

The Phenomenon of Transitional Objects and College Students

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Abstract

Transitional objects are an item that is used during a child's transition from total dependence on parents during infancy, to the beginning of independence when the child reaches approximately two years old. This object may be anything, but most typically it is a stuffed animal, blanket, pillow, or another similar toy. This object is typically kept until the age of seven, and then relinquished; however, there are some individuals who hold on to this object well into their adult years. To investigate this phenomenon, the current research surveyed college students ($N = 93$), those who have and do not have transitional objects, regarding their mental health, attachment style, and personality. The results of this study showed that college students who still have their transitional objects were more anxious, more depressed, had more anxious attachment styles, and were less emotionally stable than college students who no longer had their transitional object. This study could be used to explore the relationships between transitional objects and trauma and to identify individuals who may be struggling with issues such as mental illness or attachment problems.

The Phenomenon of Transitional Objects and College Students

A transitional object is defined as an item a child forms a particularly strong attachment to during childhood as a child begins to grow more independent from their parents. Children form attachments to transitional objects to help with the transition from total dependence on their parents or caregivers during infancy to partial independence that is attained during childhood, such as when the child begins attending school. The child will likely bring the object with them to most places, use it more than other similar objects, or need it to sleep. A transitional object can be a wide range of items, such as a stuffed animal, a blanket, a pillow, a doll, or an action figure, and the attachment to this item is developed sometime between four and 24 months and is typically relinquished when the child is around seven years old (Bachar et al., 1998). Winnicott (1951) was the first researcher to discuss the phenomenon of transitional objects and begin to define how and why they form. The current study will examine the phenomenon of transitional objects in college students and how college students who still have their transitional object differ from college students who no longer have their transitional object.

Literature Review

In Harlow's (1965) famous monkeys in isolation study, Harlow discovered that when given the choice between a soft surrogate mother and a hard wire mesh that had food and water, monkeys chose to spend their time with the soft surrogate mother rather than be near the food. Harlow's study points to an innate desire for comfort, which is seen in these monkeys as well as humans. Bowlby (1969) posited that people are born with an innate desire to form attachments to people and things around them. The primary source of attachments for a child would be the child's parents or guardians. An individual's attachment style is formed during childhood based on whether or not their attachment needs are met. A child would form a secure attachment style

if their needs were met, and would form anxious, avoidant, or disorganized attachment styles if their needs were not met. According to Bowlby (1969), if these attachment needs are not met, the child will seek to fulfill them with secondary sources while subsequently failing to develop the secure attachment style; this is where a child may develop a particularly strong attachment to a transitional object.

Mental Health

In the literature, there have been several studies that have examined the relationship between having transitional objects and mental health later in life. While some studies indicate that having a transitional object is normal, there is a distinction that being unable to let go of a transitional object into teenage and adult years is indicative of problems such as high stress, low self-esteem, and problems coping with stress, trauma, or difficult situations (Bachar et al., 1998; Bonne et al., 1999; Erkoalahti et al., 2016; Lookabaugh & Fu, 1992). An article by Erkoalahti et al. (2016) indicates that there are significant differences between children who had transitional objects and those who did not. Erkoalahti noted that there were significant differences in the occurrence of emotional and behavioral problems, impulse control, emotional tone, body image, social relations, and emotional health between the individuals who had transitional objects and those who did not. Individuals who still have their transitional objects struggle more with these problems than individuals who no longer have their transitional objects. Other researchers also found other problems exhibited by individuals with transitional objects, such as distress, inability to control emotions, immaturity, difficulties coping with stress, and low self-esteem (Bachar et al., 1998; Bonne et al., 1999; Lookabaugh & Fu, 1992).

