

Examining the Relationship between Attachment and Depression in Terms of Various Variables: A Theoretical Study

Bağlanma ve Depresyon Arasındaki İlişkinin Çeşitli Değişkenler Açısından İncelenmesi: Teorik Bir Çalışma

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Abstract

Self-psychology concept, developed by Heinz Kohut, is now seen as one of the most fundamental psychoanalytic theories. Kohut's theory of self psychology and Bowlby's attachment theory emphasizes the importance of early care giving relationship and how this has a profound effect on the development of a healthy sense of self and relationship in adulthood. In this study, it is aimed to explain the concept of self-object in self-psychology and attachment theory in detail. In this context, in order to examine the effects of self-object and attachment dimensions, the literature findings related to attachment and self-object with depression, anxiety and subjective well-being and the possible mediator effect of emotion regulation in these relationships were investigated. Suggestions were made for future research.

Keywords: Attachment, self-object, psychological symptoms, subjective well-being, emotion regulation

Öz

Heinz Kohut tarafından geliştirilen kendilik psikolojisi yaklaşımı, günümüzde en temel psikanalitik teorilerden biri olarak görülmektedir. Kohut'un kendilik kuramı ve Bowlby'nin bağlanma kuramı, bakım verenler ile kurulan ilişkinin önemi ve bunun sağlıklı bir kendilik duygusunun gelişimi ve yetişkinlik döneminde kurulacak ilişkiler üzerinde etkisi olacağı üzerinde durmaktadır. Bu çalışmada, kendilik psikolojisi içerisinde yer alan kendilik nesnesi kavramı ve bağlanma kuramının detaylı bir şekilde açıklanması hedeflenmiştir. Bu bağlamda kendilik nesnesi ve bağlanma boyutlarının etkilerini incelemek için bağlanma ve kendilik nesnesi ile depresyon, anksiyete ve öznel iyi oluş ilişkisi ve bu ilişkilerde duygu düzenlemenin olası aracı etkisine dair alanyazın incelenmiştir. İleride yapılacak araştırmalar için önerilerde bulunulmuştur.

Anahtar sözcükler: Bağlanma, kendilik psikolojisi, psikolojik semptomlar, öznel iyi oluş, duygu düzenleme

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SELF-PSYCHOLOGY developed by Heinz Kohut (1971, 1977) is considered as one of the most fundamental psychoanalytic theories (eg. Mollon 2001, Strozier 2001). It is a comprehensive theory, both because it provides an explanation for personality development, and because it includes a psychopathology structure and an integrated approach to the therapeutic process. Kohut (1971) described self as the whole image and self-perception of self. According to Kohut (1971, 1977, 1984) self (seen as a process or system that regulates subjective experience) is the essence of a person's psychological existence, consisting of feelings, emotions, thoughts and attitudes towards self and the world. Kohut sees self as a psychological force that explains the development of a mature and healthy personality as well as the formation of personality disorders.

Although Kohut changed Freud's theory by reducing the importance of sexual and aggressive instincts, he also follows Freud (1933) and called individuals "object" of instincts. The selfobject represents the person (caregiver) who plays a role in the development and integrity of the individual's early self. Self-objects are objects that are perceived as part of the self. The basis of the theory is the self, which is conceptualized as a mental system that regulates the subjective experience of the individual in relation to various developmental needs (Wolf 1988). Kohut (1971) called these needs "selfobject needs" because it is associated with the maintenance of the self and is met (or not) by the external figures in the individual's life. Kohut (1977, 1984) emphasizes that meeting critical developmental needs in early caregiving experiences plays an important role in promoting a cohesive sense of self development. According to Kohut, there are three main selfobject needs that affect the developing self. These are mirroring, idealizing and twinship. The need for mirroring includes appreciation for qualities and achievements. Kohut (1971) combined that they need a caregiver who admires them successfully, celebrates their progress and applauds their success. Kohut (1971) suggested that children need a caregiver who admires them, celebrates their progress and applauds their achievements. He argued that the need for mirroring is related to the "grandiose self" or "narcissistic self" structure, which the baby sees the perfect and good features belong to himself in the first years, and the bad and imperfect features to others. Satisfying this need for a self-object includes being valued by others and proud of one's qualities and achievements; this contributes to the concept that Kohut sees as a healthy sense of "grandiosity". As distinct from the need for mirroring, idealizing selfobject needs arise from the desire to trust and unite to an idealized other in times of stress, similar to the need of an attachment figure. The need for idealization involves reflecting perfection into an external figure, and this figure is believed to be the parent figure, which is generally believed to know everything and have unlimited power. The presence of one or more ideal parent figures that children admire and the feeling that they are related to them make them feel safer in their development and strengthens their ability to set high but realistic goals. The need for a twinning object is the need to feel similar to others and to relate to them. The twinning self-object needs addressed to a larger group, closeness, feelings of belonging, facilitate the sense of connection and increase the adoption of community rules, the development of empathy and connectedness (Kohut 1971). The fulfilled twinning

