

## Personality Attributes and Attachment Style versus Risky Behavior

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**Abstract:** The objective of this study was to examine risky behavior in university students versus personality attributes and attachment styles. This research was a correlation study. Statistical population included all students in Islamic Azad University, Tehran Central Campus. The selection of the study subjects was through simple random sampling. The sample size was 200. Data collection tools included NEO (Neuroticism Extraversion Openness to experience) Personality Inventory, Cloninger Risky Behavior Questionnaire 2009, and Attachment Style Questionnaire. This study used Pearson Correlation Coefficient and Multivariate Regression to test study hypotheses. The study findings showed that risky behavior in university students had significant relation with attachment styles ( $p=0.01$ ). Risky behavior in university students had significant negative relation with secure attachment style and significant positive relation with avoidance and bipolar attachment styles at 99 percent level of confidence. Similarly, risky behavior in university students had significant negative relation with extroversion, openness to experience, conscientiousness, and agreeableness personality attributes, but significant positive relation with neuroticism, both at 99 percent level of confidence. Regression analysis showed that personality attributes and attachment styles can predict 0.581 of risky behavior variance. Regression coefficient comparison showed that openness to experience has the highest contribution ( $Beta = -0.415$ ) in predicting risky behavior in university students. As risky behavior has positive relations with avoidance and bipolar attachment styles and neuroticism personality attribute, we can conclude that the higher the level of avoidance, bipolar, and neuroticism, the higher the risky behavior and vice versa.

[Sepideh Shirzad, Hossein Sheikhy Sary. **Personality Attributes and Attachment Style versus Risky Behavior.** *J Am Sci* 2013;9(3s):86-91]. (ISSN: 1545-1003). <http://www.jofamericanscience.org>. 13

**Keywords:** Personality, Attachment Styles, Risky Behaviors

### Introduction

Earlier attachment studies have examined risky behavior versus insecure attachment and issues related to social adjustment such as various types of criminal behavior and risk taking.

For example, Bowlby (1994) encouraged 44 young individuals to commit robbery in a study. After examining their family characteristics and living conditions, he concluded that disappointment and harmful experiences with parents produced a condition that he called "affectionless" (As quoted in Khooshabi and Abu Hamzeh, 2007). Affectionless is identified by distrustfulness and hostility towards parents and other caregivers or pervasive lack of affection and sympathy on their part.

Strong aversion and hostility toward parents may be perilous and harmful. Baffling and frustrated feelings in a person with strong aversion and hostility may be directed to other agents, individuals, or social institutions without creating feelings of guilt, sadness, or regret. An insecure attachment may lead to risky behavior, social deviation, or criminal acts. The relationship between insecure attachment and risk seeking behavior may be explained in terms used for disconcerted application of secondary attachment strategies.

Individuals with anxious attachment may experience behavioral disorder. They use behavioral disorder as a crude way of attracting attention and serious care (Mohammadi, 2011). Individuals with avoidance attachment resort to risky behavior as a way to deny their level of attachment or tendency to avoid non-responsive parents (Mohammadi, 2011). Distrustfulness and hostility in an individual with avoidance attachment may lead to rejection of norms and further risk taking against social inhibitions.

Kamkari, et al. (2011) described a developmental mutation that reduces the sociability in individuals with avoidance attachment. This condition occurs when such an individual attempts to gain insight about different forms of frustrating attachments and find ways to emotionally distance self from them. This condition interferes with internalization of primary norms and other social principles.

Psychodynamic and sociological literature identifies risk taking in insecure attachment as criminal behavior. For example, Masoomi (2011) argued that aggression or risky behavior stemmed from impulsive inclination for seeking attention and care from non-responsive partners. From psychological point of view, criminal behavior stems from individual's weak relation with a social system

and may involve lack of commitment towards social customs and norms, failure to learn from normal activities, lack of social belief, and emotional distance from parents and school (Masoomi, 2011).

Rejection of norms and basic expectations may have roots in emotional distance from attachment styles accompanied with affectionless feeling - similar to individuals with avoidance attachment. It may also have roots in anger and vengeful reaction towards inaccessible parents - similar to individuals with anxious attachment. Both anxious and avoidance insecure attachment styles may provoke risk taking behavior.

Individuals with avoidance attachment who attempt to separate themselves from psychological disappointment unconsciously resort to risky behavior as a way to avoid harmful excitements. Such individuals may resort to risky behavior to calm and relieve their disappointment when having problem controlling their excitements. This is also the way they use to block the uncontrollable extension of obsessive ruminations and disturbing memories. These defensive mechanisms have been documented extensively in psychological literature (Mohammadi, 2011).