Research has been conducted on some general problems children or adolescents, who still have their transitional objects past when they would normally be let go, may experience. There is

also a correlation between having a transitional object later into adolescence, and developing a mental illness such as depression, anxiety, or dissociative identity disorder (DID) (Bachar et al., 1998; Barlow et al., 2012; Erkoalahti & Nyström, 2009; Erkoalahti et al. 2016). Erkoalahti and Nyström (2009) found that adolescents who displayed signs of depressive symptoms used their transitional object more often and were often more attached to it than individuals who did not exhibit depressive symptoms. Barlow et al. (2012) noted a relationship between dissociative identity disorder and attachment to things like transitional objects. In the study that Barlow conducted, he had two groups, one with college students as a control, and one with individuals with dissociative identity disorder, with either high or low dissociation. Participants completed the Stuffed Animal Attachment Questionnaire and participants with DID indicated a significantly higher attachment to stuffed animals than the control group of college students.

There is not a consensus on whether attachment to material objects during adulthood is normal or a sign of problems during adulthood (Hooley & Wilson, 2012; Keefer et al., 2012; Wapner & Redondo, 1990; Winnicott, 1953). Wapner and Redondo (1990) studied elderly people in nursing homes and found that attachment to objects helped them to cope and regulate their emotions. However, Hooley and Wilson (2012) found that adults attached to transitional objects were more likely to have borderline personality disorder. A study conducted by Keefer et al. (2012) found that attachment to objects was formed when the support system that an individual has is found to be unreliable, meaning that the transitional object was created as a form of supplementary attachment and comfort. The study that Keefer conducted aligns more closely with the argument that the formation of transitional objects at all is seen as a sign of problems. The research is overall unclear and not in agreement on the effects of adult attachment to transitional objects.

Another study conducted by Hooley and Wilson (2012) analyzed borderline personality disorder and how it may have a relationship with attachment to a transitional object. During their study, Hooley and Wilson noted that individuals who reported intense, current attachments to transitional objects were more likely to meet the criteria for borderline personality disorder than individuals who did not report that close attachment. Hooley and Wilson (2012) posited that this relationship was as a result of childhood trauma and child-rearing practices that the participants had experienced, and that a heavy reliance on transitional objects is indicative of underlying pathology.

Attachment

Some individuals may be more attached to transitional objects than the average population. Konok et al. (2016) examined attachment to phones as a transitional object and found that individuals with a high anxious attachment style, as a result of a fear of rejection or abandonment, were much more attached to their phones than individuals with different attachment styles. The trend of individuals with a high anxious attachment style showing increased attachment to inanimate objects is supported by other studies as well (Hooley & Wilson, 2012; Keefer et al., 2012; Stagg & Li, 2019). Individuals who hold on to their transitional objects past the point when they would normally be let go are usually very insecure with an anxious attachment style and have an aversion to seeking help (Stagg & Li, 2019). These individuals will likely fear abandonment or rejection and have not been adequately supported during their childhood. Attachment style is commonly formed by parenting style and child-rearing behaviors. As a result, different cultures will likely see different trends regarding transitional objects if the child-rearing practices differ between cultures.

Gender and Culture Differences

When it comes to having and using transitional objects, there are noted gender and cultural differences. (Erkolahti & Nyström, 2009; Litt, 1981; Hobara, 2003; Stagg & Li, 2019). Researchers have found that girls are more likely to have a transitional object than boys and that the types of transitional object that girls and boys typically have differ, mostly on account of what types of toys are typically given to boys and girls based on gender norms (Erkolahti & Nyström, 2009). Girls are more likely to have soft transitional objects like blankets and stuffed animals, and boys are more likely to have hard transitional objects like action figures and toy cars. Across cultures, a study conducted by Stagg and Li (2019) revealed that Taiwanese children were more likely to have transitional objects than American children. This cultural difference is attributed to differences in child rearing practices as well as different school systems. The Taiwanese children in the study had less access to quality education than the American children did, and education has a significant impact on the formation of a good support system that facilitates secure attachments, so they were more likely to have transitional objects later into their adolescence.

Personality

There is limited literature on the effect of personality on having a transitional object. A study by Cohen and Clark (1984) investigated early object attachments and how it is related to personality characteristics. Cohen and Clark used the Sixteen Personality Form Questionnaire to assess personality and noted significant relationships between personality types and early object attachment. Cohen and Clark found that individuals who identified as reserved were less likely to develop early object attachment, and individuals who identified as tense were more likely to develop early object attachment. This study is one of very few that examine personality traits and

transitional objects, and there are no studies that examine the personality traits of openness to experience, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and emotional stability.

