

Attachment Insecurity and Psychological Flexibility in Emergent Adulthood: The Mediating Role of Self-Compassion

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ABSTRACT. Attachment is a crucial component of development throughout life and attachment security is a resilience factor, contributing to adjustment to life challenges, as well as educational context. The current research aims to approach attachment dimensions, in relation to psychological flexibility and inflexibility and self-compassion, investigating a mediation model of self-compassion in the relationship between attachment avoidance and anxiety dimensions and psychological flexibility. The research also aims to collect data on the complex relationships between the three aforementioned constructs and their components, global self-compassion and its components, anxious and avoidant attachment. The research included 50 participants, a population of college students, who agreed to complete measures of anxiety and avoidance in attachment relationships, self-compassion, and psychological flexibility and inflexibility. Our results indicate significant correlations between attachment anxiety, self-compassion, and psychological flexibility and inflexibility. Two total mediation effects were found in the association between the attachment anxiety dimension and self as context and the attachment anxiety dimension and fusion, relationships mediated by self-compassion. Our results will be discussed in the light of the needs of emergent adults, in terms of both mental health and guidance towards healthy development in emergent adulthood.

Keywords: attachment anxiety, attachment avoidance, psychological flexibility, experiential avoidance, self-compassion

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Attachment dimensions

Pioneers of attachment theory, John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth revolutionized the view of the mother-child relationship, outlining both its essential role in survival and well-being in the first three years of life and the active maintenance of attachment throughout life, as manifested in thoughts, emotions and behaviors (Mikulincer, Gillath, & Shaver, 2002). The attachment involves reliance on the availability and responsiveness of the attachment figure who functions as a secure base for exploring the world (both physical environment and relationships with others, reflecting on one's own internal experiences), as well as a safe haven for times of distress, where the person can seek support, protection, and can be comforted (Bowlby, 1982).

In situations of distress, seeking the proximity of the 'more mature, stronger and wiser' person is the option chosen by most young children, depending on how they have been looked after by attachment figures in their family environment (Bakermans-Kranenburg & van IJzendoorn, 2016). Interpersonal experiences and the quality of care determine the formation of positive or negative internal working models. Consistent and constant care can lead to the development of a secure attachment so that in times of danger and distress the child seeks out the attachment figure both to receive comfort and reassurance and to learn to control negative emotions (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978). Such care generates positive representations, meaning that the self is considered as deserving love, protection, and support, while others are viewed as capable, effective, and available to provide love, protection, and support (Bowlby, 1973). Alternatively, children who have received low and inconsistent care usually develop an insecure attachment that is characterized by negative representations of self and others. When they feel in danger or distress, these children are either difficult for caregivers to reassure or they attempt to reassure themselves independently of their caregivers (Ainsworth et al., 1978).

Attachment style, as Ainsworth et al. (1978) emphasized, is partly based on the interaction with people in the child's early life, particularly how parents responded to the child's distress, but Bowlby fostered the idea that the nature of relationships with later attachment figures during lifetime can influence the security felt by individuals and ultimately the reconsideration of the dimensions of anxious and avoidant attachment. Following the application of the Stranger Situation, Ainsworth et al. identified four attachment styles: secure, anxious-resistant/ambivalent, avoidant, and Main & Solomon (1986) added the disorganized style. With time, the behavioral strategies within the attachment system and internal working models become more sophisticated and complex, similar to those found in adults (Simpson & Karantzas, 2018).

Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991) developed a model of adult attachment, by describing four combinations: abstract self-image seen in dichotomous, positive or negative terms (self as worthy or not of love and support), and abstract image of others seen in dichotomous, positive or negative terms (others as trustworthy and helpful, or untrustworthy and avoidant). The four adult attachment styles of this model are: secure, preoccupied, fearful, and avoidant.

1.2. Self-compassion

Neff (2003) outlines a definition of self-compassion, as a special manner of relating to oneself that implies approaching difficulties (personal limitations, mistakes, failures, facing difficult life situations with an external locus of control) in the way that the person would respond to a friend, through kindness, understanding, and support. Operationalizing the concept of self-compassion, Neff (2003) outlines three core elements that combine and interact to create a mindset: 1) a sense of shared humanity versus personal isolation, 2) mindfulness versus over-identification with painful emotions and cognitions, and 3) self-oriented kindness versus self-critical attitude.

