

**Gender Differences in the Intergenerational Transmission of Emotional Regulation:
A Moderated Mediation Model of Attachment Styles**

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ABSTRACT

Emotional regulation is a foundational psychological process shaped by early familial environments and relational dynamics. This study investigates gender differences in the intergenerational transmission of emotional regulation, examining the mediating role of attachment styles within a moderated mediation framework. Grounded in Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1969), the Process Model of Emotion Regulation (Gross, 1998), and Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977), the study explores how parental emotional regulation and emotion coaching contribute to young adults' emotional functioning. A cross-sectional design was employed with 250 young adults (18–35 years; $M = 24.6$, $SD = 4.2$; 52% female) from Pakistan, recruited via convenience and snowball sampling. Culturally adapted measures assessed perceived parental emotional regulation, attachment styles, and emotional dysregulation. Data were analyzed using SPSS and Hayes' PROCESS macro (Model 7; Hayes, 2018). Results indicated that parental emotional regulation significantly predicted offspring emotional dysregulation through insecure attachment styles. Gender significantly moderated the indirect effect via attachment anxiety, with stronger transmission pathways observed among females. These findings highlight the culturally embedded nature of emotional development and underscore gendered pathways in emotional transmission within collectivistic contexts.

Keywords: emotional regulation, attachment styles, gender differences, intergenerational transmission, Pakistan

INTRODUCTION

The capacity for adaptive emotional regulation is among the most consequential psychological competencies across the lifespan. Broadly defined as the processes through which individuals influence which emotions they have, when they have them, and how they experience and express them (Gross, 1998), emotion regulation exerts pervasive effects on mental health, relationship quality, and occupational functioning. Difficulties in emotion regulation have been consistently linked to depression, anxiety, and personality disorders (Gratz & Roemer, 2004; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007).

Central to understanding emotion regulation is identifying its developmental origins. The family, and the parent–child relationship in particular, constitutes the primary context within which regulatory capacities are forged or impaired. Intergenerational transmission of emotional regulation refers to the process by which parental emotional functioning and socialization practices shape offspring regulatory competencies (Zelekha & Yaakobi, 2020). Despite theoretical interest, the mechanisms underlying this transmission—and moderating variables such as gender—remain underexplored, especially in non-Western cultures.

Attachment theory provides a powerful explanatory framework. Internal working models formed through early caregiver interactions organize individuals' emotional responses and regulatory strategies throughout life (Bowlby, 1969; Ainsworth et al., 1978). Secure attachment promotes flexible, adaptive regulation; insecure attachment—whether anxious or avoidant—is associated with dysregulatory patterns including rumination, hyperactivation, and expressive suppression (Brenning et al., 2012; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Since attachment orientations are themselves shaped by parental emotional behaviors, attachment styles may serve as a key mechanism through which parental emotional functioning is transmitted to offspring.

Gender further structures this process. Females demonstrate higher rates of attachment anxiety and greater emotional expressivity, while males more frequently employ avoidant and suppressive strategies (McRae et al., 2008). Emotion socialization research shows that parents interact differently around emotions with sons versus daughters, creating divergent developmental pathways (Chaplin & Aldao, 2013; Gottman et al., 1997). In Pakistan—a collectivistic society marked by strong familial interdependence and gendered emotional scripts—these patterns are amplified by cultural prescriptions around emotional expression and the meaning of relational availability (Abbasi et al., 2020; Zafar et al., 2021).

The present study tests a moderated mediation model in which parental emotional regulation predicts young adults' emotional dysregulation through attachment styles (anxious and avoidant), with gender as a first-stage moderator. The following hypotheses are advanced:

H1: Parental emotional regulation will significantly and negatively predict offspring emotional dysregulation.

H2: Attachment anxiety and avoidance will mediate the relationship between parental emotional regulation and emotional dysregulation.

H3: Gender will significantly moderate the indirect effects, with stronger transmission pathways among females.

H4: The moderated mediation model will demonstrate significant conditional indirect effects differentiated by gender.

