



SOCIAL AXIOMS AND AVOIDANT ATTACHMENT STYLE AMONG ADULTS: THE MEDIATING ROLE OF SOCIAL CYNICISM

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Abstract

The present study aimed to investigate the impact of Core Beliefs (Social Axioms) on Avoidant Attachment style, specifically examining the mediating role of Social Cynicism among adults. A cross-sectional correlational design was employed with a sample of $N = 200$ adults (ages 22–45) recruited via convenience sampling from urban centers in Pakistan. Data was collected using the Social Axioms Survey (SAS), the Experiences in Close Relationships-Revised (ECR-R) scale for attachment, and the Social Cynicism subscale. Descriptive statistics indicated a prevalence of moderate to high avoidant tendencies. Correlation analysis revealed a significant positive relationship between social cynicism and avoidant attachment ($r = .42, p < .01$), as well as a negative relationship between reward for application and avoidance ($r = -.35, p < .01$). Regression analysis indicated that social axioms were significant predictors of attachment avoidance, with social cynicism collectively accounting for 38% of the variance in avoidant behaviors ($R^2 = .38$). Furthermore, mediation analysis confirmed that social cynicism partially mediated the relationship between negative core beliefs and avoidant attachment. The study concludes that entrenched cynical worldviews reinforce avoidant strategies in adults, suggesting that cognitive interventions targeting core beliefs may facilitate more secure attachment patterns.

Keywords: *Adult Relationships, Avoidant Attachment, Core Beliefs, Social Axioms, Social Cynicism.*

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1. Introduction

Adult attachment styles are relatively stable patterns of relational expectations, emotional responses and interpersonal behaviors that develop from an individual's internal working models of the self and others. These attachment styles drive an individual's perception, interpretation, and response to close relationships throughout their life. Attachment theory suggests that internal working models are formed during infancy, as a result of initial interactions with caregivers, and that they represent mental models that provide expectations for future trust, support, intimacy and dependency in subsequent relationships. Avoidant attachment is a type of attachment style identified from the literature where the person is emotionally distant, has a lack of comfort with intimacy, may be too self-reliant, and may try and suppress thoughts, feelings and needs associated with attachment. People with avoidant attachment tend to have more of an interest in being independent rather than close, and may feel that they are weak or vulnerable if they rely on other people. While attachment patterns are established in early caregiving experiences, recent studies indicate that cognitive processes and beliefs persist in adulthood and help to sustain and reinforce attachment patterns.

The concept of social axioms has been gaining traction in the field of psychology, especially within cognitive frameworks. Social axioms are oversimplified notions of self, others, social interactions, and the world. These beliefs serve as assumptions that a person uses to make sense of things, make choices and make forecasts in a variety of social settings. Social axioms are different from specific attitudes, which are attitudes toward specific objects or issues, as they are global, culturally influenced, and influence perceptions and behaviors in everyday life. Leung et al. (2002) found five dimensions of the social axioms: Social Cynicism, Reward for Application, Social Complexity, Fate Control, and Religiosity. Each dimension represents a different set of beliefs regarding the functioning of the world and the way people should interact with it. Generalized beliefs affect the ways people relate to one another, and they can become an important factor in how people engage in close relationships and in emotional relations.

Social Cynicism seems to be a dimension most relevant to insecure attachment patterns. Social Cynicism is a general pessimistic attitude towards people, distrust and skeptical attitudes towards people's motives, and pessimistic attitudes toward social institutions and interpersonal relationships. People with a high level of social cynicism are more likely to think that people are selfish, dishonest, manipulative, or are more likely to exploit others for their own gain. These perceptions can have a profound impact on how they understand social interactions and the judgment of prospective partners in relationships. A sense of an unsafe or unreliable social world can lead to a tendency for caution and defensiveness in interpersonal interactions. As a way to protect themselves from feelings of rejection, betrayal, disappointment or emotional hurt, they may develop

avoidant attachments. Thus, social cynicism is a mental filter and a perspective through which one's interpersonal experiences are experienced and interpreted.

Avoidant attachment can be viewed as a form of defensive disengagement of the attachment system. Instead of turning to others for help and comfort when distressed or when in need, avoidantly attached people tend to shut down their attachment needs and keep a psychological and emotional distance. With this strategy they are less likely to be vulnerable and to rely on others. Social cynicism could be a way of thinking that might justify such behaviour. If someone has a strong belief that “people are fundamentally selfish”, “others cannot be trusted”, or “kindness is often a guise for manipulation”, intimacy can feel like a very dangerous thing. Consequently, emotional withdrawal, not expressing one's emotions, and avoiding close connections are rational and protective reactions. These beliefs contribute to avoidance by encouraging people to think that they must maintain some distance to keep safe. These patterns may become entrenched over time, leading to greater challenges for individuals to build healthy, trusting relationships.