The Current Research

Previous researchers and theorists state that transitional objects are meant to be let go, specifically around age seven. Why is it then that some people hold on to these objects and struggle to let them go when others seem to have had no problem? The research has a significant gap surrounding transitional objects in college students and adults. There has also never been a study that has examined multiple different variables all at once. In my study I will examine the variables of mental health, attachment style, and personality. This study will be comprised of college students at a small private university. The purpose of my study is to examine transitional objects in college students and investigate what makes college students who have transitional objects different from those who were able to let them go.

Methods

Participants

Participants ($N = 96$) consisted of college students from a small private college in the Midwest. Participants were invited to participate in a convenience sample. Participants were mostly female (67.5%) and White (89.2%) with Asian (4.8%), Multiethnic (3.6%), and Hispanic or Latino (2.4%) students also represented in the sample. The mean age for the sample was 19.68 ($SD = 2.29$). 74 participants indicated that they had, at one point, had a transitional object, and 63 participants indicated that they still had their transitional objects. Of those 63 participants, 25 reported that they had their transitional object with them, where they lived.

Materials and Procedures

The survey was administered through Google Forms and sent to participants via email over the course of several weeks. The survey consisted of a measure of the participants' transitional object behaviors, the Depression, Anxiety Stress Scales (DASS-21), the Revised Adult Attachment Scale – Close Relationships Version, and the Ten Item Personality Inventory (TIPI). A university IRB approved all procedures.

Participants completed a demographics section of the survey where they answered questions regarding their age, gender, and race. Participants then completed a short questionnaire regarding transitional objects that was made specifically for this research project. The researcher operationally defined transitional objects as “an object that a child forms an especially strong attachment to during childhood. Common transitional objects are teddy bears, dolls, blankets, and pillows, and this object typically has more value placed on it than other similar objects,” and participants stated whether, based on the provided description, they had a transitional object as a child. If participants answered yes, they were directed to answer questions regarding their transitional object such as what the object was, whether they still had it, where it is, and what their attachment level to it was as a child vs now as an adult.

The DASS-21 is a self-report measure designed to measure symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress (Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995). The Cronbach's alpha for this scale is .93, indicating that it has good validity (Le et al., 2017). Participants indicated how much a given statement applied to them over the past week. Examples of provided statements included “I felt that I was using a lot of nervous energy”, “I found myself getting agitated” and “I felt I wasn't worth much as a person”. Participants indicated how frequently they had experienced the statements on a 4-point scale ranging from *never* (0) to *almost always* (3). This scale has 21 items total, divided into three, 7-item self-report scales. The DASS-21 is scored by adding the

scores on the items of each subscale and multiplying by two. Each subscale will have a score ranging from 0 to 42. Questions on the stress subscale were eliminated due to non-relevance to the research topic.

The Revised Adult Attachment Scale – Close Relationships Version is a self-report measure developed to assess differences in individual attachment styles (Collins, 1996). This scale is comprised of 18 items broken up into three subscales; close, dependent, and anxiety. Participants indicated how they generally felt in important close relationships in their life. Examples included “I find it relatively easy to get close to people”, “I am comfortable depending on others” and “I often worry that other people don't really love me”. Participants indicated how characteristic they felt each statement was of them on a scale of *not very characteristic of me* (1) to *very characteristic of me* (5). The scale is then scored by adding together each item within each subscale. In a sample of undergraduates, Cronbach's alphas for the close, depend, and anxiety subscales were .77, .78, and .85, respectively which indicates that this scale is valid (Collins, 1996).

