

## THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ATTACHMENT STYLES AND MEANING IN LIFE IN ELDERLY

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### ABSTRACT

**Background:** Attachment styles and attitudes towards meaning in life are crucial factors in sustaining an active life in old age.

**Objectives:** No study was found to investigate the relationship between these two variables. So, the present study was conducted to examine the relationship between attachment styles and meaning in life in older adults.

**Materials and Methods:** In this descriptive, correlation, cross sectional study, 235 elders were selected from the retirees' service centers in Sari, Iran according to stratified random sampling method between July and October 2016. The research tools were the multi-part demographic questionnaire, the Hazan and Shaver's attachment style questionnaire (1987) and Steger's (2006) meaning in life questionnaire. The data were analyzed in SPSS - 21 with descriptive and inferential tests at  $P < 0.05$ .

**Results:** The majority of the participants were female (51.9%) with the mean age of  $68.2 \pm 6.9$  years (range: 60-89 years). Their mean score was  $45.3 \pm 6.7$  for the attachment style pattern,  $51.9 \pm 7.9$  for meaning in life,  $27.8 \pm 4.6$  for the presence dimension, and  $24.1 \pm 4.5$  for the search dimension. The secure attachment style had the highest mean in both the presence ( $29.6 \pm 4.8$ ) and the search ( $24.6 \pm 4.6$ ). The results of the Spearman's correlation coefficient showed a positive and significant relationship between the total score of the attachment style and meaning in life for older adults.

**Conclusions:** This finding can be used in developing more knowledge and predicting attitude and satisfaction in aged, and might also serve as a suitable guide for planning their psychological and life programs

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### Introduction

Aging is a natural process which occurs in all creatures with time. The development of aging accompanies widespread reactions and changes in different body organs, which ultimately lead to death [1]. The population of older adults will be doubled in the world in 40 years. In Iran, it has also been predicted that older adults' population will increase from 8.24% in

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2011 to 10% by 2021[2]. The increasing trend of their population requires more attention to their needs and problems. The quality of life is one of the most important variables in human life that is affected by changes in older adult's mental and physical health. Aging occurs with changes in one's understanding of life. Older adults think about the time left for them to live and repeatedly review the concept of life and death [3]. Transition from youth to old age is reflected by a shift in their attention from seeking wealth to focusing on the philosophy of life and its goals for many people [4]. The search for this concept may cause widespread mental and social reactions for older adults that lead to stress and various issues [5]. Reflection on the meaning and notion of life during the years that have passed and have remained results ambivalent reactions in people. These reactions may sometimes cause desirable or undesirable outcomes[6, 7].

Successful adaptation to old age depends on the identification and use of appropriate styles and their replacement in giving direction to life [8]. The attachment style is one of the important notions in behavioral systems based on the theory of evolution which increases the chances of survival for the individuals and reduces stress and the unfavorable effects of life. This behavioral system actively operates throughout the cycle of life [9, 10]. Attachment style is an intrapersonal source with an effective role in reducing the impacts of disability, stress, and various life problems [11]. It also plays a role in creating normal and abnormal qualities in interpersonal relationships and shaping the concept of life for individuals [12]. Attachment styles in adults and older adults include the secure, avoidant, and ambivalent styles, each with particular features, causing people to react differently to life events [13]. Based on Erikson's view, older adults may either accept themselves and their age and feel that their lives are purposeful or may regret the past and feel hopeless. The existence of meaning in life depends on older adults' attachment style which determines a specific concept for them [14].

### **Review of literature**

Many studies have been conducted on meaning and attachment styles, with contradictory results. Although most studies have confirmed the effect of attachment style on establishing the concept of life, the majority of older participants in these studies follow a secure attachment style. Also, attachment styles affect the attitude towards existence and realities in older adults[15]. Furthermore, Rezaei et al. (2014) showed that the avoidant and anxious attachment styles had a role in creating a negative attitude towards meaning in life in older adults [16]. Mascaro et al. (2005) also reported positive relationships between meaning in life and the attachments of older adults to their relationships and activities [17]. Other studies have also revealed the significant relationship between attachment styles and meaning in life for older adults, such that the meaning of life may change for older adults depending on the attachment styles which are themselves affected by several factors including the relationship between older adults and their family and their underlying diseases [7]. The study by Bonder et al. (2014) did not show any significant relationship between the attachment style and meaning in life[6].