self-object needs increases the feelings of closeness to a larger group, of belonging, facilitate the sense of connection and increase the adoption of community rules, the development of empathy and connectedness (Kohut 1971).

On the other hand, attachment theory was first proposed by Bowlby and Ainsworth and colleagues to define the emotional bond between caregiver and child (Ainsworth et al. 1978, Bowlby 1969). According to attachment theory (Bowlby 1969), the attachment system regulates the behavior of both the baby and the caregiver in order to provide a sense of protection and safety during infancy. While children whose needs are consistently met, develop safe attachment models, rejected children develop insecure attachment models as they are concerned and suspicious that their needs will be met. For individuals who are securely attached, positive thoughts and beliefs regarding the availability of attachment figures and their ability to alleviate distress and beliefs that they are worthy of caring develop (Bowlby 1980). Bowlby (1988) believes secure attachment is necessary to maintain emotional balance, develop a positive self-image, and establish satisfactory close relationships. It also says that connecting securely helps the self-realization as it strengthens the sense that a person can achieve goals in a safe environment and get support when needed (Bowlby 1988). He also argues that secure attachment helps the self-actualization as it strengthens the sense that a person can achieve goals in a safe environment and get support when needed (Bowlby 1988). Ainsworth et al. (1978) defined three types of attachment styles (secure, anxious, avoidant) based on children's behavior in response to mothers' presence, absence and return. Individuals with anxious attachment are skeptical of others because their caregivers do not consistently meet their needs, and they are concerned that they will not be sensitive when they need. Individuals with avoidant attachment on the other hand, include those who are confident, independent and maintain emotional distance (Hazan and Shaver 1987).

Both theories emphasize the importance of the relationship with early caregivers, and that this will have an impact on the development of a healthy sense of self and relationships in adulthood. In this context, in order to examine the effects of self-object and attachment dimensions, the literature findings related to the relationship of attachment and self-object with depression, anxiety and subjective well-being and the possible mediation effect of emotion regulation in these relationships were investigated.

The relationship between self-object and attachment

Although there are few studies examining the relationship between self-object needs and attachment dimensions, it is not surprising that these two dimensions are related (Banai et al. 2005, Lopez et al. 2013). Kohut's theory of self (Kohut 1984) and Bowlby's (1969) attachment theory emphasizes the relationship between early caregiving and how this has a profound effect on the development of a healthy sense of self (Schore 2002). Both theorists argue that the caregiver's responsiveness to the child's early needs will affect the child's adulthood characteristics and close relationships in adulthood. Although Kohut emphasize the transference of three selfobject needs (mirroring, idealizing and twinship) evolving from the relationship with caregiver, Bowlby has focused on automatic emotion regulation

strategies that develop as a result of hyperactivation and deactivation in the attachment relationship. When attachment figures are not reliably available and supportive, the feeling of secure attachment cannot be achieved and negative thoughts about themselves and others occur, and secondary emotion regulation strategies, which are hyperactivation and deactivation, come into play. Hyperactivation strategies are created by inconsistent and unreliable caregivers who leave the infant anxious during exploration. Hyperactivation strategies include asking for closeness from attachment figures (Mikulincer et al. 2003) using rumination and anxiety (Cassidy 1994). Although Kohut does not address these strategies, the hunger to meet unmet selfobject needs can be defined as the hyperactivation of strategies aiming to meet these needs (Banai et al. 2005).

