



A study on paternal bonding and trust: the relationship between paternal bonding and trust in romantic relationships among young adults

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Abstract

This study explores the relationship between paternal bonding and trust in close relationships among young adults, with attention to gender differences. A sample of 100 university students (50 males, 50 females) aged 18–25 participated in the research. Participants completed the Parental Bonding Instrument (PBI) and the Trust in Close Relationships Scale (TCRS), measuring perceptions of paternal care and overprotection, and levels of dependability, faith, and predictability in interpersonal trust, respectively. Using non-parametric statistical tests, the study found no significant correlation between paternal care and any dimension of trust. The case was the same between overprotection and trust. No statistically significant correlation between paternal bonding and trust in romantic relationships was observed as well. Additionally, gender differences in paternal bonding or trust were not statistically significant. These findings sway away from expectations which are grounded in attachment theory and contradict findings from a robust body of literature. It points into a direction where the role of one's father in the development of trust between one's romantic partner might be less than it appears.

Key words: Paternal bonding, trust, attachment, care, overprotection

Introduction

Why do some young adults struggle to trust their partners, while others form secure, trusting relationships with ease? Attachment theory provides a possible answer, it suggests that the quality of parent–child relationship establishes a foundational framework for future relationships, including romantic ones, by shaping expectations and perceptions of intimacy (Bowlby, 1980; Hazan and Shaver, 1987; Ainsworth, 1989). Attachment studies show trust as an important component in the development of attachment. Based on the figure of attachment's availability, sensitivity, and responsiveness towards attempts to seek proximity a sense of attachment security is achieved with an increased ability to trust others. In the absence of these elements, the person is unable to overcome distress and develops doubts regarding the attainment of safety, trusting others, and whether one has the resources to cope with stress (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003; Bowlby, 1979; Erikson, 1963). Secure parental bonding fosters predictability, a key component

of trust. When caregivers respond consistently to a child's needs, the child learns that people can be relied upon, reinforcing a sense of safety in relationships. A strong parent-child bond provides a foundation for dependability, another trust dimension. If a child experiences warmth, honesty, and support from their parents, they internalize these expectations in future relationships, trusting that others will also be dependable. Parents who offer unconditional love and guidance help children develop faith in relationships, the highest level of trust according to Rempel & Holmes. This faith allows individuals to maintain trust even in uncertain situations, believing that their partners or friends will act in good faith. Attachment theory, pioneered by John Bowlby (1969, 1982, 1988), posits that early interactions with primary caregivers shape the individual's internal working models of self and others. The mentioned models inform not only how one views themselves in terms of worthiness of love and care but also how one perceives others in terms of reliability and trustworthiness. Over time, these cognitive-affective schemas influence the way individuals interpret, respond to, and engage in later interpersonal and romantic relationships (Bretherton, 1992; Cassidy & Shaver, 2008).

Mary Ainsworth's (1978) classification of attachment styles—secure, anxious-avoidant, and anxious-resistant—further emphasized the connection between early caregiving experiences and future relationship dynamics. Individuals with secure attachments tend to easily trust and depend on other individuals, while those having insecure attachments may either fear closeness or doubt others' reliability. These foundational experiences with caregivers are internalized and later manifested in adult romantic relationships (Hazan & Shaver, 1987).

In essence, when a caregiver is consistently available, sensitive, and responsive, the child learns that they are lovable and that others are trustworthy. This secure base fosters exploration and builds a relational blueprint rooted in emotional safety, trust, and intimacy. However, when caregiving is marked by neglect, inconsistency, or intrusiveness, it may lead to internalized fears of abandonment, mistrust, and emotional dysregulation (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003).

Research shows that the psychological outcomes of both daughters and sons are associated with the parenting they receive from their fathers (Wenk et al., 1994; Van Wel et al., 2000; Palkovitz, 2002). Parental bonding plays a fundamental role in shaping a child's ability to develop trust in relationships, as described by psychological theories, including those by Rempel & Holmes (1986). Trust is built through consistent, reliable, and emotionally responsive caregiving, which influences how individuals perceive and engage in relationships later in life.