According to research in the field, high levels of self-compassion are significantly correlated with low levels of anxiety, depression, and negative affect (Muris, Bongers, Schenning, Meesters, & Otgaar, 2022, Cowand, Amarsaikhan, Ricks, et al., 2024). A range of benefits, such as increased quality of social connectedness, higher levels of emotional intelligence, well-being and satisfaction in daily life, use of adaptive coping strategies to stress, increased motivation and performance in various activities, and functional dynamics in intimate relationships are also observed (Barnard & Curry, 2011 apud Williams, 2015), as well as positive impact on goal attainment, eating habits, and body image (Williams, 2015). Analyzing the literature in the field, one of the most consistent findings is the negative correlation between self-compassion and psychological distress (Neff, 2003) and psychopathology (Barnard & Curry, 2011). A number of studies also confirm the association between self-compassion and aspects of mental health: happiness, optimism, wisdom, curiosity, desire to explore, and personal initiative (Heffernan, Quinn Griffin, McNulty, & Fitzpatrick, 2010; Hollis-Walker & Colosimo, 2011; Neff, Rude, & Kirkpatrick, 2007) and support the tendency of individuals with higher levels of self-compassion not to ruminate or suppress negative thoughts and emotions (Neff, 2003; Neff, Kirkpatrick, & Rude, 2007). Several interventions in the field of mental health were developed, based on the concept of self-compassion. In one research, Neff & Germer (2013) developed and tested an 8-week intervention that targeted the improvement of self-compassion skills, applied in daily life. The research was conducted on a non-

clinical sample and proved that the increase in self-compassion and everyday satisfaction of participants was associated with a deceleration in anxiety and depression. Similarly, Smeets, Neff, Alberts & Peters (2014) found that a 3-session intervention led to a significant decrease in rumination behavior and an increase in optimism, self-compassion, and self-efficacy in students (Hayes, Lockard, Janis, & Locke, 2016).

1.3. Psychological flexibility and inflexibility

The basis of the Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) model of behavior change lies in psychological flexibility (acceptance, defusion, self as context, contact with the present moment, values, and committed action, as mentioned in Hayes, Luoma, Bond, Masuda, & Lillis, 2006). The concept was defined as a complex ability to connect with the here and now, as a human being in full consciousness, and to either persist in performing a behavior if its completion is conducive to achieving personal values or to modify the behavior if it is not aligned with important values (Hayes et al., 2006, apud Tyndall et. al., 2020). At the opposite pole is psychological inflexibility, with its components: experiential avoidance, fusion, self as content, lack of contact with the present moment, lack of contact with values, inaction, Hayes et. al., 2006), a term that defines a behavioral pattern represented by an excessive control of an individual's thoughts, emotions, and feelings, as well as a tendency towards avoidance of unpleasant internal experiences, which is detrimental to the person's effectiveness and valued actions (Levin et. al., 2014, apud Tyndall et. al., 2020). Renshaw (2018) argues that psychological flexibility fosters increasing and maintaining the mental health. In contrast, psychological inflexibility facilitates the development of mental health disorders and difficulties (Tyndall et. al., 2020).

The overall goal of ACT is the client's assimilation of psychological flexibility by internalizing the six interrelated processes, extended along a continuum, which forms the Hexaflex Model of psychological flexibility and inflexibility, in which the six processes are placed along the dimensions of acceptance and mindfulness, on one side, and engagement and behavioral change on the other side.

A study conducted by Salandé, Hawkins, & Raymond (2017) investigated the relationship between psychological flexibility, attachment style, and personality organization. The hypothesis that psychological flexibility is associated with secure attachment was confirmed. A negative correlation between psychological flexibility and anxious attachment is also confirmed. The hypothesis that avoidant attachment correlates negatively with psychological flexibility was not statistically significant.