Deactivation is said to result from emotional neglect (Mikulincer and Shaver 2007). The infant, whose need for intimacy is not met, tries to adapt to the care environment by trying to be self-sufficient. Ainsworth and colleagues' definition of avoidant attachment shows deactivation strategies. Although the infant is physically in distress during separation, avoids establish attachment when reunite with the caregiver. Deactivation strategies involve creating an emotional distance from others (Mikulincer et al. 2003). Other strategies include suppression of distressed cognitions and memories (Shaver and Mikulincer 2002). By temporarily suppress fight or flight responses over time, deactivation strategies minimize embarrassment and distress temporarily (Schore 2002). In addition to focusing on selfobject transference, Kohut (1971, 1977) tried to explain the contribution of interpersonal relationships in creating sense of coherence in the self from childhood to adulthood. In this context, his views are similar to the attachment theory of Bowlby and Ainsworth (Ainsworth et al. 1978; Bowlby 1980). The development of a coherent self depends on the availability and sensitivity of others, when a person wants to manage the distressed situation. Similar to attachment theorists, Kohut (1971) emphasizes that relationships established during infancy, which is completely dependent on the caregiver, are particularly important for the preservation of healthy narcissism. In this early phase of self, the child's self is immature and relies on caregiver for self-cohesion. While a person becomes less dependent on the caregiver during the developmental process, he emphasizes that dependence continues in a limited way throughout the entire life process (Kohut 1977). This approach is in line with Bowlby (1988) and Ainsworth's (1991) views on the importance of continuing attachment needs throughout life (Banai et al. 2005).

The relationship of self-object with depression, anxiety, and subjective well-being

Kohut and Wolf (1978) argue that deficiencies in mirroring, idealizing and twinship in the early period lead to self disorders. For example, the inadequacy of the individual's self-object needs may activate hunger for these needs or to avoid them. A child who has parents that do not mirror enough, who gives incomplete, neglected, or inconsistent care may become an individual with a mirroring hunger and who needs others to increase his sense of being special. Deficiencies in the self-object have been associated with a wide variety

of psychological problems such as pathological narcissism, emotional dysregulation and interpersonal dysfunction (Kohut 1984). The degree and type of psychopathology that occurs, depends on the stage of development where primary needs are not met (Fonagy and Target 1997; Kohut and Wolf 1978). Average shortcomings lead to inability to internalize realistic ambitions or mature ego ideals, leading to increased vulnerability to fear of fragmentation and criticism, negative emotions and thoughts and loneliness (Kohut 1971). According to Kohut (1977), weakness in the self underlies the narcissistic personality disorder or behavioral disorders. In narcissistic personality disorder, symptoms such as hypersensitivity, depression, hypochondriasis and loss of enthusiasm are observed. Due to differences in experiences with the self-object, symptoms of self-pathology are classified into four groups, namely an understimulated self, a fragmenting self, an overstimulated self, and an overburdened self (Kohut and Wolf 1986). When the stimulus responses of the selfobjects are not enough in the early stages, understimulated self emerged. Vitality is lacking in individuals with this self-structure. Kohut (1977) defines deprivation experience in the self as “empty depression”. Morrison (1986), on the other hand, thinks that the goals and ambitions cannot develop due to the insufficient responses of the self-object, and therefore, depression emptiness occurs. Empty depression is defined clinically as a condition in which the person feels and perceives herself in despair, deprivation and emptiness. Similarly, the study of Banai and colleagues (2005) suggested that Kohut’s (1977, 1984) selfobject hunger and selfobject needs in adulthood are related to emotional problems. In this context, they investigated the relationship of selfobject needs with psychological well-being, depression, anxiety and hostility feeling. As a result, their findings support that Kohut (1971) selfobject needs and rejection of these needs in adulthood are associated with emotional inconsistencies. The results also show that mirroring and twinship deprivation are positively associated with self-esteem, psychological well-being, depression and anxiety. Idealization and twinship avoidance were found to be significantly associated with psychological well-being, anxiety, depression and feelings of hostility (Banai et al. 2005).

The relationship of attachment with depression, anxiety and subjective well-being

Attachment styles resulting from relationships with primary caregivers seem to be related to the psychological functions of individuals in adulthood, and insecure attachment is associated with mental health disorders (Mikulincer and Shaver 2012, Dozier et al. 2008). Mikulincer and Shaver (2012) reviewed the studies conducted in both clinical and non-clinical samples and found that insecure attachment was associated with many different mental disorders, from mild distress to severe personality disorders and even schizophrenia. Also, secure attachment has been associated with less behavioral problems (Leekers et al. 2009). In addition, avoidant attachment, which is one of the insecure attachment styles, seems to be associated with the development of depression and anxiety in adulthood as a result of the caregiver’s failure to meet the child’s need in distressed situations. This can lead child to avoid expressing negative feelings and minimize the search for closeness with others

(Bradley 2000, Cassidy 1994). Similarly, it is thought that having insecure attachment provides a basis for internalizing problems such as anxiety, depression, and social isolation (Brumariu and Kerns 2010). Madigan et al. (2012) found that children with insecure attachment had twice as many internalizing problems compared to children with secure attachment.