The Ten Item Personality Inventory (TIPI) is a ten item, self-report measure designed to measure the big five dimensions of personality (Gosling et al., 2003). This scale is comprised of 10 items broken into five subscales of the big five personality traits; openness to experience, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and emotional stability. Participants indicated the extent to which a pair of traits applies to them on a scale of *disagree strongly* (1) to *agree strongly* (7). Examples of trait pairs that participants were shown include “Anxious, easily upset”, “Extraverted, enthusiastic”, and “Sympathetic, warm”. The scale is scored by adding together each item within each subscale. The TIPI exhibits good reliability and validity with previously established measures of personality ($r = .411, p < .00$) (Azkhosh et al., 2020).

Results

The purpose of this analysis was to assess the differences between college students who still have their transitional objects compared to those who do not on the variables of mental health, attachment style, and personality. I analyzed this research question by using an independent-samples *t* test to compare college students who still have their transitional object with them to those who no longer have their transitional object with them. I compared the two groups on the variables of anxiety, depression, secure attachment style, dependent attachment style, anxious attachment style, and the big five factors of personality. The results of this analysis are reported in Table 1.

The two groups were significantly different on their anxiety scores. The scores of individuals who still have their transitional object were significantly higher than the scores of individuals who no longer have their transitional object. The two groups were significantly different on their depression scores. The scores of individuals who still have their transitional object were significantly higher than the scores of individuals who no longer have their transitional object. The two groups were significantly different on their scores for having an anxious attachment style. The scores of individuals who still have their transitional object were significantly higher than those who no longer have their transitional object. The two groups were significantly different on their scores in agreeableness. The scores of individuals who still have their transitional object were significantly lower than those who no longer have their transitional object.

Table 1

Independent-Samples t Test

Variable	Still have TO		No longer have TO		<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
Anxiety	9.64	5.96	6.82	4.33	2.13	.040
Depression	8.52	5.09	6.21	4.42	2.07	.042
Attach-Close	18.04	5.09	20.31	4.80	1.93	.058
Attach- Dependent	16.00	5.70	17.55	4.79	1.27	.207
Attach-Anxious	22.00	6.86	18.82	6.43	2.01	.047
Extraversion	7.24	3.73	7.77	3.78	0.58	.562
Agreeableness	9.08	2.18	10.11	1.84	2.19	.032
Conscientious-ness	10.44	2.82	10.65	2.72	0.32	.747
Emotional Stability	6.44	2.84	7.05	2.67	0.94	.351
Openness to Experience	10.56	2.33	10.11	2.21	0.84	.405

I also conducted a Pearson's *r* correlation to assess if there was any relationship between current level of attachment to their transitional object and mental health, attachment style, or factors of personality. This analysis is exploratory, and the following statistics were the only results meaningful to transitional objects. First, I tested the two variables were an individual's current level of attachment to their transitional object ($M = 2.53$, $SD = 1.32$) and their scores on the anxiety questionnaire ($M = 7.26$, $SD = 5.11$). The variables had a medium and significant correlation in the positive direction ($r = .42$, $p < .001$), indicating that people who are more attached to their transitional object feel more anxious on average than individuals who no longer have their transitional object. Then, I tested the current level of attachment to their transitional object and their scores on the anxious attachment style questions ($M = 19.92$, $SD = 6.75$). The

two variables had a small, significant correlation in the positive direction ($r = .30, p = .008$), indicating that individuals who are more attached to their transitional object have more of an anxious attachment style than individuals who no longer have their transitional object. Finally, I tested the current level of attachment to their transitional object and their emotional stability scores ($M = 7.03, SD = 2.89$). The two variables had a small, significant correlation in the negative direction ($r = -.25, p = .027$) indicating that people who are more attached to their transitional object are less emotionally stable than individuals who no longer have their transitional object.

The final analysis I conducted was to test if there were any gender differences between men and women in their behaviors regarding transitional objects. I conducted an independent-samples t test to compare if there were differences in the level of attachment as a child or currently between men and women. The results of this analysis are reported in Table 2. Men and women only significantly differed on their reports of how attached they currently are to their transitional objects. Men reported a lower level of attachment to their transitional object than women did.