### **Purpose and hypotheses**

Meaning in life in old age can affect the quality of life in older adults. To create effective plans and improve the level of social and mental health, it is essential to investigate the trend of meaning in life of elders. In addition, identifying older adults' attachment styles might be effective as a method of preventing, controlling and treating many of their physical and mental conditions and this might also change their attitude towards life [18, 19]. The present study was conducted to examine the following:

- 1- The relationship between attachment styles and meaning in life in older adults covered by the retirees' service centers in Sari county,Iran.
- 2- The level of attachment styles in older adults covered by the retirees' service centers in Sari county,Iran.
- 3- The level of meaning in life in older adults covered by the retirees' service centers in Sari county,Iran.
- 4-The mean distribution of the dimensions of meaning in life based on attachment styles in older adults covered by the retirees' service centers in Sari county,Iran.
- 5- The relationship between attachment styles and the domains of meaning in life in older adults covered by the retirees' service centers in Sari county,Iran.

### **Method**

#### **Data**

The present correlational, descriptive and analytic study was conducted between July and October 2016. The statistical population consisted of older adults above the age of 60 covered by the retirees' service centers in Sari county, Iran. The inclusion criteria were age of >60 years old, Iranian nationality, ability to speak Persian, no mental and neurological disorders that require medication, no cognitive impairment based on Abbreviated Mental Test scores above 7, and the ability to communicate and answer the questions. The exclusion criteria were unwillingness to participate or refusal to fill in the questionnaire during the interview.

#### **Sampling**

The sample population of older adults in Sari county was calculated based on the latest census in 2011 which was approximately 47056 people. Thus, considering the largest standard deviation (7.4) in the study by Rezaei et al. (2013) which provides a larger sample population [16], the sample was calculated as 213 in descriptive studies with 95% confidence coefficient and 80% test power. The sample size was increased to 235 to cover a 10% sample loss. Stratified random sampling was used to select the subjects.

### **Design and analytic strategy**

The retirees' service centers were visited after the approval of the Research Deputy at Mazandaran University of Medical Sciences and the issuance of the researcher's reference letter. The list of older adults was obtained at these centers, a number was assigned to the subjects, and the samples were selected based on the quota of each center through the table of random numbers. The participants were then phoned and invited to participate in the study after being briefed on the research objectives if they met the inclusion criteria. Older adults were visited at the center to complete the questionnaires if they were willing to participate and were replaced with another person if they were not. They were given a questionnaire at the time of the visit after briefing them on the present study and application of the obtained data. After obtaining their verbal consent and observing their privacy, the questionnaires were read out for older adults separately in the form of an interview (whether they were literate or illiterate) to prevent any bias. The questionnaire items were completed based on individual choice and opinion and the questionnaires were collected in the presence of the researcher.

### **Measurement:**

The research tools were multi-part questionnaires, including demographic questionnaires, the Adult Attachment Questionnaire (AAQ), and the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ). The adult attachment questionnaire is a self-evaluation tool consisting of two parts, developed by Hazan and Shaver (1987), who reported its reliability as 0.81 based on test-retest method and its internal consistency as 0.78 using Cronbach's alpha. Collins (1990) reported its internal consistency as 0.79 using Cronbach's alpha. In Iran, Rezaei et al. (2013) assessed its psychometrics and reported the Cronbach's alpha coefficient as 0.78 (Rezaei AM, 2014). To reexamine its reliability in the present study, the questionnaire was completed by 20 retired adults in Sari county and the Cronbach's alpha coefficient was calculated as 0.81. The first part of this questionnaire consists of 15 items- 5 items are assigned to each domain of secure, avoidant and ambivalent attachment styles- using a five-point Likert scale (Strongly disagree 1, Disagree 2, Undecided 3, Agree 4, Strongly agree, 5). The questions 1-2-3-4-5 pertain to the avoidant style; the questions 6-7-8-9-10 to the secure style, and the questions 11-12-13-14-15 to the ambivalent style. The participant's minimum and maximum score in each of the test subscales are 5 and 25, respectively. The total score ranges 15-75 and none of the questions is reversely scored [20]. In the second part of the questionnaire, the participants should mark only one sentence that best describes them. Therefore, as nominal scales, questions 1, 2 and 3 present the avoidant, ambivalent and secure attachment styles and have been separately analyzed [21]. The meaning in life questionnaire (MLQ) measures the meaning in life and was developed by Steger et al. (2006). An acceptable internal consistency was reported for the presence (0.86) and search (0.87) subscales [22]. The reliability and validity of this questionnaire were examined by Mesrabadi et al. (2013) in Iran[23]. To reexamine the reliability, the questionnaire was completed by 20 retired adults in Sari county and the Cronbach's alpha was calculated as 0.79. This questionnaire consists of 10 items, scored using the Likert scale as absolutely untrue (1 point), mostly untrue (2 points), somewhat untrue (3 points), neither true nor untrue (4 points), somewhat true (5 points), mostly true (6 points), absolutely true (7 points). The score of this questionnaire ranges between 10 and 70. Higher scores indicate higher meaning in life. MLQ has two subscales: presence consists of five questions (questions 1, 2, 3, 4, 5), and its score ranges between 5 and 35. Search consists of five questions (6, 7, 8, 9, 10), and its score ranges between 5 and 35 [22].