Risk taking research have revealed significant relation between reported insecure attachment toward parents or peers and involvement in criminal behavior such as theft, running from school, abnormal behavior and violence. Insecure attachment to parents or peers is associated with high propensity to risk taking in young subjects in the form of alcohol abuse and/or internet addiction (Mazaheri, 2011).

There are evidences that mental insecurity styles (measured by Adult Attachment Interview - AAI) are related to personality attributes and deviant behavior. For example, Dehghani (2009) compared the results obtained from Adult Attachment Interviews of 22 imprisoned young criminals with 22 patients suffering from personality disorders free of criminal history and 22 healthy adolescents as the control group. This study found high prevalence of avoidance attachment plus low levels of effective performance (emotional related metacognition) in criminal group compared to the other two groups. Those criminals with aggressive assaults (homicide, harmful ill will) showed very low effective performance (such as theft) compared to individuals who had committed non-aggressive acts.

Van Ijzendoorn, et al (2007) interviewed 40 men with the history of risk taking behavior and found out that 95% of criminals had shown insecure mental patterns and personality disorders. Similar results have been reported in studies on young hospitalized psychiatric patients and anti-social prisoners (Frodi, Dernevik, Sepa, Philipson, & Bragesjo, 2006, as reported in Masoomi, 2011).

Allen, et al. (2007 and 2008) and Marsh, et al. (2008) found out that anxious attachment was related to risk taking during adolescence and was a good predictor of criminal behavior two years later. The relation was stronger when mothers were insensitive in responding to their children's anxious demand for attention to provide the relevant guidance and help - i.e. low maternal control and high maternal autonomy (quoted in Mohammadi, 2011).

Kamkari, et al. (2011) discovered that the combination of anxious attachment and low maternal autonomy was a good predictor of personality traits. Anxious attachment may make adolescents susceptible to psychological risks. Certain forms of psychological risk (such as risky behavior or depression) depend on the characteristics of abnormal maternal behavior which fluctuates with autonomy.

Several studies conducted on adolescent and young adult subjects used self-assessment attachment scales and reported that anxious and avoidance attachments are related to anti-social tendencies, criminal behavior, and indulgence to risky behavior (Esmaeeli Far, 2011).

The findings of earlier studies show that it is impossible to draw a simple conclusion about the relative significance of various types of insecure attachments. The present study concentrated on examining the relation of risk taking with attachment styles together with the possible relation it may have with personality attributes. This study assumes that risk taking has a predictable relation with attachment and personality attributes. Some earlier studies have examined the interactions between attachment styles and risk taking. Yet, there are only a few studies on the contribution of personality attributes and attachment styles in adolescent risk taking behavior.

A large part of Iranian population is made of adolescents and young adults. Iranian cultural and social planners face challenging issues in understanding and addressing the problems of social group. Hence, this study examines the contribution of personality attributes and attachment styles in adolescent risk taking behavior.

#### **Research Hypotheses**

1. Risky behavior is significantly related to attachment styles of university students.
2. Risky behavior is significantly related to personality attributes of university students.
3. Attachment Styles and Personality attributes are good predictors of risky behavior in university students.

#### **Research Methodology**

The study is a correlation research. Statistical population included all students in Islamic Azad University, Tehran Central Campus. The sample size was 200 randomly selected subjects. Data collection

tools included NEO (Neuroticism Extraversion Openness to experience) Personality Inventory, Cloninger Risky Behavior Questionnaire 2009, and Attachment Style Questionnaire. This study used Pearson Correlation Coefficient and Multivariate Regression to test study hypotheses.

### Findings

**Hypothesis 1:** *Risky behavior is significantly related to attachment styles of university students.*

**Table 1:** Pearson Correlation Coefficient Attachment Styles versus Risky Behavior

	N	Correlation Coefficient	Significance
Bipolar - Risky behavior	200	0.104	0.001
Secure - Risky behavior	200	-0.521	0.001
Avoidance - Risky behavior	200	0.547	0.001

Table 1 shows significant relations between attachment styles and risky behavior in university students at 0.01 significant levels. Therefore, it is possible to conclude that risky behavior has a significant negative relation with secure attachment style at 99 percent level of confidence. Conversely, risky behavior has significant positive relations with avoidance and bipolar attachment styles at 99 percent level of confidence.

**Hypothesis 2:** *Risky behavior is significantly related to personality attributes of university students.*

**Table 2:** Pearson Correlation Coefficient Personality Attributes versus Risky Behavior

	N	Correlation Coefficient	Significance
Neuroticism - Risky behavior	200	0.401	0.001
Conscientiousness - Risky behavior	200	-0.536	0.001
Agreeableness - Risky behavior	200	-0.698	0.001
Extroversion - Risky behavior	200	-0.317	0.001
Openness to experience - Risky behavior	200	-0.601	0.001

Table 2 shows a significant relation between personality attributes and risky behavior in university students at 0.01 significant levels. Therefore, it is possible to conclude that risky behavior has significant negative relations with extroversion, openness to experience, Conscientiousness, and agreeableness personality attributes at 99 percent level of confidence. Conversely, risky behavior has a significant positive relation with neuroticism personality attribute at 99 percent level of confidence.