1.4. Associations between attachment, self-compassion, and psychological flexibility

The secure attachment style generates interpersonal schemas that lead to the development of self-compassion (Gilbert & Procter, 2006; Neff & Bertevan, 2013, apud Beduna & Perrone-McGovern, 2019). Research by Raque-Bogdan, Ericson, Jackson, Martin, & Bryan (2011) identified a mediation effect of self-compassion in the relationship between attachment dimension and mental health. Therefore, high levels of anxiety and avoidance are associated with low levels of self-compassion. Neff & McGehee (2010) conducted a study that highlighted that individuals who come from environments where primary caregivers have been consistently helpful and loving, caring, develop the ability to relate to the self in a caring manner. Thus, there is a possibility that the way individuals relate to themselves in difficult times (personal failures, emotional distress) is shaped by their caregivers. Research results affirm a significant correlation between high levels of self-compassion and maternal support.

In turn, a negative correlation between anxious attachment and self-compassion was found in several studies. Individuals with an insecure-anxious attachment style tend to develop a negative self-model (Pietromonaco & Feldman Barrett, 2000), have a high level of self-criticism (barely managing to show compassion towards themselves, Cantazaro & Wei, 2010), a difficulty in identifying internal resources to generate self-compassion (seeking validation from external sources is a defining characteristic of anxious attachment style, Neff & McGehee, 2010) and a tendency to exaggerate their distress (immersing themselves in painful cognitions and feelings, ruminating on the idea that unpleasant experiences only happen to them, Mikulincer, Shaver, & Pereg, 2003).

The association between insecure-avoidant attachment and self-compassion is a complex one, as individuals scoring high on this attachment dimension can have either a positive or a negative perspective on themselves (Pietromonaco & Feldman Barrett, 2000). Mikulincer & Orbach (1995) argue that a positive self-model of these individuals may appear as a defensive mechanism of denial of hidden insecurity and is qualitatively different from the positive self-model observed in securely attached individuals. Alternatively, avoidant attachment causes individuals to compulsively rely on themselves as a means of survival. By setting high standards and achieving them, individuals validate their abilities to cope with difficult situations and minimize the risk of being rejected by others. Neff & McGehee (2010) interpret these individuals as having difficulty in maintaining a clear self-image. Therefore, this dimension of attachment can be positively, negatively, or insignificantly associated with self-compassion.

Dahl, Plumb, Stewart & Lundgren's (2009) research outlines how HEXAFLEX model processes directly influence self-compassion and compassion toward others. Therefore, self-compassion involves the ability to voluntarily experience difficult emotions; to mindfully observe self-evaluating, negative, and disapproving thoughts without allowing them to dominate behavior or the mindset; to engage in the process of achieving life goals with kindness and self-validation; and to flexibly shift perspective toward a broader, transcendent sense of self (Hayes, 2008, *apud* Neff & Tirsch, 2013).

The aim of the current research is to identify a possible mediating effect of self-compassion in the association between attachment dimensions and psychological flexibility. Following the review of the literature and research in the field, the question is whether we will find similar results on our Romanian sample, to those obtained internationally regarding the complex relationships between attachment dimension and self-compassion, psychological flexibility and self-compassion, and psychological flexibility and attachment in emerging adulthood.

The following research hypotheses were formulated:

(1) High levels of anxiety in the attachment relationship correlate significantly with low levels of self-compassion and psychological flexibility.

(2) High levels of avoidance in the attachment relationship correlate significantly with low levels of self-compassion and psychological flexibility.

(3) Higher levels of self-compassion associate with higher levels of psychological flexibility.

(4) Self-compassion statistically significantly mediates the relationship between attachment and psychological inflexibility.

2. METHOD

2.1. Participants

To gather the data, an online form was built on the Google platform and sent as a link to the participants. A convenience sample of 50 participants, emergent adults, enrolled at various universities in Cluj-Napoca, Iași, Bucharest (Romania), was selected and participated voluntarily, considering the following inclusion criteria: a. age between 19-29 years, b. current student status (Table 1).