The study was approved, with respect to 31 ethical codes, by the Research Ethics Committee at Mazandaran University of Medical Sciences (IR.MAZUMS.REC.95.2309), and the following ethical codes were observed: coordinating with authorities for sampling, informing the samples of the application of the data, the confidentiality of the information, and voluntary participation. All the participants expressed their consent before entering the study.

### **Statistical Analysis:**

Data were analyzed in SPSS-16. Descriptive statistics were used to determine the mean and standard deviation. The normality of data was examined by the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test and the variables were considered statistically significant at  $P < 0.05$ . The normality of the research population was rejected, so non-parametric tests were used for the analyses. The Spearman's correlation coefficient was used to determine the relationship between the mean scores of attachment styles and meaning in life. Eta test was used to examine the relationship between the mean scores of attachment styles and meaning in life in binary variables (such as gender and marital status), Chi-squared test was used to examine the relationship between the mean score in polychotomous variables (such as education, income status, etc.). The significance level for all the analyses was  $P < 0.05$ .

### **Results**

Most of the participants in the study were female (122 participants) (51.9%), with the mean age of  $68.2 \pm 6.9$  years (range: 60-89) (IQR=11). The mean score of the attachment style pattern in older adults supported by the retirees' centers in Sari county was  $45.3 \pm 6.7$  with the highest and lowest scores ranging between 62 and 29 (IQR=8). The mean score of meaning in life in the study population was  $51.9 \pm 7.9$  (IQR=11). (Table 1).

**Table 1:** The mean distribution and the relationship between the scores of attachment styles and meaning in life in older people covered by the retirees' service centers in Sari county, Iran, 2016.

Variable	Mean	SD	Interquartile Range	Median	Distribution Range	Test statistic*	P Value
Attachment style	45.3	6.7	8	45	29-62	0.235	0.0001
Meaning in life	51.9	7.9	11	53	26-70		