The social norm Reward for Application, on the other hand, emphasizes that effort, working hard, persistence and commitment are likely to lead to positive results. People who strongly agree with this statement are likely to see a challenge as a way to build their character and feel that they will get back what they put in. In a relational setting, Reward for Application can motivate people to devote a large amount of time, energy and emotion to building and sustaining close relationships. Avoidantly attached individuals might not do as well on this dimension because they may have learned in the past that approaching others for closeness, a sense of being needed, or affection may not succeed or be rewarding. They may then be less likely to invest in relationships as they perceive that there will not be rewards for their emotional investment. Such uncertainty about the benefits of relational investment can further reinforce avoidant tendencies and be part of the challenges that people may have when building intimacy.

The connection between social axioms and attachment styles may be bi-directional and dynamic. One way attachment styles shape social experiences is that they affect the way people interpret and react to them. Cynical beliefs are more likely to be formed in avoidant attachment styles, for instance, if they have had many experiences of disappointment in their relationships or of their needs going unsatisfied. Conversely, cognitive structures that maintain and rationalize attachment-related behaviour over time are provided by entrenched social axioms. Negative beliefs about self and others can lead to emotional isolation, and avoidant behaviors can make it difficult to encounter positive social interactions to counter negative beliefs. This is a reinforcing process that keeps perpetuating itself, with thoughts and feelings continually feeding into each other. This can lead to people being stuck in unhealthy relational patterns that prevent them from experiencing closeness and satisfaction in relationships.

Although there is a clear theoretical link between social axioms and avoidant attachment in adults, few empirical studies have directly investigated the role that specific social axioms play in the development of avoidant attachment in adults. More specifically, there is a lack of research that examines how Social Cynicism as a mediator accounts for how core beliefs are expressed in avoidant relational behaviors. This is particularly noticeable in the context of non-Western cultures, in which social values and interpersonal relationships may vary vastly from those found in Western cultures. This deficit is significant in promoting the understanding of the cognitive processes associated with attachment insecurity, and for informing clinical interventions. This allows therapists and counsellors to design more specific interventions to address the underlying and problematic beliefs that underlie the avoidant attachment style, thereby minimizing cynicism,

1.1. Rationale of the Study

Most of the previous literature has focused on the developmental origins of attachment, and how attachment styles are related to the early life contexts, parenting and relationships throughout the lifespan. Though there have been important studies of the origins of secure and insecure attachment styles, little research has focused on the cognitive processes that maintain attachment-related behaviors in adulthood. Specifically, there is a lack of understanding of how the general belief system (social axiom) affects interpersonal functioning and further helps perpetuate avoidant attachment tendencies in adults. Social axioms are general beliefs and assumptions people have about themselves, others and the social world and the beliefs are likely to influence how they interpret social experiences and expectations for social relationships. Social cynicism, which includes distrust of others, pessimism about human nature and skepticism about the motives of people and institutions, is among these axioms and may have a special influence on attachment-related behaviors.

Relationships may appear unsafe, risky, and even damaging to adults with very negative views, and they may use distancing behaviors typical of avoidant attachment. This means that negative core beliefs can lead to avoidant attachment indirectly by fostering a cynical worldview that can lead to self-reliance, emotional avoidance, and a lack of intimacy. Although the link between these two is theoretically supported, empirical studies to explore the role of social cynicism as an intervening variable between core beliefs and avoidant attachment are limited and especially in the non-Western cultural setting of Pakistan. The understanding of this relationship is significant as adult attachment is a key factor affecting relationship satisfaction, emotional well-being, social adjustment and mental health outcomes.

Hence, in the present study, an investigation was conducted to explore the effect of Core Beliefs (Social Axioms) on Avoidant Attachment Style with a special focus on the

mediating effect of Social Cynicism among adults. The current study adds to the existing body of research on generalized beliefs about relationships and their impact on interpersonal relationships and helps to better understand the psychological processes involved in avoidant interpersonal relational strategies. The results could also have implications for counselling and therapeutic practice as they indicate the need to consider maladaptive belief systems and cynical worldviews in the process of building healthier and more secure adult relationships.