Table 2

Independent-Samples t Test

Variable	Men		Women		t	p
	M	SD	M	SD		
Attach TO-Child	4.35	0.83	4.37	0.93	0.08	.938
Attach TO-Current	1.96	1.02	2.70	1.34	2.60	.012

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine transitional objects in college students and investigate what makes college students who have transitional objects significantly different from those who were able to let them go. To answer this research question, I examined the variables of mental health, attachment style, and personality. Through analysis, I found that college students who still have their transitional object are more likely to experience symptoms of anxiety and depression than college students who no longer have their transitional object. I also found that there were significant differences between the two groups involving attachment style. College students who still have their transitional object indicated anxious attachment styles more frequently than college students who no longer have their transitional object. Finally, college students who still have their transitional objects scored lower on agreeableness than college students who no longer have their transitional objects.

I also analyzed if a college student's current level of attachment to their transitional object was related to the variables of mental health, attachment style, and personality. Through analysis I found that a high level of attachment is correlated positively with anxiety symptoms and having an anxious attachment style. A high level of attachment was also negatively correlated with emotional stability. These results indicate that college students who are more attached to their transitional objects may experience more anxiety symptoms, be more likely to have an anxious attachment style, and be less emotionally stable. Finally, I analyzed if there were any differences between men and women in transitional object behaviors. The only significant difference between men and women was that women reported currently being more attached to their transitional object than men did. Men and women did not differ in terms of their likelihood to have had a transitional object as a child nor if they still had a transitional object.

My results were partially consistent with past research. In my study, I found that college students who still have their transitional objects are more likely to experience symptoms of anxiety and depression, this is consistent with the literature which indicates that having a transitional object may be related to anxiety or depressive symptoms (Bachar et al., 1998; Barlow et al., 2012; Erkolahti & Nyström, 2009; Erkolahti et al. 2016). In my study, I also found that college students who still have their transitional object are more likely to have an anxious attachment style, which is consistent with what was found in the literature (Hooley & Wilson, 2012; Keefer et al., 2012; Konok et al. 2016; Stagg & Li, 2019). The literature indicated that there would be gender differences in behaviors surrounding having transitional objects (Erkolahti & Nyström, 2009). The study by Erkolahti and Nyström indicated that women were more likely to have transitional objects and would likely be more attached to them. I did not find similar results in my study. This discrepancy may have been a result of not having a representative sample, as I had significantly more women than men.

Strengths

Some of the strengths of this study include the scales having established reliability and validity as previously established in previous research (Azkhosh et al., 2020; Collins, 1996; Gosling et al., 2003; Le et al., 2017; Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995). As a result of these studies being previously established and being self-report, all questions were realistic for participants to answer, and there were no leading questions enticing participants to answer in a particular way. Another strength is that all participants were included in the study, there was no need for participants to be eliminated based on ineligibility.

Limitations

Although this study did indicate significant differences between college students who still have their transitional objects and those who do not have their transitional objects, this study suffered from low power. Given that I was conducting through convenience sampling, this resulted in a small sample size with uneven numbers in each group. The group of interest, college students who still have their transitional objects, had 25 participants, whereas the other group, college students who no longer have their transitional objects, had 56 participants. Due to this study having low power, I may have made a Type II error, where I potentially found results to be not significant, but with a larger sample size, those results would have been found to be significant. Another limitation of this study is that the results are not generalizable. This study was conducted with a convenience sample at a small, private, midwestern college, with a primarily White and female sample. The results gathered from this study are likely only applicable to this unique sample, and further tests in more diverse samples may not yield the same results. Also, as a result of the non-representative sample, race differences were not considered in this study.

Implications

This is the first study to examine transitional objects and college students, and it is also one of very few studies to examine multiple variables such as mental health, attachment style, and personality. Throughout this study, I found that there were significant differences between college students who still have their transitional objects and college students who no longer have transitional objects. These findings could be used in future research to assess what may cause some children to hold on to their transitional objects, such as if holding on to transitional objects is a result of trauma or causes poor coping skills. Outside of research, the results of this study

could be used to identify young adults who may be struggling with issues such as mental illness, or attachment problems.

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