**Hypothesis 3:** *Attachment Styles and Personality attributes are good predictors of risky behavior in university students.*

**Table 3:** Regression Model, Analysis of Variance, and Regression Statistics Risky Behavior versus Personality Attributes or Attachment Styles

Model	Index							
	SS	df	Ms	F	P	R	R <sup>2</sup>	SE
Regression	3687.01	2	1089.37	8.419	0.013	0.239	0.581	26.746
Remainder	48221.09	198	301.26					
Total	51909.87	200						

$R^2$  represents the percentage covariance of attachment styles and personality attributes in predicting risky behavior. Table 3 shows that personality attributes and attachment style can predict 0.581 of risky behavior variance. Calculated F shows that the linear regression model is significant ( $P=0.013$ ,  $F=8.419$ ). Therefore, risky behavior has significant linear relationship with attachment styles and personality attributes.

Table 4 shows the prediction of the significant model in the form of regression coefficients. Therefore attachment styles and personality traits are good predictors of risky behavior among university students. T-test showed that regression coefficients are significant at below 0.01. As b is a non-standard regression coefficient, comparison between standard regression coefficients are recommended.

Table 4: Regression Coefficients Risky Behavior versus Personality Attributes or Attachment Styles

Variable	Index				
	B	SEB	Beta	t	p
Constant	43.158	9.875		7.415	0.0001
<b>Attachment Styles</b>					
Secure	0.614	0.101	-0.479	0.047	0.001
Bipolar	0.102	0.136	0.131	0.01	0.001
Avoidance	0.322	0.321	0.512	0.049	0.001
<b>Personality Attributes</b>					
Neuroticism	0.418	0.105	0.401	0.012	0.001
Extroversion	0.321	0.415	-0.214	0.098	0.004
Openness to experience	-0.541	0.213	-0.487	0.067	0.002
Agreeableness	-0.489	0.148	-0.314	0.053	0.001
Conscientiousness	-0.501	0.248	-0.335	0.051	0.001

A comparison between standard regression coefficients shows that openness to experience has the highest contribution ( $Beta = -0.415$ ) in predicting risky behavior in university students. Positive relations of risky behavior with avoidance and bipolar attachment styles and neuroticism personality attribute indicate that the higher the level of avoidance, bipolar, and neuroticism, the higher the risky behavior and vice versa.

### Discussion and Conclusion

**Hypothesis 1:** *Risky behavior is significantly related to attachment styles of university students.*

The study findings revealed that risky behavior in university students has significant negative relation with secure attachment style and significant positive relation with avoidance and bipolar attachment styles with 99 percent level of confidence.

These findings correspond to earlier research conclusions. Early research examined risky behavior versus various attachment styles (Looser, Saborin, Torgun, 2007; Mikolanser, Florian, Ruskin, Kummel, and Banister, 2008, as quoted in Masoomi, 2011). This study followed the same approach in examining

risky behavior in university students and found significant relation with attachment styles.

Mazaheri (2011) found out in another study that insecure individuals have higher potential for risky behavior when compared with secure individuals. Mazaheri's findings correspond to this study hypothesis that insecure attachment style (avoidance and bipolar) is significantly related to risky behavior. There are other researchers like Dehghan (2010) who found no significant relation between secure attachment styles and risky behavior.

Zhang and Labouvie-Vief found in a six-year study that perceived secure attachment is a reflective source that may help a secure individual to maintain anxiety without resorting to avoidance defense mechanisms. Fonigi (2012) found out in another study that highly flexible secure attachment was related to absence of propensity toward risky behavior. Goli Nejad's findings (1390/2011) support the hypothetical relation between attachment style and risk taking. There are other studies about perceived efficiency in secure individuals that showed secure attachment was negatively related to risky behavior (Fonigi, 2012). Therefore, attachment style is an important element in

the individual's evaluation of threat and the ability to cope (Fonigi, 2012).

**Hypothesis 2:** *Risky behavior is significantly related to personality attributes of university students.*

This study discovered significant negative relations between risky behavior of university students and extroversion, openness to experience, agreeableness, and conscientiousness personality attributes at 99 percent level of confidence. But, the relation between risky behavior and neuroticism attribute was positively significant. Therefore, the findings of this study conform to the findings of similar earlier studies.

