theoretical framework for future research and may also have implications for relationship education and psychological counselling.

However, the model proposed in this review should be interpreted with caution. Existing evidence cannot yet fully confirm the direction of causality or the developmental order, and the second pathway currently depends more on theoretical reasoning and indirect evidence. Future research should use longitudinal, dyadic, and cross-cultural designs to further examine whether parental psychological control and parental rejection predict different attachment pathways, and whether these pathways can prospectively predict adult romantic relationship quality. Overall, attachment theory remains an important theoretical framework for understanding how early family experiences may continue to influence emotional functioning and close relationships in adulthood.

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