Table 1. *Demographic characteristics of the sample*

Age	Minimum (years)	19
	Maximum (years)	28
	Mean (SD) (years)	22.74 (1.651)
Gender	Feminine (%)	74 %
	Masculine (%)	26 %
Background	Urban (%)	76 %
	Rural (%)	24 %
Relational status	In a romantic relationship (%)	56 %
	Single (%)	44 %
Educational level	BA studies (%)	84 %
	MA studies (%)	16 %
Occupation	Student (%)	42 %
	Student and part-time job (%)	10 %
	Student and full-time job (%)	48 %

2.2. Instruments and procedure

Three assessment instruments were used in the research which were translated and linguistically adapted for the purpose of the current investigation.

1. The Multidimensional Psychological Flexibility Inventory (MPFI) (Rolffs, Rogge, Wilson, 2018) was designed by Dr. Ron Rogge in collaboration with Dr. Kelly Wilson and Jaci Rolffs for the comprehensive assessment of psychological flexibility and inflexibility, according to the HEXAFLEX model. The instrument consists of 60 items assessing 12 dimensions, the first 6 representing psychological flexibility and the next 6 dimensions representing psychological inflexibility.

2. The Experiences in Close Relationships - Relationship Structures Questionnaire (ECR-RS) (Fraley, Heffernan, Vicary, & Brumbaugh, 2011) was designed in 2011 by R. Chris Fraley to assess attachment patterns in a variety of close relationships, based on the Experiences in Close Relationships-Revised inventory (ECR-R) (Fraley, Waller, & Brennan, 2000). The instrument consists of 9 items that are repeated to assess individual differences in relationships with parental figures (mother and father), with a partner in a romantic relationship, and with the best friend, thus totaling 36 items. The assessment of each relationship can be considered as an independent scale comprising two variables: anxious attachment (how much the person worries that he or she might be rejected or abandoned by the attachment figure) and avoidant attachment (strategies used to deactivate attachment needs). An overall score for anxiety and avoidance can be computed based on the answers.

3. The Self-Compassion Scale-Short Form (SCS-SF) (Raes, Pommier, Neff, Van Gucht, 2011) is the 12-item short version derived from the 26-item Self-Compassion Scale (SCS) constructed by Kristin Neff (2003) to assess self-compassion. By selecting 2 items from each of the 6 subscales, Raes et al. created the version we used. The authors found that the scores obtained with the short version significantly correlate with both the global score of the long version of the scale and the score obtained for each subscale. The SCS-SF measures the 6 main components of self-compassion and low self-compassion, in contrast: self-kindness vs self-judgment, common humanity vs isolation, mindfulness vs over-identification.

Participants were first presented with an informed consent form that included: purpose and initiators of the study, procedure, risks, confidentiality, safety and withdrawal from the study. At the end of the form, the participants were given the choice to tick a box if they wished to participate in the study. Statistical analyses were performed in SPSS 20.

3. RESULTS

The demographic variables did not account for statistically significant differences in our sample.

The Pearson correlation test is used to investigate the associations between attachment dimension, psychological flexibility, and self-compassion. Attachment anxiety dimension correlated strongly significantly at .01 with the components of self-compassion: self-criticism ($r = .536$), isolation ($r = .363$), and over-identification ($r = .431$), and negatively correlated with global self-compassion ($r = -.580$), kindness ($r = -.438$), and mindfulness ($r = -.485$). Therefore, a hyper-activation of the attachment system will be accompanied by high levels of the sense of isolation experienced by the individual, self-criticism, and an over-identification with negative emotions and thoughts. In our sample there were no statistically significant correlations between the attachment avoidance dimension and the components of self-compassion.

The negative correlation of the attachment anxiety dimension with the variable self as context ($r = -.358$, $p < .01$) indicates a difficulty for these individuals to free themselves from unhelpful negative self-evaluations. We also found a significant negative correlation between the attachment anxiety dimension and defusion ($r = -.239$, $p < .05$). Three significant negative correlations ($p < .05$) were found between the attachment avoidance dimension and committed action ($r = -.295$), present moment ($r = -.278$), and psychological flexibility ($r = -.261$). We identified a significant correlation at $p < .05$ between

the attachment anxiety dimension and the variable fusion ($r = .280$), as well as a strongly significant correlation at $p < .01$ with self as content ($r = .401$) and a correlation with the variable inaction ($r = .236$). In our sample, there are no statistically significant correlations between the attachment avoidance dimension and the components of psychological inflexibility.