\* Spearman's rho

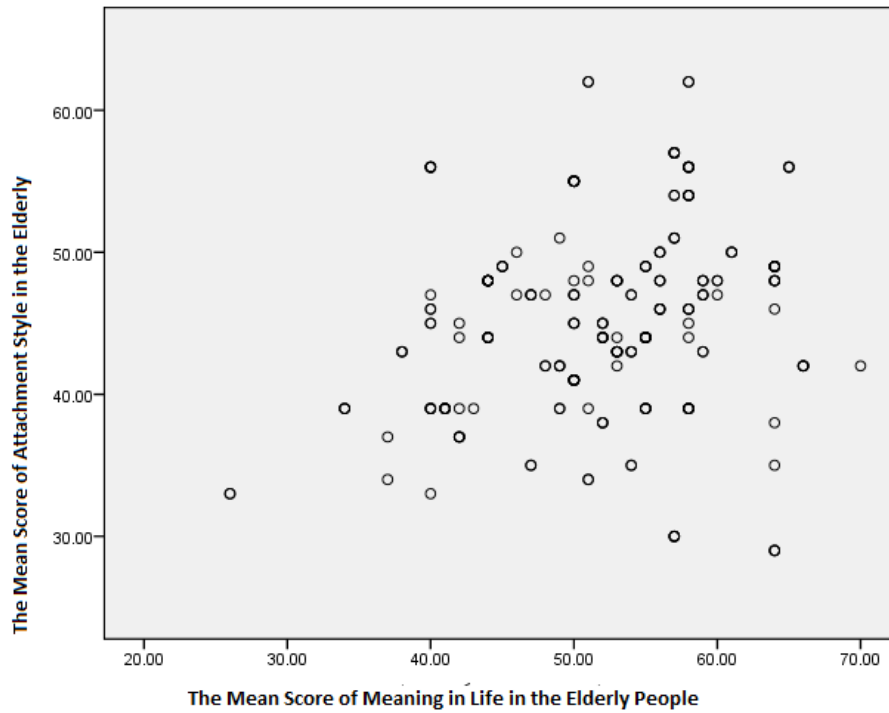
Table 2 shows the mean distribution of the dimensions of meaning in life based on the attachment styles for older adults supported by the retirees' centers in Sari county, Iran. Therefore, for different attachments styles, the mean score of meaning in life in the presence dimension (27.4±8.6) was higher than the search dimension (24.4±1.5). The table also shows that the secure attachment style has the highest mean in the presence dimension (29.4±6.8) and the search dimension (24.4±6.6). In addition, the lowest mean score in the presence dimension of the meaning in life was in the ambivalent attachment style (26.4±1.9) and the avoidant attachment style (23.3±7.8) in the search dimension.

**Table 2:** The mean distribution of meaning in life (ML) dimensions based on attachment styles in older people covered by the retirees' service centers in Sari county, Iran, 2016.

Types of attachment styles	Dimensions of meaning in life		Test statistic*	P Value
	SD) ±(Mean			
	Presence	Search		
Avoidant	27.02±3.4	23.7±3.8	6.865	0.03
Secure	29.6±4.8	24.6±4.6		
Ambivalent	26.1±4.9	23.9±5.3		

\*Pearson Chi-Square

As illustrated in Table 1 and the scatter plot, the results of the Spearman correlation test showed a positive and significant relationship between the attachment style and meaning in life in older adults covered by the retirees' service centers in Sari county, Iran, 2016 ( $r=0.235$ ,  $p=0.0001$ ). (Fig 1).



**Fig 1:** The scatter plot of the correlation results of attachment styles and meaning in life in older people covered by the retirees’ service centers in Sari county, Iran, 2016.

The results of covariance correlation matrix showed that presence has a significant correlation with secure attachment style ( $r=0.147$ ,  $p=0.024$ ) and search has a significant correlation with avoidant ( $r=0.158$ ,  $p=0.015$ ) and ambivalent attachment styles ( $r=0.261$ ,  $p=0.0001$ ) (Table 3).

**Table 3:** Covariance correlation matrix results for each attachment style and dimensions of meaning in life in older people covered by the retirees’ service centers in Sari county, Iran, 2016.

	<b>Avoidant attachment</b>	<b>Secure attachment</b>	<b>Ambivalent attachment</b>	<b>Presence</b>	<b>Search</b>
<b>Avoidant attachment</b>	1				
<b>Secure attachment</b>	$r=-0.549$ $P=0.0001$	1			
<b>Ambivalent attachment</b>	$r=0.194$ $p=0.003$	$r=0.001$ $p=0.9$	1		
<b>Presence of meaning</b>	$r=-0.037$ $p=0.5$	$r=0.147$ $p=0.024$	$r=-0.55$ $p=0.3$	1	
<b>Search for meaning</b>	$r=0.158$ $p=0.015$	$r=0.106$ $p=0.1$	$r=0.261$ $p=0.0001$	$r=0.502$ $p=0.0001$	1