Theoretical Framework

Three theoretical pillars anchor this investigation. Bowlby's (1969) Attachment Theory posits that early caregiver–infant interactions produce internal working models that govern emotional and relational functioning across the lifespan. Ainsworth et al.'s (1978) Strange Situation procedure empirically identified secure, anxious-ambivalent, and avoidant attachment patterns—each associated with distinct regulatory profiles. In adulthood, Mikulincer and Shaver (2007) mapped these into the dimensions of attachment anxiety (associated with hyperactivation of emotional distress) and avoidance (associated with deactivation and suppression).

Gross's (1998) Process Model of Emotion Regulation identifies strategies arrayed along a generative timeline, from situation selection to response modulation. Cognitive reappraisal—an antecedent-focused strategy—is consistently adaptive, while expressive suppression predicts poorer outcomes (Gross, 2002, 2015). Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977) provides the third pillar: children acquire emotion regulation tendencies through sustained observation and modeling of parental regulatory behaviors, offering a direct mechanism for intergenerational transmission (Bandura & Walters, 1963).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Intergenerational Transmission of Emotional Regulation

Parents' own attachment histories predict children's attachment security through multiple mechanisms including sensitivity, emotional availability, and reflective functioning (Zelekha & Yaakobi, 2020). Gottman and colleagues' (1997) concept of meta-emotion philosophy—parents' awareness and coaching of their children's emotions—demonstrated that emotion-coaching parents produced children with superior regulatory capacities, fewer behavior problems, and better peer relationships. Crucially, emotion-coaching attitudes are distributed asymmetrically across gender: mothers engage in more emotion-focused interaction than fathers, and daughters receive more emotion discourse than sons (Gottman et al., 1997; Chaplin et al., 2005).

Attachment Styles and Emotional Regulation

Mikulincer and Shaver (2007) proposed that secure attachment enables a "broaden-and-build" regulatory cycle: secure individuals tolerate negative affect, seek support effectively, and employ reappraisal flexibly. Anxiously attached individuals hyperactivate their attachment system—amplifying distress and ruminating—while avoidantly attached individuals deactivate emotional awareness through suppression. Brenning et al. (2012) confirmed these patterns empirically: attachment anxiety predicted dysregulatory strategies (rumination, catastrophizing), and avoidance predicted suppression-based approaches, with both dimensions independently predicting depressive symptoms after controlling for parenting.

Gender Differences in Emotion Regulation and Attachment

Women are diagnosed with depression and anxiety at substantially higher rates than men, a disparity that has been partially attributed to differential use of emotion regulation strategies (McRae et al., 2008). Neuroimaging research indicates that while men and women show comparable behavioral decreases in negative affect following cognitive reappraisal, the neural pathways recruited differ by gender: women engage prefrontal regulatory circuits more heavily, while men demonstrate greater amygdala suppression—suggesting that the regulatory process itself is organized differently across gender (McRae et al., 2008).

In terms of attachment, meta-analytic evidence suggests that adult women score higher on attachment anxiety than men, while gender differences in avoidance are less consistent and may be modulated by relationship context and evolutionary pressures (Zelekha & Yaakobi, 2020). The intergenerational transmission of attachment orientations itself shows gender-differentiated patterns: parent-offspring same-gender dyads (e.g., mother-daughter, father-son) may show stronger transmission than cross-gender dyads, though evidence across studies remains mixed (Zelekha & Yaakobi, 2020).

Within collectivistic cultures, gender differences in emotion regulation are further amplified by normative prescriptions surrounding emotional expression. Research on Eastern societies indicates that expressive suppression norms are particularly pronounced for women, who face cultural expectations to manage emotions in service of relational harmony and familial role obligations (Abbasi et al., 2020). In Pakistan specifically, restrictive gender norms and patriarchal structures create conditions under which emotional suppression—particularly inhibition of negative affect—is actively socialized in girls from early childhood (Abbasi et al., 2020). These same norms may paradoxically intensify emotional sensitivity by tying emotional expression to social evaluation and self-worth, creating fertile ground for attachment anxiety.