We found significant correlations between the variable kindness and psychological flexibility ($r = .361$, $p < .01$) and its components, engaged action ($r = .288$, $p < .05$) and self as context ($r = .444$, $p < .01$), present moment ($r = .240$, $p < .05$), and defusion ($r = .269$, $p < .05$). An individual's tendency to be gentle, tolerant, and self-understanding is associated with higher levels of psychological flexibility, with individuals consistently performing actions in the service of achieving valued life goals and being successful in detaching from negative definitions and labels developed based on previous experiences. The variable self-criticism also correlated strongly significantly negatively with self as context ($r = -.418$, $p < .01$) and significantly negatively with psychological flexibility ($r = -.258$, $p < .05$). Thus, increased psychological flexibility is associated with an awareness of self-worth in situations of failure/limitations and a detachment from negative labeling that is associated with a low likelihood of self-criticism. The construct isolation correlated strongly significantly negatively with the psychological flexibility component self as context ($r = -.468$, $p < .01$). Therefore, a low level of isolation from others is associated with a deeper understanding of the human condition, an acceptance of imperfections, and an increased release from labels and narratives about the self that may cause the person to choose inaction. There was a significant correlation at .05 between the humanity and acceptance variables ($r = .287$). An increased sense of shared humanity tends to be associated with increased acceptance and understanding of personal limitations. Strongly significant correlations ($p < .01$) are obtained between the mindfulness and psychological flexibility variable ($r = .497$) and its components: defusion ($r = .425$) and self as context ($r = .592$). Significant correlations at .05 are also obtained with engaged action ($r = .307$), values ($r = .353$), contact with the present moment ($r = .329$), and acceptance ($r = .341$). High levels of the mindfulness variable are associated with high levels of the components of psychological flexibility. Thus, a mindful person will accept difficult situations, act in agreement with attaining the values and meaning of life, tend to be in touch with the experiences of the present moment, and tend to be able to perceive thoughts as sounds, words, and parts of speech, without getting caught in them. Two statistically significant negative correlations at .05 were found between over-identification and self as context ($r = -.327$) and defusion ($r = -.266$). Over-identification with negative thoughts and emotions does not allow for the observation of a broader, objective perspective of the

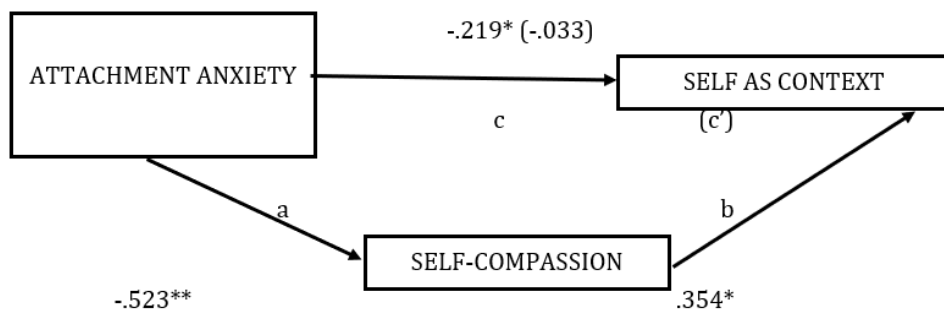
individual's life, taking into account both limitations and failings as well as resources and abilities. Therefore, a high level of over-identification will be accompanied by low levels of the component self as context, evading negative self-labeling will occur with difficulty. We obtained four significant correlations between global self-compassion and psychological flexibility ($r = .362, p < .01$), defusion ($r = .325, p < .05$), self as context ($r = .554, p < .01$) and values ($r = .248, p < .05$). Thus, we found that higher levels of global self-compassion tend to be associated with higher levels of psychological flexibility and more specifically, defusion, self as context, and values, with the individual being able to deal with negative thoughts, feelings, and psychological distress as products of the mind and act in the direction of achieving life goals according to personal values.