In parallel with this situation, adult attachment can also contribute to individual differences on subjective well-being. Subjective well-being, in its simplest terms, is defined as the state of being happy that every person experiences (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi 2000). One of the most effective theories of subjective well-being includes concepts such as happiness, life satisfaction, and the presence of positive emotions (Myers and Diener 1995). Research provides empirical evidence that adult attachment contributes to subjective well-being. For example, anxious and avoidant attachment in adulthood was found to be negatively related to subjective well-being and positively related to negative affectivity (Wearden et al. 2005).

The mediating effect of emotion regulation

The ability to regulate emotions is to achieve more functional behavior and to provide appropriate and flexible responses in different emotional situations (Gross and Thompson 2007). On the other hand, not being able to regulate emotions effectively is characterized by having less functional strategies, and not making appropriate decisions in different situations (Fox 1994, Denham 1998), and it is associated with various psychopathological symptoms and difficulties in the developmental process (Maughan and Cicchetti 2002). Research shows that individuals use their emotional regulation strategies in a habitual way, and these differences have consequences for many areas of psychological adjustment such as emotional experience, cognitive and social functionality (eg. Gross and John 2003). Similarly, problems in emotion regulation play an important role in the development and maintenance of psychopathological symptoms and emotional disorders (Garnefski et al. 2002, Velotti et al. 2013). It has been suggested that difficulties in emotion regulation are associated with a number of emotional disorders such as anxiety disorders and major depressive disorder (Campbell-Sills and Barlow 2007, Mennin and Farach 2007). Research shows that the way regulating emotions also has an important effect on subjective well-being (Bryant 2003; Eisner et al. 2009; Tugade and Fredrickson 2007). However, which emotion regulation strategies are functional and in which are not depends mostly on the context. Extensive research shows that some emotion regulation strategies will encourage or reduce psychological well-being among situations. For example, suppression of emotions has often been associated with a decrease in positive emotions (Gross and Levenson 1997), subjective well-being (Gross and John 2003), and interpersonal functionality (Butler et al. 2003).

Research supports that secure attachment develops with the approval of the child's positive or negative emotions by the caregiver and forms the basis of emotion regulation in adulthood (Siegel 2012, Schore 2015). Secure attachment is thought to occur when the attachment figures consistently and qualitatively respond to the needs of the child,

creating a safe emotional and physical environment. Children with secure attachment see caregivers as a safe haven in case of danger (Bowlby 1982). Primary attachment strategies include the search for closeness to attachment figures. When the search for closeness is not met, secondary strategies such as hyperactivation or deactivation strategies are used. These strategies include strategies such as increasing emotional distance with others (Mikulincer et al. 2003) and suppression of distressing cognitions and memories (Shaver and Mikulincer 2002). Depending on the availability and sensitivity of caregivers, children develop internal working models that continue throughout adulthood and affect personality processes (Mikulincer and Shaver 2007). An individual with a secure attachment style develops an “internal working model” that includes positive beliefs about the presence of others, as well as positive beliefs about himself. Research shows that the quality of attachment relationship affects emotion regulation by affecting the child’s expectations (internal study models) about the presence and behaviors of the caregiver (Bowlby 1969, 1982). In other words, internal working models are thought to shape emotion regulation by affecting the cognitive, affective and behavioral responses of individuals when they are in distress.

In addition, parents who provide secure attachment can evaluate children’s emotions and the factors that cause these feelings more accurately and insightfully and provide more effective help. They can then talk to the child with a delicate approach to their distressing experience and provide more information about useful strategies to manage distress. Secure attachment does not mean rejection of negative emotions. On the contrary, effective emotion regulation is the flexibility to integrate positive and negative emotions, and increased ability to experience and tolerate disturbing situations even in the absence of caregivers (Bowlby 1969, 1980, Cassidy 2008). Emotion regulation strategies implemented by the child in distressed situations, who are securely attached, include clear, direct and active statements towards the caregiver. Positive expressions that will be experienced together at the end of the experience serve to protect the interest in the relationship (Bowlby 1982, Bretherton 1990). For example, interactions with emotionally accessible and sensitive others allow the child to understand that showing and confirming emotions is a step to achieve emotional balance, and learns that it is socially acceptable and beneficial to investigate and try to understand one’s emotions (Cassidy 1994). For this reason, individuals with secure attachment learn adaptive emotion regulation strategies that enable them to manage the distress in the light of their positive experience in emotion regulation they have experienced with their caregivers. Unlike individuals who are securely attached, individuals who have avoidant attachment style prefer to hide their thoughts and feelings. Although they tend to seem comfortable, they undermine their unresolved distress and their ability to cope with inevitable negativity of life. This impairment is especially likely during long-term, difficult stressful experiences that require actively dealing with a problem and resorting to external support resources (eg Berant et al. 2008).