Additionally, Zafar et al. (2021) investigated gender-differentiated associations between emotion regulation difficulties and psychopathology among Pakistani adolescents, finding that the model tested among girls yielded twice as many significant connections as the model for boys—suggesting that emotion dysregulation carries a greater psychopathological burden for females. Notably, the study identified a negative association between inability to engage in goal-directed behavior and anger among girls, and found that girls exhibited lower emotional clarity than boys. While fewer emotion regulation dimensions were associated with psychopathology in boys, limited access to effective regulation strategies was associated with anxiety, depression, aggression, and borderline personality features specifically among girls (Zafar et al., 2021). Taken together, these findings indicate that the intersection of gender and cultural context in Pakistan creates conditions of heightened emotional vulnerability among females—a pattern directly relevant to the gendered intergenerational transmission pathways investigated in the present study.

Pakistani Cultural Context and Emotional Development

Pakistan presents a distinct socio-cultural context for studying emotional development. As a predominantly collectivistic, family-oriented society, emotional experience and regulation are deeply embedded within interpersonal and familial matrices. Individual emotional expression is frequently evaluated against the backdrop of izzat (honor) and sharam (shame), creating cultural imperatives that significantly shape emotion socialization practices (Abbasi et al., 2020). Mental health stigma remains pervasive, and emotional difficulties are often externalized or somatized rather than acknowledged as psychological phenomena.

Research specifically on Pakistani adolescents has demonstrated that emotion dysregulation is significantly associated with anxiety, depression, and borderline personality features, with gender-differentiated patterns: the model tested among girls revealed 13 significant positive associations between emotion regulation difficulties and psychopathology variables, compared to seven among boys (Abbasi et al., 2020). This asymmetry suggests that Pakistani females are particularly vulnerable to the psychological sequelae of emotion dysregulation, consistent with broader cross-cultural evidence linking collectivistic gender norms to elevated female emotional burden.

Family structure plays a significant contextual role in emotional development within Pakistan (Mohiuddin, 2007). The majority of Pakistani families are large, collectivistic, and patriarchal, with elders making key decisions spanning marriage, career, and lifestyle. Joint family systems—wherein two to three generations

cohabit—are prevalent alongside nuclear families (Baig et al., 2014). The presence of multiple caregivers and extended kin within joint systems may afford adolescents greater practical, emotional, and social support. Najm-us-Sahar and Muzaffar (2017) found that adolescents from joint families reported more resilience and better social adjustment than their nuclear-family counterparts, implying that the joint family structure fosters peer connection, harmony, and opportunities to build individual competencies—outcomes that support emotional regulation and adaptive coping.

Furthermore, Saleem (2021) found that among Pakistani adolescents, family cohesion was negatively associated with depression and positively associated with self-confidence. This suggests that the quality of familial attachment and cohesiveness may function as a secure base from which individuals explore their environment and to which they return for emotional regulation support. The study further demonstrated that self-confidence partially mediated the relationship between family cohesion and depression, with the family's supportive and integrated environment serving as a primary driver of self-efficacy (Mogonea & Mogonea, 2014). Consistent with Social Learning Theory (Bandura & Walters, 1963), this indicates that Pakistani families transmit self-regulatory resources—and, by extension, emotional regulation tendencies—through modeling and sustained relational interaction. Despite this evidence, few studies have investigated the intergenerational mechanisms through which emotional dysregulation develops within Pakistani families, leaving the role of parental emotional processes, attachment, and gender moderation largely uninvestigated. The present study directly addresses this gap.

METHOD

Research Design and Participants

A quantitative cross-sectional survey design was employed. Participants were 250 young adults ($n = 130$ female, 52%; $n = 120$ male, 48%) aged 18–35 years ($M = 24.6$, $SD = 4.2$) residing in Pakistan. Most participants (74.8%) had completed at least undergraduate education. Inclusion required being raised by at least one biological parent as a primary caregiver through age 12. Convenience and snowball sampling were conducted via WhatsApp, Instagram, and university email listservs. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. Four responses were excluded for careless responding (straightlining and failed attention checks), yielding the final $N = 250$.