Negative correlations are identified between kindness and the components of psychological inflexibility: inaction ($r = -.359, p < .01$), fusion ($r = -.435, p < .01$), and self as content ($r = -.402, p < .01$). Self-criticism was significantly associated with self as content ($r = .362, p < .01$) and fusion ($r = .340, p < .01$). The construct self-criticism also positively correlates with lack of connection with the present moment ($r = .251, p < .05$). Thus, high levels of self-criticism are associated with high levels of cognitive fusion and definition of the person in terms of descriptions involving negative thoughts, feelings, and self-judgments, as well as a deficit of consciously living experiences. The self-compassion component defining humanity significantly negatively correlated with self as content ($r = -.243, p < .01$), demonstrating that the perception of shared humanity decelerates the process of accusing and defining an individual according to negative self-evaluations. Significant correlations are identified between the variable isolation and three of the components of psychological inflexibility: lack of contact with the present moment ($r = .307, p < .05$), fusion ($r = .311, p < .05$), and self as content ($r = .286, p < .05$), showing that high levels of isolation experienced by an individual will be associated with high levels of lack of contact with the present moment, fusion, and self as content. The person experiences their existence on autopilot, often arriving at negative evaluations and self-judgments in their isolation, integrating all these thoughts as part of reality, irrefutable truths, and finding it difficult to detach from unnecessary negative self-evaluations. We identify significant negative correlations between mindfulness and the components of psychological inflexibility: fusion ($r = -.475, p < .01$) and inaction ($r = -.337, p < .01$). Therefore, a high level of mindful thinking reflects an openness to the reality of the present moment (even in stressful situations) and a low level of cognitive fusion (avoidance of integrating negative emotions into existing reality) and inaction. There were significant correlations between over-identification and fusion ($r = .433, p < .01$), inaction ($r = .315, p < .05$), psychological inflexibility ($r = .341, p < .01$), self as content ($r = .353, p < .01$), and

experiential avoidance ($r = .303, p < .05$). A person with a high level of over-identification will show high levels of fusion with negative thoughts and emotions, difficulty taking action in pursuit of the meaning in life, an inflexibility in thinking, and the adoption of "flight" behaviors in the face of unpleasant feelings and thoughts. Four negative correlations are identified between global self-compassion and components of psychological inflexibility: fusion ($r = -.504, p < .01$), self as content ($r = -.411, p < .01$), and inaction ($r = -.360, p < .01$). The higher the level of global self-compassion, the lower the levels of fusion, inaction, and self as content. Thus, a self-tolerant person who accepts his or herself in totality (including personal failures and limitations) will with less difficulty be able to act in times of distress and not be defined by the labels received.

Given the correlations we found, we further tested a mediation model (Baron & Kenny, 1986, Hayes, 2013). The significance of the mediation effect was analyzed using the Sobel Test and the mediation model was performed using PROCESS function in SPSS. The initial hypothesis, that postulated a mediating role of self-compassion in the relationship between attachment anxiety dimension and psychological inflexibility was not confirmed, as no statistically significant mediating relationship was found. After analyzing the correlation matrix, a possible mediation in the relationship between the attachment anxiety dimension and self as context, a component of psychological flexibility, was investigated (Figure 1).

Figure 1. The complete mediation effect of self-compassion between attachment anxiety and self as context



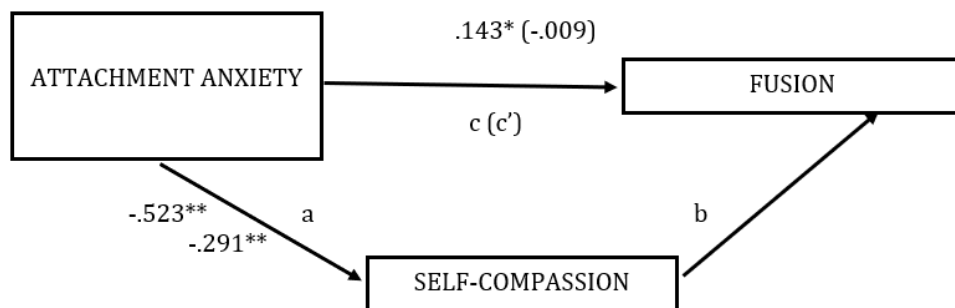
*. Significant at $p < .05$ (one-tailed) **. Significant at $p < .01$ (one-tailed)

The significance of the mediation effect is analyzed using the Sobel test. For this mediation relationship, the p-value is .004. As we can see in the figure above, there is a complete mediation relationship, as the direct effect ($c' = -.033$)

of the attachment anxiety on self as context, becomes non-significant when introducing self-compassion as mediator.