## **Discussion**

The results of the present study showed a positive and significant relationship between attachment styles and meaning in life in older adults covered by the retirees' centers in Sari county. Previous research has not thoroughly investigated the link between these two variables among older adults [24]. The study by Baiocco et al. (2009) showed a significant relationship between the attachment styles and purposeful life [25]. The study by Stewart et al. (2011) also indicated the relationship between the attachment styles and meaning in life [26]. Lambert et al. (2012) further showed that low levels of attachment decrease meaning in life among individuals [27]. In fact, attachment is a deep emotional bond that one develops over time with the surrounding environment, objects, and people, and accordingly interacts with what is happening in one's environment [28]. People seek to give meaning to what occurs in life [29], accordingly, by changing one's attitude and values about the existing issues of life, attachment styles help people have a clearer view of their existential philosophy [6]. Older adults' view about life is more realistic than that of the other age groups. Older adults know how to use the remainder of their lives such that they can maintain peace and quiet. Old age is the time for a review of life. Older adults try to examine their life by viewing what has happened so far and what the future holds [30]. Bodner et al. (2014) did not report a significant difference between attachment styles and meaning in life considering the differences in age (with the mean of 38.2 years), value-based beliefs and the cultural structure of the research population [6]. The present study results, that is, the significant relationship can be explained as the research population was older adults.

The findings of the present study showed that the secure attachment style had the highest mean with respect to the dimensions of the presence and search. The dimension of presence indicates one's value of life, and the dimension of search shows one's active attempt to attach this value to life [31]. In fact, one's behavioral model is shaped within the value system that life brings to them and also by attempts they make to establish and promote these values. Since these behavioral models in adults are influenced by attachment styles, people's normal and abnormal behaviors are determined [32]. The secure attachment style is a healthy model of behavioral improvement which brings about happiness, and helps shape interpersonal relationships and interactions more skillfully, confidently, and peacefully. Hence, people make extensive efforts to meet their needs and gain the desired satisfaction in life. Furthermore, it is expected that people with a secure attachment style try harder to give meaning to their lives and, accordingly, life is of greater value to them [6].

The dimension of search includes the attempts individuals make to create the values of life [33]. The results of the present study showed that this dimension has a significant relationship with the avoidant and ambivalent attachment styles while the lowest mean score pertained to the ambivalent attachment style in the presence dimension and the avoidant attachment style in the search dimension.

The avoidant and ambivalent attachment styles are considered insecure styles. The individuals with these styles constantly experience stress and anxiety in meeting their needs [33]. Because of this reaction, the individuals with insecure styles should only try to create this value. In fact, older adults with insecure attachment styles are confused about gaining satisfaction and lack the necessary skills to meet their needs owing to their inadaptability to life circumstances [33, 34]. Some studies showed that older adults that have insecure, avoidant, and anxious attachments experience negative and confusing attitudes [35, 36].

The findings of another study showed that in other attachment styles, the mean score of meaning in life in the presence dimension is higher than in the search dimension. With age, the search for meaning declines and the presence of meaning gains importance [34]. Emotional experiences become more profound and complex with age, and emotions are more efficiently adjusted. Based on Erikson's theory, senescence is the last stage of life in which people conclude the past. In fact, the process of reviewing one's life provides older adults with an opportunity to resolve their old and long-lasting conflicts by considering their success. The psychological conflicts at this stage constitute ego integration against despair that includes coping with life. People who experience this integration find themselves complete and satisfied with their achievements. Erikson states that older adults evaluate their past and their satisfaction or dissatisfaction with life constitutes their main problem in this evaluation. Since this satisfaction is discussed in the form of life being valuable or not in the presence domain, older adults assume that their past and present life is of value, which is indeed the ultimate goal of human life [30].

### **Limitations**

This is a cross sectional study and the correlations can not imply causation relationships between parameters.

## **Conclusion**

The findings of this study showed that there is a correlation between the pattern of attachment styles in elders covered by retirees' service centers in Sari county and the meaning in their lives. In this regard, the secure attachment style had a positive correlation with the meaning in life. On the other hand, the present study showed that elders with ambivalent attachment also search for meaning and this finding is unprecedented especially at an old age which might reflect their stress and concern. Thus, based on individual characteristics, healthcare providers should pay specific attention to these aspects of old people's needs by giving them spirituality-based instructions or forming peer groups which focus on common issues. The results of similar studies might serve to know and predict the attitude and satisfaction among older adults in a better way and might also serve as a suitable guide for their psychological planning and life. Our study had several strengths, including

a population-based and random sampling, using interview for data gathering, using Abbreviated Mental Test questionnaire for cognitive assessment.

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