Measures

Parental Emotional Regulation.

An 18-item adaptation of the Parental Meta-Emotion Philosophy Scale (Gottman et al., 1997) assessed retrospective perceptions of parental emotion coaching and emotional awareness on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Never, 5 = Always). Cultural adaptations were verified by bilingual psychologists. Internal consistency: $\alpha = .83$.

Attachment Styles.

The Experiences in Close Relationships Scale—Revised (ECR-R; Fraley et al., 2000; 36 items, 7-point scale) yielded two dimensions: Attachment Anxiety ($\alpha = .91$) and Attachment Avoidance ($\alpha = .88$).

Emotional Dysregulation.

The Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale (DERS; Gratz & Roemer, 2004; 36 items, 5-point scale) assessed six facets of dysregulation. Higher scores indicate greater difficulty. Internal consistency: $\alpha = .91$.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using IBM SPSS v.26 and Hayes' PROCESS macro v.4.1 (Hayes, 2018). Two PROCESS Model 7 analyses were conducted—one per mediator (attachment anxiety; avoidant attachment)—with parental emotional regulation as the predictor (X), emotional dysregulation as the outcome (Y), and gender as the first-stage moderator (W; 0 = male, 1 = female). Conditional indirect effects were tested using bootstrapped confidence intervals (95%; 5,000 samples); effects were considered significant when CIs excluded zero (Preacher & Hayes, 2008).

RESULTS

Descriptive Statistics and Bivariate Correlations

Table 1 presents means, standard deviations, bivariate correlations, and internal consistency estimates for all study variables. Parental emotional regulation was negatively correlated with emotional dysregulation ($r = -.42, p < .001$), attachment anxiety ($r = -.38, p < .001$), and avoidant attachment ($r = -.31, p < .001$). Both attachment anxiety ($r = .54, p < .001$) and avoidance ($r = .37, p < .001$) were positively associated with dysregulation. Female participants reported significantly higher attachment anxiety than males, $t(248) = 2.84, p = .005$.

Table 1

Means, Standard Deviations, Correlations, and Internal Consistency (N = 250)

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	α
1. Parental ER	3.54	0.62	—				.83
2. Attachment Anxiety	3.91	1.21	-.38***	—			.91
3. Attachment Avoidance	3.47	1.09	-.31***	.44***	—		.88
4. Emotional Dysregulation	90.8	18.1	-.42***	.54***	.37***	—	.91

Note. ER = emotional regulation. α values shown on diagonal. *** $p < .001$.

Moderated Mediation Results

Table 2 presents regression coefficients for the moderated mediation model with attachment anxiety as the mediator. Parental emotional regulation significantly predicted attachment anxiety ($b = -0.41$, $SE = 0.07$, $p < .001$), and gender significantly moderated this path ($b = -0.19$, $SE = 0.09$, $p = .033$): the negative association was stronger for females ($b = -0.60$, 95% CI $[-0.78, -0.42]$) than males ($b = -0.41$, 95% CI $[-0.57, -0.25]$). Attachment anxiety significantly predicted dysregulation ($b = 8.74$, $SE = 1.12$, $p < .001$), and a significant direct effect of parental emotional regulation on dysregulation remained after accounting for the mediator ($b = -5.23$, $SE = 1.44$, $p < .001$), indicating partial mediation.