Further analysis of the correlation matrix analysis led us to test a possible mediation relationship between attachment anxiety dimension and fusion, a component of psychological inflexibility.

Figure 2. *The complete mediation effect of self-compassion between attachment anxiety and fusion*



*. Significant at $p < .05$ (one-tailed) **. Significant at $p < .01$ (one-tailed)

Following the SOBEL test, the p-value was .006, proving that the model was statistically significant. In figure 2, a complete mediation relationship can be inferred. The direct effect ($c' = -.009$) of attachment anxiety on fusion becomes non-significant when introducing self-compassion as a mediator.

4. CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

This research was initiated out of a desire to delve deeper into the attachment system and how its insecurity is experienced by young people in the emergent adulthood age range. The constructs of self-compassion and psychological flexibility and inflexibility, respectively, provided the framework of the study. The aim of the research, to identify a possible mediating effect of the self-compassion variable in the causal association between attachment anxiety dimension and psychological inflexibility was partially accomplished.

The complex relationships between the constructs under analysis (attachment anxiety, self-compassion, psychological flexibility, and the various components of psychological inflexibility) was mainly proven by the multiple correlations between the attachment dimension and self-compassion. The first

hypothesis that "High levels of anxiety in the attachment relationship correlate with low levels of self-compassion" was confirmed. Therefore, the more the person is characterized by the anxious dimension of attachment, the lower levels the person proves in self-oriented goodness, mindful thinking and overall self-compassion, as well as higher levels of self-criticism, isolation and over-identification, indicating that individuals with high attachment anxiety tend to struggle with self-compassion. Our results are consistent with those identified in the literature (Huang & Wu, 2024), showing that attachment insecurity is significantly correlated with lower levels of self-compassion.

We specifically identify strongly significant negative bivariate correlations between the attachment anxiety dimension and the psychological flexibility components self as context and defusion, which confirms the hypothesis ("Higher levels of anxiety in the attachment relationship correlate significantly with lower levels of psychological flexibility"). Therefore, a person with an anxious attachment will find it more difficult to observe their thoughts as mental productions that may not be true and may not allow them to organize/ restrict their behavior. This suggests that individuals with high attachment anxiety are more likely to experience cognitive fusion, difficulty engaging in value-driven actions, and challenges in maintaining perspective during distressing situations.

The second hypothesis ("Higher levels of avoidance in the attachment relationship correlate significantly with lower levels of psychological flexibility") was partially confirmed. Significant negative correlations were confirmed with engaged action, contact with the present moment and psychological flexibility as constructs. Therefore, a deactivation of the attachment system will be accompanied by low levels of engaged action, and psychological flexibility, making it difficult for the individual to act in the service of achieving important values in life. The person can be more likely to ruminate about past experiences or be distracted, to not be in touch with the experiences of the present moment.

Consistent with data from other studies (eg., Sagüés de la Maza, Moreno-Jiménez, & Blanco-Donoso, 2026, Calvo et al., 2022), statistically significant correlations were identified between attachment anxiety and self as content, fusion, and inaction, meaning that people with an anxious attachment are prone to integrate negative thoughts as existing in reality and to relate rigidly to the forms in which they describe themselves, being defined by these descriptions and mobilizing in actions with difficulty.

Third, the multiple correlations that may exist between psychological flexibility and inflexibility, respectively, and self-compassion were investigated targeting the following hypothesis ("Higher levels of self-compassion are associated with higher levels of psychological flexibility"). The research hypothesis was confirmed, there were statistically significant correlations at both global

and subscale-specific levels. Self-compassion, particularly the components of kindness, mindfulness, and global self-compassion, was found to be positively correlated with psychological flexibility, suggesting that individuals who demonstrate self-compassion are more likely to engage in behaviors that reflect psychological flexibility, such as accepting difficult emotions, acting in accordance with their values, and maintaining a broader perspective on life. Furthermore, high levels of mindfulness were associated with lower levels of cognitive fusion and inaction, suggesting that mindfulness can mitigate the negative effects of psychological inflexibility. Our results are similar to those from other studies (eg., Nas, Taytaş, & Vangölü, 2026, Sahinler, Dindar, & Koc, 2026).