According to the self-object theory, the emotional regulation of the baby in the early period of their life is completely primary caregiver (self-object). Primary caregivers are usually mothers, and in time, fathers and other individuals also become the self-object.

The self-object is the basis for adaptation to the environment, regulation of impulse and integration throughout the developmental process. The development process of the self is the process of self-regulation of emotions previously done by the mother as a result of early experiences. Mutual emotional transitions that occur depending on the quality of the relationship between the caregiver and the child are important for the development of emotional awareness. Mutual emotional transitions that occur depending on the quality of the relationship between the caregiver and the child are important for the development of emotional awareness. The child sees the reflections of his own feelings in his mother, so that the mother acts as an emotional mirror for the child to experience his own feelings. In this relationship, as the breaks and reunions occur, the development of confidence and empathy in the child is supported.

In this context, self development is the acquisition and increase of emotion regulation (Schoe 2003). According to self-psychology, the main function of self-integrity is to provide emotional regulation. The non-coherent and non-empathic attitudes of the primary caregiver (usually the mother) and the others who care afterwards (father and other important persons) may cause psychological disorders such as depression, anxiety disorders, personality disorders (Kohut 1977).

Conclusion and recommendations

Reviewed studies showed that, there is a limited study in which the concepts of self-object and attachment are discussed together (Banai et al. 2005, Lopez et al. 2013). Both theories emphasize the relationship between early care and that it has a significant impact on the development of a healthy sense of self. In this study, the literature findings related to attachment and self-object and their relationship with depression, anxiety and subjective well-being were investigated in order to examine the possible effects of self-object and attachment dimensions. Bowlby's attachment theory has focused on emotion regulation strategies (hyperactivation and deactivation) in attachment relationship (Cassidy 1994). Similarly, emotion regulation appears to have an important place in self-psychology. According to Kohut, the development process of self is the process of self-execution of emotion regulation performed by the mother (object of self) as a result of early experiences with the caregiver (Schoe 2003). In this context, the possible mediating effect of emotion regulation in current relationships was also examined.

Current findings suggest that, when self-object needs are not met, depression and anxiety may increase and subjective well-being may decrease (Banai et al. 2005). Although Kohut suggests that self-object hunger and adult selfobject needs in adulthood are associated with emotional problems, research has mostly looked at the relation of the self-object with narcissism and borderline personality disorder (eg Tonkin and Fine 1985, Masterson 1993). It is considered to be important for future research to evaluate different psychological disorders such as depression and anxiety. The findings to be obtained in this area will also enable the integration of empirical studies conducted by psychologists working in the clinical field with a clinical-based psychoanalytic theory. It is thought that obtaining more data can

improve clinical predictions and make Kohut's theories more functional. In the theory of self psychology, the object of self appears to be directly related to emotion regulation. The lack of self-object needs and non-empathetic attitudes by the primary caregiver suggests that emotion regulation cannot be learned during the developmental process, and as a result, may lead psychological disorders such as depression, anxiety and personality disorders to appear (Kohut 1977). The results show that it may be important to examine the mediating effect of emotion regulation when investigating the relationship between self-object and psychological symptoms. More research is needed in this area.

Similarly, avoidant and anxious attachment dimensions are associated with increased depression and anxiety, and decreased subjective well-being (eg, Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi 2000, Dozier et al. 2008, Mikulincer and Shaver 2012). Research supports that; emotion regulation may have an effect on attachment and psychological symptoms. Individuals with insecure attachment cannot learn how to deal with distress in early childhood and use effective emotion regulation strategies, and this can lead to increased psychological distress and reduced subjective well-being (eg Siegel 2012, Schore 2015). This suggests that targeting emotional regulation may be important in studies on subjective well-being or psychological health in clinical practice.

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