Table 2

Regression Coefficients for Moderated Mediation via Attachment Anxiety (Model 7)

Predictor	<i>b</i>	SE	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	LL	UL	β
<i>Outcome: Attachment Anxiety</i>							
Parental ER (X)	-0.41	0.07	-5.73	<.001	-0.55	-0.27	-.33
Gender (W)	-0.23	0.15	-1.55	.122	-0.52	0.06	-.09
Parental ER $\times$ Gender	-0.19	0.09	-2.14	.033	-0.37	-0.01	-.14
<i>Outcome: Emotional Dysregulation</i>							
Parental ER (direct effect)	-5.23	1.44	-3.63	<.001	-8.07	-2.39	-.18
Attachment Anxiety (M)	8.74	1.12	7.80	<.001	6.53	10.95	.41

Note. ER = emotional regulation. Gender coded 0 = male, 1 = female. LL = lower limit; UL = upper limit of 95% bootstrap CI (5,000 samples). β = standardized coefficient.

Table 3 presents conditional indirect effects for both pathways. For the anxiety pathway, the indirect effect was significant for females ($b = -5.24$, 95% CI $[-8.43, -2.17]$) and males ($b = -3.58$, 95% CI $[-6.14, -1.12]$), and the index of moderated mediation was significant (index = -1.66 , 95% CI $[-3.27, -0.12]$), supporting H3. For the avoidance pathway, the indirect effect was significant for females ($b = -2.73$, 95% CI $[-5.04, -0.41]$) but not males (95% CI $[-3.52, 0.16]$). The avoidance moderated mediation index was non-significant (index = -1.15 , 95% CI $[-2.74, 0.31]$). The overall model explained 41% of variance in emotional dysregulation ($R^2 = .41$, $F(4, 245) = 42.6$, $p < .001$)

Table 3

Conditional Indirect Effects of Parental ER on Emotional Dysregulation via Attachment Styles

Pathway	Gender	<i>b</i>	SE	95% LL CI	95% UL CI
<i>Via Attachment Anxiety</i>					
Parental ER → Anxiety → Dysregulation	Female	-5.24	1.61	-8.43	-2.17
Parental ER → Anxiety → Dysregulation	Male	-3.58	1.29	-6.14	-1.12
Index of Moderated Mediation	—	-1.66	0.82	-3.27	-0.12
<i>Via Attachment Avoidance</i>					
Parental ER → Avoidance → Dysregulation	Female	-2.73	1.18	-5.04	-0.41
Parental ER → Avoidance → Dysregulation	Male	-1.58	0.94	-3.52	0.16
Index of Moderated Mediation	—	-1.15	0.79	-2.74	0.31

Note. ER = emotional regulation. Bootstrap CIs based on 5,000 samples. LL = lower limit; UL = upper limit. Significant effects (CI excludes zero) are indicated in bold.

DISCUSSION

This study examined whether and how gender moderates the intergenerational transmission of emotional regulation through attachment styles in a Pakistani young adult sample. Findings supported a moderated mediation model: parental emotional regulation predicted offspring emotional dysregulation through insecure attachment, and these pathways were significantly stronger for females—particularly via attachment anxiety.

Parental Emotional Regulation and Offspring Dysregulation

The significant negative direct effect of parental emotional regulation on offspring dysregulation is consistent with research documenting intergenerational continuity in emotional functioning (Gottman et al., 1997; Zelekha & Yaakobi, 2020). Parents who regulate their own emotions effectively and engage in emotion coaching create family environments that scaffold similar regulatory development in children—a process explicable through both attachment security mechanisms and observational learning (Bandura, 1977; Bowlby, 1969). The partial mediation observed indicates that attachment styles account for a substantial, though not exhaustive, portion of this transmission, suggesting additional mechanisms—such as parental expressiveness and broader family emotional climate—warrant future investigation.

Attachment as a Mediating Mechanism

The mediating role of attachment anxiety was robustly supported. Anxiously attached individuals hyperactivate their attachment system, amplifying distress and promoting rumination—patterns that translate directly into the multi-dimensional dysregulation assessed by the DERS (Brenning et al., 2012; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). When parents fail to demonstrate sensitive, regulated emotional behavior, they undermine the relational security that prevents the development of anxious preoccupation. Avoidant attachment's mediation was significant for females but not males. This gender asymmetry may reflect culturally normative emotional stoicism among Pakistani males, where avoidant regulatory strategies are both expected and reinforced—rendering DERS-measured dysregulation a less sensitive indicator of avoidance-related difficulties in men (Zafar et al., 2021).