The mediation model that was hypothesized, with self-compassion as a mediator in the relationship between attachment anxiety dimension and psychological inflexibility was partially confirmed regarding two components of the HEXAFLEX model: the self as context (psychological flexibility) and fusion (psychological inflexibility).

First, from the self as context perspective, individuals retain a sense of self by detaching from labels and unnecessary negative self-evaluations. This sense of self is related to self-esteem and sense of self-worth. Virginia Satir (1988) states that the development of a sense of self-worth is achieved in a supportive environment where individual differences are accepted and valued. Therefore, she emphasizes the importance of introjecting unconditional love and acceptance from parents, as the child grows into an adult who is able to both recognize personal qualities and limitations and accept them without judgment. Such upbringing predisposes the generation of positive schemas in which the self is perceived as worthy of love, care, and respect. In antithesis, low and inconsistent parental care produces a negative pattern of the self.

The mediating relationship shows that by modifying the level of self-compassion, the person is able to recognize the distress and suffering experienced in the present, learning to treat oneself with kindness and to see one's limitations as part of the human condition, thus producing an increase in self-worth.

Furthermore, the more the person is characterized by attachment anxiety, the more the person is prone to exhibit behaviors such as rumination, worrying, and fusion with negative, automatic thoughts. Integrating negative thoughts as existing in reality, important, true, and automatically following them can lead to restricting the individual's behavior and freedom to pursue valued directions in life. The mindfulness component implies openness to the reality of the present moment, counteracting the very human tendency to merge with negative, painful thoughts, and emotions. The mediation relationship

demonstrates that by modifying the level of self-compassion, in particular the mindfulness component, the relationship between the dimension of attachment anxiety and psychological inflexibility could be eliminated. Also, increasing self-compassion may help individuals with high attachment anxiety develop a more flexible sense of self.

As attachment insecurity is associated with difficulties in relationships, our results could have practical implications on the design of therapeutic interventions targeting the increase of self-compassion, with effects of psychological flexibility, favoring the development and maintenance of good mental health. Overall, these findings emphasize the importance of self-compassion and mindfulness in fostering psychological flexibility, especially for individuals with high attachment anxiety, and highlight the need for interventions that target these areas to improve mental health and well-being.

5. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Several confounding variables (eg., involvement in a therapeutic process before participation in this research) could distort the associations we found. Another possible limitation could be that we did not have a large enough sample to perform a more in-depth analysis of the differences between attachment anxiety and avoidance in different relationships.

The lack of significant findings between the attachment avoidance dimension and the components of self-compassion and psychological flexibility is noteworthy. While this may reflect a true absence of relationship, it is also possible that the operationalization of attachment avoidance in this study did not capture its nuances or that the sample size was insufficient to detect smaller effects.

The study relies on self-report measures for assessing attachment, self-compassion, and psychological flexibility, which are susceptible to social desirability bias, recall bias, and individual differences in introspection. These biases could impact the accuracy of the data. Additionally, the use of a single measurement tool for each construct may not fully capture the complexity of these psychological dimensions, especially attachment, which can be multidimensional and context-dependent.

Although the study offers valuable insights through correlational analyses, this method does not allow for a full exploration of the mechanisms at play. Future research could benefit from using experimental or mixed-methods designs to explore the causal relationships and underlying processes in greater depth.

While the study provides valuable insights into the relationships between attachment anxiety, self-compassion, and psychological flexibility, its limitations suggest that further research, particularly with a longitudinal design,

more diverse samples, and alternative methods of measuring these constructs, would help to clarify and extend these findings. Additionally, exploring potential interventions to enhance psychological flexibility through self-compassion may offer practical implications for mental health interventions.

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