Paternal bonding

Paternal bonding, though historically under-researched compared to maternal bonding, has an important part in a child's emotional as well as relational development. Parental bonding comprises of two dimensions. These are care and overprotection. As we are exploring paternal bonding we shall investigate these two dimensions specifically in the context of the father.

Paternal warmth is synonymous with care, affection, support, nurturance or love provided by the father to his child. Warmth encompasses the affectionate bond between the parent and the child and the verbal and physical expression of the parent's affection towards the child (Rohner, Khaleque, & Cournoyer, 2005). Parents express warmth towards their children by providing comfort, affection, nurturance, and support. This warmth provided by the parent indicates the parent's love and acceptance for the child. High paternal care is typically associated with positive outcomes, such as secure attachment, higher self-esteem, and the development of prosocial behaviors (Rohner et al., 2005). Fathers who are emotionally available and affectionate provide children with not only a

model for healthy relationships but also an internal sense of emotional safety, which can translate into higher levels of trust in romantic relationships (Palkovitz, 2002).

Parental overprotection is defined as an excessive level of protective behavior from parents that exceeds what is appropriate for the child's developmental stage. The father is usually the one through which the child gains multiple experiences of the outside world. With the father being overprotective, the child's chance at developing autonomy and gaining experiences in the outside world becomes limited, at least during their childhood. A study by Ingen et al., (2015) showed that helicopter parenting was associated with mistrust in peers.

Paternal bonding with daughters

Fathers have a unique and often profound part in shaping the beliefs and behaviors of their daughters in romantic contexts. A nurturing, supportive father-daughter relationship fosters self-worth, healthy expectations of male behavior, and emotional resilience (Nielsen, 2014). The impact of the relationship between a father and his daughter on the mental health of the daughter is significant as shown in the study given by Byrd-Craven et al., (2012) where negative perceptions of the a daughter's relationship with her father predicted cortisol levels in the morning and pleasant relationship between the father and the daughter were linked with lower baseline levels of cortisol. Several studies show women with a poor relationship with their fathers are more likely to develop psychological and emotional difficulties than women who maintain close relationships with their fathers (Amato & Dorius, 2010; Carlson, 2006; King & Soboleski, 2006; Stewart, 2003).

Paternal bonding with sons

In many cultures, including India, father-son relationships are characterized by emotional restraint and functional engagement rather than overt expressions of warmth.

Noller (1978) found that father-son relationships exhibited notably lower levels of warmth compared to other parent-child gender combinations, as measured by physical affection such as kissing, cuddling, and hugging. Similarly, Floyd and Morman (2003) observed that fathers and sons tended to express affection more indirectly—through shared activities or practical support—rather than through direct verbal or physical expressions. Fathers play a crucial part in their sons' life, including determining their conduct and behavior. Harper and McLanahan (2004), conducted a study examining the link between youth incarceration and absent fathers, finding that male adolescents raised in fatherless homes faced a higher risk of incarceration compared to those who lived with their fathers. In a study conducted by Mackey & Mackey (2003), it was found that the absence of a father was a stronger predictor of violence in young men than poverty.

This reserved interaction style may lead sons to internalize emotional suppression or associate love with achievement, performance, or compliance. Sons raised without consistent emotional support from their fathers may face difficulties in expressing affection, forming secure romantic attachments, or trusting others in emotionally intimate contexts.

Trust in romantic relationships

Trust remains to be a central element in relationships of romantic nature, acting as the bedrock upon which emotional closeness, commitment, and mutual dependence are built. It allows individuals to feel secure in their partner's intentions, predict behaviors, and take emotional risks without fear of betrayal (Holmes & Rempel, 1989). According to Rempel, Holmes, and Zanna (1985), trust

is not a singular concept but a multifaceted one, comprising three critical dimensions: predictability, dependability, and faith. In the absence of trust, the relationship is at risk of dissolution.

Predictability is a basic level of trust where one believes the other person's behaviour is consistent and predictable. It is based on the expectation that the person will act in a certain way.

Dependability: involves the belief that the other person is reliable and can be depended upon in times of need. It includes a sense of confidence in the person's supportiveness and loyalty. This component is built gradually through repeated encounters where the trustworthiness of the other is tested.

Faith: is characterized by a deep-seated belief in the other's benevolence and concern for one's welfare. It involves emotional security and with limited evidence believing that their partner would care and respond to them even though the future is uncertain.