Gender as a Moderator

The significant index of moderated mediation for the anxiety pathway confirms that gender meaningfully differentiates the strength of intergenerational emotional transmission. Females showed stronger indirect effects, consistent with their greater exposure to emotion-focused parental socialization (Gottman et al., 1997; Chaplin et al., 2005), higher normative attachment anxiety (Zelekha & Yaakobi, 2020), and the amplifying effects of Pakistani collectivistic culture—where daughters are more deeply embedded in familial emotional systems and relational security is foundational to identity and social standing. The joint family system characteristic of Pakistan may further intensify these gendered transmission effects, as daughters in multi-generational households are more consistently exposed to parental and grandparental emotional modeling across the lifespan (Baig et al., 2014; Saleem, 2021). These findings align with neural evidence showing women recruit more effortful prefrontal regulatory circuits (McRae et al., 2008) and with epidemiological data documenting elevated female psychopathology linked to dysregulation (Abbasi et al., 2020; Zafar et al., 2021).

Limitations

Several limitations merit acknowledgment. First, the cross-sectional design precludes causal inference, and retrospective parental assessments may be subject to current-state biases. Second, online convenience sampling limits representativeness to urban, educated, internet-connected Pakistanis. Third, the composite mother–father parental measure obscures potentially distinct maternal and paternal transmission pathways. Fourth, gender was modeled as binary. Fifth, potential confounds including parental psychopathology, childhood trauma, and socioeconomic status were not assessed. Future longitudinal research with direct behavioral observations, separate parental measures, and clinical samples is warranted.

Practical Implications

The identification of attachment anxiety as the primary mediating mechanism—particularly for females—suggests that attachment-focused interventions may be especially impactful in Pakistani clinical contexts. Psychoeducational programs building parental emotion coaching competencies could interrupt maladaptive intergenerational transmission cycles. Clinicians working with dysregulated young adults in Pakistan should routinely assess parental emotional histories and attachment orientations, recognizing that current dysregulatory difficulties may reflect longstanding insecurities rooted in early familial emotional environments.

Attachment-informed therapeutic modalities—including Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT) and schema-focused approaches targeting early maladaptive schemas rooted in attachment experiences—appear

particularly well-suited to this population. Given the pronounced gendered transmission effects observed among females, culturally tailored group interventions addressing the intersection of gender, familial role expectations, and attachment insecurity may be warranted in South Asian contexts.

Additionally, since adolescence and young adulthood constitute developmental periods marked by significant emotional, physical, and social transitions (World Health Organization, 2024), school- and university-based mental health initiatives that build coping skills, emotional awareness, and help-seeking behaviors may offer critical early support for young people who would otherwise face barriers to professional psychological services. Within collectivistic Pakistani society, where family-based interventions are culturally congruent and highly acceptable, training family members—including grandparents in joint family systems—as lay emotion coaches may extend intervention reach considerably. Policy investment in culturally sensitive mental health literacy programs, particularly those addressing gendered emotional socialization norms, represents an important systemic complement to individual and family-level clinical approaches.

CONCLUSION

This investigation advances understanding of intergenerational emotional processes by demonstrating that parental emotional regulation predicts young adults' dysregulation through insecure attachment styles, with gender significantly moderating transmission via attachment anxiety. Within a Pakistani young adult sample, females exhibited stronger transmission pathways, consistent with their greater embeddedness in familial emotional systems, the amplifying role of collectivistic gender norms, and the structural influence of joint family environments on emotional development. These findings underscore the necessity of integrating cultural and gender-specific considerations into both theoretical models and evidence-based interventions targeting emotion regulation. Longitudinal research is needed to confirm these pathways and elucidate the culturally embedded mechanisms of intergenerational emotional transmission across South Asian contexts.

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