1.2. Objectives of Study

1. Investigate the relationship between Social Axioms (Core Beliefs) and Avoidant Attachment style.
2. Examine if Social Cynicism mediates the relationship between generalized negative beliefs and attachment avoidance.
3. Examine how Reward for Application interacts with avoidant tendencies among the adult population.

1.3. Hypothesis

H1: Social Axioms (Social Cynicism and Reward for Application) are significantly associated with Avoidant Attachment among adults.

H2: Social Cynicism significantly predicts higher levels of Avoidant Attachment.

H3: Social Cynicism will significantly mediate the relationship between negative core beliefs and avoidant attachment.

H4: There are gender differences in the levels of Social Cynicism and Avoidant Attachment among adults.

2. Methodology

2.1. Research Design

The present study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional correlational research design to examine the relationship between core beliefs (social axioms) and avoidant attachment among adults, with social cynicism as a mediating variable. This design was appropriate for identifying relationships and indirect effects among psychosocial variables within a natural setting.

2.2. Sample

A total of $N = 200$ adults were recruited using convenience sampling from various professional and educational settings. The age range was selected as 22 to 45 years to capture individuals in early to middle adulthood, a period where attachment patterns significantly impact romantic and professional relationships. Participants were required to be fluent in English and provide informed consent. Individuals with a history of diagnosed severe clinical disorders were excluded to ensure the sample reflected general population trends.

2.3. Instruments

1. Demographic Information Sheet: A self-developed sheet to collect information regarding age, gender, education, marital status, and occupation.

2. Social Axioms Survey (SAS) (Leung et al., 2002): Used to assess core beliefs. Specifically, the Social Cynicism and Reward for Application subscales were α utilized. Reliability in previous research has shown = .78–.84.

3. Experiences in Close Relationships-Revised (ECR-R) (Fraley et al., 2000): A 36- item scale used to measure adult attachment. The 18-item Avoidance subscale α was the primary focus. Its reliability in this study was = .89.

4. Social Cynicism Scale: Extracted from the SAS, this 8-item subscale measures α negative view of human nature. Its reliability in the current sample was = .81.

2.4. Procedure and Ethical Consideration

After obtaining informed consent, participants completed the demographic sheet followed by the standardized questionnaires. Confidentiality and voluntary participation were ensured. Data were analyzed using SPSS (Version 26) employing descriptive statistics, reliability analysis, Pearson correlation, regression, and mediation analysis.

3. Results

Table 1 Frequency and percentage of participants (N = 200)

Demographic variables	<i>f</i>	%
Age		
22–30	110	55.0
31–40	65	32.5
41–45	25	12.5
Gender		
Male	88	44.0
Female	112	56.0
Marital Status		
Single	95	47.5
Married	105	52.5
Education		
Bachelors	82	41.0
Masters	118	59.0

- The study had 200 adults (ages 22–45). Most were women (56%).
- People showed moderate to high emotional distance in relationships (avoidant attachment).
- There was a clear connection between negative thinking about people (social cynicism) and emotional distance, that when people trusted others less and thought others were selfish, they were more emotionally distant.
- This relationship was statistically significant (meaning it is real, not random).

- Another finding was the people who believed “effort leads to good results” were less avoidant (less emotionally distant).
- Social cynicism alone was a strong predictor of avoidant behavior and explained about 38% of it.

4. Discussion

The first goal of research in this study was to examine the relationship between social axioms (core beliefs) and avoidant attachment among adults, specifically the role of social cynicism in mediation. The results of the study offer strong empirical support for the proposed theoretical model, and suggest that general beliefs about the social world have a significant impact on interpersonal functioning and attachment-related behaviors. Specifically, the findings indicate that the cynical worldview functions as a significant cognitive mechanism in the development of emotional distancing and avoidance in close relationships; the negative core beliefs can be a source of such emotional distancing and avoidance. These conclusions will build on the current body of knowledge regarding adult attachment, because the authors' results bring attention to the role of cognitive belief systems as maintaining factors of attachment insecurity, instead of only developmental experiences from childhood.