While attachment theory and trust models emphasize early caregiving as the basis for adult relationship dynamics, relatively little research has examined the specific contribution of paternal bonding—separated from maternal influence—to trust in romantic relationships. Even fewer studies have explored these dynamics within Indian cultural settings, where shifting familial roles coexist with enduring traditional expectations. Furthermore, most existing studies do not disentangle the multidimensional nature of trust or consider how paternal warmth and control may influence each facet differently.

The present study has been conducted with the aim to fill these gaps by investigating the relationship between paternal bonding (care & overprotection) and trust in romantic relationships (predictability, dependability, and faith) among young adults. Additionally, the study explores potential gender differences in these relationships. By isolating the paternal dimension, the current study contributes to a more intricate understanding of how father-child dynamics shape adult attachment behaviors and trust patterns. Insights from this research could inform future parenting interventions and support the development of emotionally resilient and relationally competent young adults.

Methodology

Objective

1. To investigate relationship between dimensions of paternal bonding, that are care and overprotection, and trust among young adults.
2. To evaluate the differences on the level of paternal bonding and trust among male and female young adults.

Hypothesis

The current study includes multiple hypothesis:

H1: There will be significant relationship between dimensions of paternal bonding, that are care and overprotection, and trust among young adults.

H2: There will be a significant difference on the level of paternal bonding among male young adults and female young adults.

H3: There will be a significant difference in the level of trust among male young adults and female young adults.

Sample

The current study involved 100 young adults (50 men, 50 women), between the age of 18 to 25. Participants were selected through convenience sampling from universities and online platforms. Inclusion criteria required participants to be currently be in a romantic relationship and to have had a living father figure during upbringing.

Measures

An online survey was circulated to the participants where they responded to questions about their demographic details as well as the items of the instruments used.

Parental Bonding Instrument – Father Form (PBI-F)

Paternal bonding was measured by the parental bonding instrument (Parker et al., 1979), a self-report questionnaire which assesses the parenting styles as perceived by the child. The adult participants respond to items by looking back at the first sixteen years of their life. The instrument contains two dimensions, namely care and overprotection. The Care subscale measures warmth and affection from the parent, while the Overprotection subscale assesses control and intrusiveness. There is a mother form and a father form with 25 questions in each one. From the total number of items, 12 items measure care and the rest 13 items measure overprotection. The items were rated on a Likert scale which ranged from very like, moderately like, moderately unlike and very unlike. For the purpose of this study, only the father form was used. Higher scores reflect greater perceived paternal care or overprotection.

Trust in Close Relationships Scale

Trust in romantic relationships was measured using the Trust in Close Relationships Scale (Rempel et al., 1985), a self-report questionnaire which assesses the level of trust an individual has on their partner. The scale consists of 3 subscales, dependability, faith and predictability. There are 17 items where 5 items measure dependability, 7 measure faith and 5 measure predictability. The items were rated on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree.

Results

The study included a total sample of 100 young adults, evenly split by gender with 50 males and 50 females. Analyses were conducted to examine the relationship between dimensions of paternal bonding (Care and Overprotection) and dimensions of interpersonal trust (Dependability, Faith, and Predictability), as well as to assess gender differences in paternal bonding and trust.

Tests of Normality

Prior to conducting inferential analyses, tests of normality, were performed to assess the distribution of the main variables. The Shapiro-Wilk test, which is considered more reliable for smaller sample sizes ($n < 200$), indicated that the Trust was not normally distributed ($p = .000$), while the Parental bonding (father) showed no significant deviation from normality ($p = .162$) as shown in Table 1. Given the non-normal distribution of the trust variable, non-parametric statistical tests including Spearman's rho correlations and Mann-Whitney U tests were used to test all the hypothesis to ensure robustness and consistency in analysis.