For example, a study examined the relation between risky behavior of counselors in Tehran and their personality types. The findings showed a negative relation between F personality type (typified by high scores in conscientiousness, extroversion, openness to experiments, and agreeableness) and risky behavior. The findings also revealed a significant relation between highly neurotic personality type and risk taking (Ahangar Anzabi, 2002).

Another study showed neuroticism as a single predictor for risk taking (Esmaili Far, 1390/2011). Neurotics have certain characteristics including anxiety, hostility, depression, and touchiness. They are emotionally unpredictable and are prone to negative stress and psychological distress (Meslesh, et al, 2006, as quoted in Mazaheri, 2011).

A similar study reported a negative relation between extroversion and risky behavior in nurses (Esmaili Far, 2011). Lingard reported in another study that extroverts' tendency to seek more interactions with others may encourage risky behavior (Lingard, 2003, as quoted in Esmaili Far, 1390/2001). Social extroversion and actual extroversion are negatively related to fear and risky behavior. This finding corresponds to Fonigi's findings (Fonigi, 2012) which revealed a significant negative relation between openness to experience and risky behavior. That means highly open nurses are prone to exhibit higher degree of risky behavior. Goldberg believes that openness to experience may relate to lower stress and, consequently, to fewer risky behaviors (Goldberg, 1993, as quoted in Esmaili Far, 2001); because, the situation is more threatening to individuals who score high in this attribute.

**Hypothesis 3:** *Attachment Styles and Personality attributes are good predictors of risky behavior in university students.*

The findings of this study show that personality and attachment style predict 0.581 of risk taking

variance. The calculated Betas for neuroticism attribute plus avoidance and bipolar attachment styles show that they are good predictors for risk taking.

The negative relations of risky behavior with secure attachment style and agreeableness, extroversion, and openness to experience personality attributes indicate that the higher risky behavior of university students, the lower the levels of these factors, and vice versa. The findings of similar earlier research confirm the findings of this study.

Other researchers have reported that risky behavior is more related to extroversion compared to other attributes in the five-factor personality model. Exiting experience and association with cognitive and behavioral domains are among characteristics of extroverts. Extroversion includes characteristics such as fearlessness, touchiness, irritability, high self-esteem, low social anxiety, and high impulse control. Individuals who score high in extroversion, generally, tend to set accessible objectives and evaluate their performance (Masoomi, 1390/2001). Taghavi Roodsari (2009) concluded in another study that risky behavior is negatively predictable by openness to experience and conscientiousness.

Besharat (2001) defined agreeableness as a personal attribute with non-personal characteristics. Agreeableness attribute is an objective oriented behavior which controls impulses in a socially acceptable way. This control mechanism may be extendable to include risky behavior.

Agreeableness includes altruism, rearing, and caretaking characteristics. They are opposite to hostility, conflict, self-orientation, and irresponsiveness. Earlier studies have reported negative relations between agreeableness and risky behavior (Mosadegh, 2010).

Masoomi defined agreeableness, openness to experience, and extroversion as the tendency for self-esteem, self-control, liveliness, and adventurism. Individuals with these characteristics exhibit positive emotions and tend to be socially oriented. These personality attributes are related to conformity and sympathy. The individuals who score high in these attributes have tendency to reevaluate issues with the intention to solve them. They are generally hopeful and positive. Their attitude may help them concentrate on positive and good aspects of their experiences. Individuals who exhibit high extroversion, agreeableness, and openness to experience tend to apply rationalism, problem solving, social support, and positive reevaluation in establishing relations with others. They have lower propensity toward risky behavior because of such experiences.

These findings conform to the results of Watson and Hubbard study (2006, as quoted in Masoomi,2011), which reported significant relation

between risky behavior and conscientiousness. Costa and McCrae (2000, as quoted in Zolfaghari, 2011) found significant relation between conscientiousness and self-discipline, progressiveness, objective-orientation, and competence. Persistence in conscientiousness and self-discipline may cause individuals to perform their duties, complete their tasks, and engage in new activities, while avoiding risky behavior.

Saeedi (2011) showed in his study that negative propensity for risk taking in high school teachers is influenced by their personality attributes. This study found that the degree of risk taking is predictable by extroversion and agreeableness personality attributes.

Numerous other studies have shown positive relation between avoidance insecure attachment and risky behavior. These studies indicated that individuals repress their senses and holding back on action to counter stressful stimuli (Seyedi, 2011). The findings of this study and similar ones confirm their usefulness in understanding behavior of insecure individuals when they resort to risky behavior. Lazarus believed that when such individuals perceive a situation as threatening and harmful, they may often opt for temporary relief without paying attention that their approach may take them into problem.

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4/13/2013