As predicted in the first hypothesis (H1), a positive correlation was found between social cynicism and avoidant attachment ($r = .42, p < .01$). The discovery suggests that cynicism about people is associated with more avoidant attachment attitudes, like lack of comfort with intimacy, not depending on others, and desire for emotional independence. This finding is similar to earlier theoretical and empirical studies indicating that people who see others as selfish, untrustworthy, and possibly manipulative tend to self-protect in a passive way. Leung et al. (2002) argue that social cynicism is a general conception or attitude that organizes people's perception of social interactions and the motivations of others. People who have the basic belief that others are not to be trusted or tend to disappoint them might consciously decide to keep the distance in their relationships because they want to avoid the danger of rejection, betrayal and emotional injury. Avoidance, therefore, is an adaptive response to a perceived threatening social environment, regardless of whether or not this is actually the case.

Another important finding of the study was that Reward for Application significantly and negatively predicted avoidant attachment. The finding indicates that people who think that things happen for those who work for them and invest, are less likely to be involved in avoidant relationship behaviors. On the other hand, those who feel that their efforts are not worth it or that they do not invest in themselves may not be as inclined to build and sustain close interpersonal relationships. This may be viewed in light of the social compensation hypothesis, but in an inverted fashion. Without feeling like they are getting something in return for their effort, time and emotion in a relationship, they may

feel like it is not worth it to maintain it. Consequently, they might avoid chances of emotional bonding and closeness. These can create a growing sense of disconnection from social interaction and distance from others, which can lead to emotional avoidance and relational distancing. The study points to the need for positive social expectations in healthy attachment and relationship engagement.

These results were supported by the regression analysis which showed that together social axioms accounted for 38% of the variance of avoidant behaviors ($R^2 = .38$). This significant amount of the variance accounted for demonstrates the role of generalized belief systems in influencing adult relationship patterns. Although much of the work in the field of attachment has focused on the effects of early caregiving experiences, the present results indicate that these beliefs remain salient in adulthood. Social axioms might influence the perception of social experiences, social risk judgements and perceptions of closeness as safe or harmful. Thus, rather than being only the result of past experiences, avoidant attachment must be understood as a result of current cognitive processes, which influence interpersonal expectations and behaviours.

The establishment of Social Cynicism as a mediator between the variables (H3) was one of the central findings of the present study. The mediation analysis showed that negative core beliefs about the social world are not only a direct influence on avoidant attachment, but that they also have an indirect effect via the development of a cynical worldview. The discovery implies that social cynicism is a psychological mechanism between belief systems and attachment-behaviour. People who have formed negative beliefs about the world and others can slowly become cynical and mistrustful and become emotionally detached from others. This negative way of thinking can lead to an even greater tendency to not trust others to be intimate or dependent in relationships over time.

Additionally, the results have indicated that there is a self-reinforcing cognitive cycle. People with an avoidant tendency might see social interactions in a cynical way, so they remain emotionally distant from others. This distancing behavior further limits opportunities for positive interpersonal interactions, which might put to the test or disconfirm their negative assumptions. Consequently, they can maintain or even reinforce their negative opinions of the world. This pattern reinforces [runs self-reinforcing] cynical beliefs leading to avoidance and avoidance leading to lack of corrective social experiences. This process may help to perpetuate avoidant attachment styles and help to account for the longevity of avoidant types of functioning even in the face of changes in life circumstances or the nature of attachment opportunities.

The results of this research study provide a clue to the cognitive underpinnings of adult attachment overall. This study underscores the need to account for maladaptive beliefs and negative social beliefs in psychological interventions, by recognizing social cynicism as an important mediator. The therapeutic interventions that seek to change

worldview attitudes and dysfunctional expectations of others and foster more realistically balanced interpersonal expectations can be helpful in reducing avoidant tendencies and developing healthier interpersonal attachments. The present study thus offers theoretical and practical implications for the role of the social axioms in the adult relationships and directions for further research and clinical practice.

5. Limitations of the Study

The study employed a cross-sectional design, which limits causal inferences. The sample consisted of $N = 200$ adults from urban centers, which may limit generalizability to rural populations. Data was collected via self-report measures, which are susceptible to social desirability bias.

6. Recommendations

Therapy for adults with avoidant attachment should incorporate Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) to target social axioms. Moving beyond relational history to address “worldview axioms” can help clients reframe their perception of human nature. Educational institutions and workplaces should implement social-emotional learning workshops that challenge cynical biases and promote the “Reward for Application” in collaborative environments.

7. Conclusion

This study highlights the critical intersection of cognitive worldviews and relational attachment. The findings confirm that social cynicism is a significant risk factor for avoidant attachment, acting as a mediator that explains how negative core beliefs translate into emotional distance. Ultimately, the “cynical escape” offers no true security; instead, fostering trust and challenging entrenched negative axioms remain the pillars of psychological health.

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