Table 1

	Kolmogorov-Smirnov			Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	Df	Sig.
Trust	.134	100	.000	.902	100	.000
Parental Bonding (Father)	.110	100	.005	.981	100	.162

a. Lilliefors Significance Correction

Correlation Between Paternal Bonding and Trust

To test the hypothesis for the existence of a significant relationship between paternal bonding and trust, Spearman's rho correlations were conducted. The results indicated no significant association between Total Paternal Bonding and Total Trust ($\rho = .028$, $p = .779$), as shown in Table 2, suggesting that the overall paternal bonding experience is not meaningfully related to how much trust young adults report in close relationships. When broken down by bonding dimensions, the correlation between Paternal Care and Trust was negligible and non-significant ($\rho = -.012$, $p = .908$), as shown in Table 2. Likewise, Paternal Overprotection also showed a non-significant correlation with Trust ($\rho = .084$, $p = .409$), as shown in Table 2.

Table 2

			PBI (Father Form)	Care	Overprotection	Trust
Spearman's rho	PBI (Father Form)	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.513**	.334**	.028
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000	.001	.779
		N	100	100	100	100
	Care	Correlation Coefficient	.513**	1.000	-.586**	-.012
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.	.000	.908
		N	100	100	100	100
	Overprotection	Correlation Coefficient	.334**	-.586**	1.000	.084
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.001	.000	.	.409
		N	100	100	100	100
	Trust	Correlation Coefficient	.028	-.012	.084	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.779	.908	.409	.
		N	100	100	100	100

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Gender Differences in Paternal Bonding

A Mann-Whitney U test was conducted to determine whether male and female participants differed significantly in their experiences of paternal bonding. The results showed no statistically significant gender difference in Parental bonding (Father) scores, $U = 1059.50$, $z = -1.316$, $p = .188$, as shown in Table 3. This suggests that both male and female participants reported similar levels of bonding with their fathers.

Table 3

	Parental Bonding (Father)
Mann-Whitney U	1059.500
Wilcoxon W	2334.500
Z	-1.316
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.188

a. Grouping Variable: Gender

Gender Differences in Trust

A Mann-Whitney U test was conducted to assess gender differences in Total Trust scores, revealing no significant difference between male and female participants, $U = 1244.50$, $z = -0.038$, $p = .970$, as shown in Table 4. This implies that gender does not significantly influence the reported levels of trust in close relationships within this sample.

Table 4

	Trust
Mann-Whitney U	1244.500
Wilcoxon W	2519.500
Z	-.038
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.970

a. Grouping Variable: Gender

Discussion

The present study explored the relationship between paternal bonding—specifically the dimensions of care and overprotection—and trust in romantic relationships among young adults, while also assessing gender differences in both paternal bonding experiences and levels of trust. Contrary to expectations grounded in attachment theory and supported by a robust body of literature (e.g., Bowlby, 1980; Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003), the findings revealed no statistically significant correlation between paternal bonding and trust in romantic relationships. Additionally, gender differences in paternal bonding or trust were not statistically significant, suggesting that these dynamics may operate in more complex or culturally nuanced ways than previously conceptualized.

Paternal Bonding and Trust in Romantic Relationships

The central hypothesis that greater levels of paternal care would be associated with greater trust in romantic relationships was not supported by the data. Neither the parental bonding (Father) score nor its subcomponents (care and overprotection) showed significant associations with trust. This finding contrasts with a substantial body of empirical evidence indicating that early caregiving experiences, particularly those marked by warmth and consistency, shape one's internal working models and trust schemas in intimate relationships (Bretherton, 1992; Cassidy & Shaver, 2008; Rempel & Holmes, 1986). For example, Feeney and Noller (1990) found that secure attachment—often linked to nurturing parental behavior—was positively correlated with greater trust and intimacy in adult relationships. Similarly, Simpson (1990) showed that individuals with secure attachment styles reported higher levels of trust and satisfaction in romantic relationships over time.

There are several possible explanations for this divergence from the existing literature. One possibility is that the paternal role in the Indian cultural context may be less emotionally expressive or salient in shaping relational trust than maternal or peer influences. As Sriram (2003, 2011) and Roopnarine et al. (1990) highlight, Indian fathers have traditionally been seen more as authority figures than emotional caregivers. Even though changing gender roles and urbanization have begun to challenge this paradigm (Sandhu, 2008), the lingering effects of emotionally distant fathering may result in minimal variance in paternal bonding scores, thereby attenuating the potential for meaningful statistical associations with trust.

Furthermore, while studies such as those by Rohner et al. (2005) and Palkovitz (2002) emphasize the long-term benefits of paternal warmth on children's emotional development, the null findings in this study may reflect a cultural and generational shift. As highlighted by Byrd-Craven et al. (2012) and Nielsen (2014), it is the perceived emotional availability, not just the behavioral care, that shapes attachment outcomes. Inconsistent or ambivalent paternal involvement—common in transitional cultures like India—may dilute the impact of paternal bonding, particularly if such bonding was mediated by less visible or indirect forms of affection.

Paternal Overprotection and Trust

Another unexpected outcome was the absence of a significant correlation between paternal overprotection and trust. Prior research has identified overprotective parenting as a risk factor for diminished autonomy and impaired social relationships (Spokas & Heimberg, 2008; Meyer & Gillings, 2004). Ingen et al. (2015) even found that paternal overcontrol was associated with peer mistrust, which may logically extend into romantic contexts. However, in this study, overprotection did not significantly predict trust in any dimension. This might be due to measurement limitations, differences in perceived versus actual overprotection, or possible mediators such as maternal influence or peer support that were not accounted for. The study by Acharya (2019) similarly found that while paternal overprotection contributed to depressive symptoms, its effects on interpersonal trust may be more indirect, mediated through cognitive distortions or emotional dysregulation.

Gender Differences in Paternal Bonding and Trust

The lack of gender differences in reported paternal bonding experiences was also surprising, given previous findings that fathers tend to relate differently to sons and daughters. Noller (1978) and Floyd and Morman (2003) documented lower levels of physical and verbal affection in father-son dyads, while daughters generally report more emotional closeness with fathers (Punyanunt-Carter, 2006; Byrd-Craven et al., 2012). However, the results of study at hand suggests that male and female participants may have internalized paternal behavior in similar ways, at least in terms of perceived care and overprotection. One explanation might be that

young adults in India are increasingly exposed to egalitarian parenting practices, especially in urban and educated families (Roopnarine et al., 1990; Sandhu, 2008).

Similarly, no gender differences were found in levels of trust in romantic relationships, which contrasts with Rempel et al. (1985), who reported that women tend to value all three components of trust—predictability, dependability, and faith—more consistently than men. This parity may indicate changing gender norms and the increasing emotional expressiveness of men in romantic contexts, possibly due to globalization, evolving media portrayals of masculinity, and more open communication in romantic relationships among younger generations.

Implications

Despite the non-significant results, the study contributes insights of value into the evolving nature of paternal roles in shaping relational dynamics in contemporary Indian society. As Gökçe and Yılmaz (2018) and Jilani et al. (2022) highlight, paternal emotional availability may influence psychological well-being and interpersonal functioning in subtle and indirect ways. The absence of direct effects in this study invites further research into mediating and moderating factors—such as self-esteem, emotional regulation, communication motives, and maternal behavior—that may bridge the link between paternal bonding and romantic trust. Moreover, the findings emphasize the importance of culturally sensitive interpretations. What constitutes "care" or "overprotection" in one culture may not hold the same meaning in another. As Khalid et al. (2017) argue, parenting styles in South Asia often blend affection with control, complicating straightforward associations with Western-developed constructs like trust and attachment.

Limitations and future recommendations

Several limitations should be noted. First, relying on convenience sampling and self-report instruments may restrict the generalizability and objectivity of the results. Second, the cross-sectional nature of the study prevents any conclusions about causality. Future longitudinal research would be more effective in examining how paternal bonding impacts the development of trust over time. Additionally, incorporating qualitative interviews or observational data may provide richer information regarding the nuanced expressions of father-child relationships in Indian families.

Future studies could also examine how maternal bonding, peer attachments, and romantic partner behaviors interact with paternal bonding to shape trust. The multidimensional nature of trust—as conceptualized by Rempel et al. (1985)—may require more nuanced analytical techniques such as structural equation modeling to uncover indirect or moderated effects.

Conclusion

In sum, the findings of this study suggest that while paternal bonding is widely acknowledged as important in psychological and relational development, its direct influence on trust in romantic relationships among young adults in the current sample was not statistically significant. These results invite further exploration into how cultural context, gender socialization, and evolving parental roles mediate the pathways between early caregiving and adult relational outcomes. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for informing parental education, therapeutic interventions, and future research on trust and attachment in romantic relationships.

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