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Associations Between Parental Attachment, Peer Attachment, and Moral Disengagement

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Background

- **Attachment** is the emotional bonding that happens between an infant and a caregiver, predicting relational functioning later in life (Bowlby, 1973; Simpson & Rholes, 2017).
- Early attachment styles generalize to **peer relationships** in childhood and adolescence (Dykas et al., 2008).
- **Moral disengagement**, or the justification of actions contrary to the ethics of the perpetrator, is a form of anxious and dysfunctional behavior (Bandura, 2016). It is used to preserve self-concept while violating core values.
- There is evidence that moral disengagement is related to attachment style, suggesting moral disengagement could be impacted by relational influences (Chugh et al., 2013).

Hypothesis:

We predicted that secure parent and peer attachment would be associated with less moral disengagement.

Methods

Participants

- 403 college students
- 72% women, 28% men
- 90% White non-Hispanic/Latinx, 4% Hispanic/Latinx, 3% Asian

Measures

- **Parent Attachment** (12 items): 1 = never true, 5 = Always True, $\alpha = .92$, "My parents accept me as I am." (Raja et al., 1992)
- **Peer Attachment** (12 items): 1 = never true, 5 = Always True, $\alpha = .89$, "My friends encourage me to talk about my difficulties." (Raja et al., 1992)
- **Moral Disengagement** (31 items): 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree. $\alpha = .92$ "It is alright to lie to keep your friends out of trouble." Log transformation applied due to skewness. (Bandura et al., 1996)

Results

Table 1. Correlations between study variables.

	1	2	3
1. Parent Attachment (PA)	--		
2. Peer Attachment (PE)	.40***	--	
3. Moral Disengagement	-.11*	-.16**	--

Notes: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

Table 2. Final model of predictors of moral disengagement.

Predictors	Estimate	SE	Type III p value
Intercept	.57	.02	< .001
PA	-.04	.02	.06
PE	-.07	.03	< .01
Gender (M = 1)	.20	.03	< .001
PA X PE	-.05	.02	< .05

Notes: Interaction terms are centered. $F(4,398) = 13.57, p < .001$. Multiple $R^2 = .12$, Adj. $R^2 = .11$

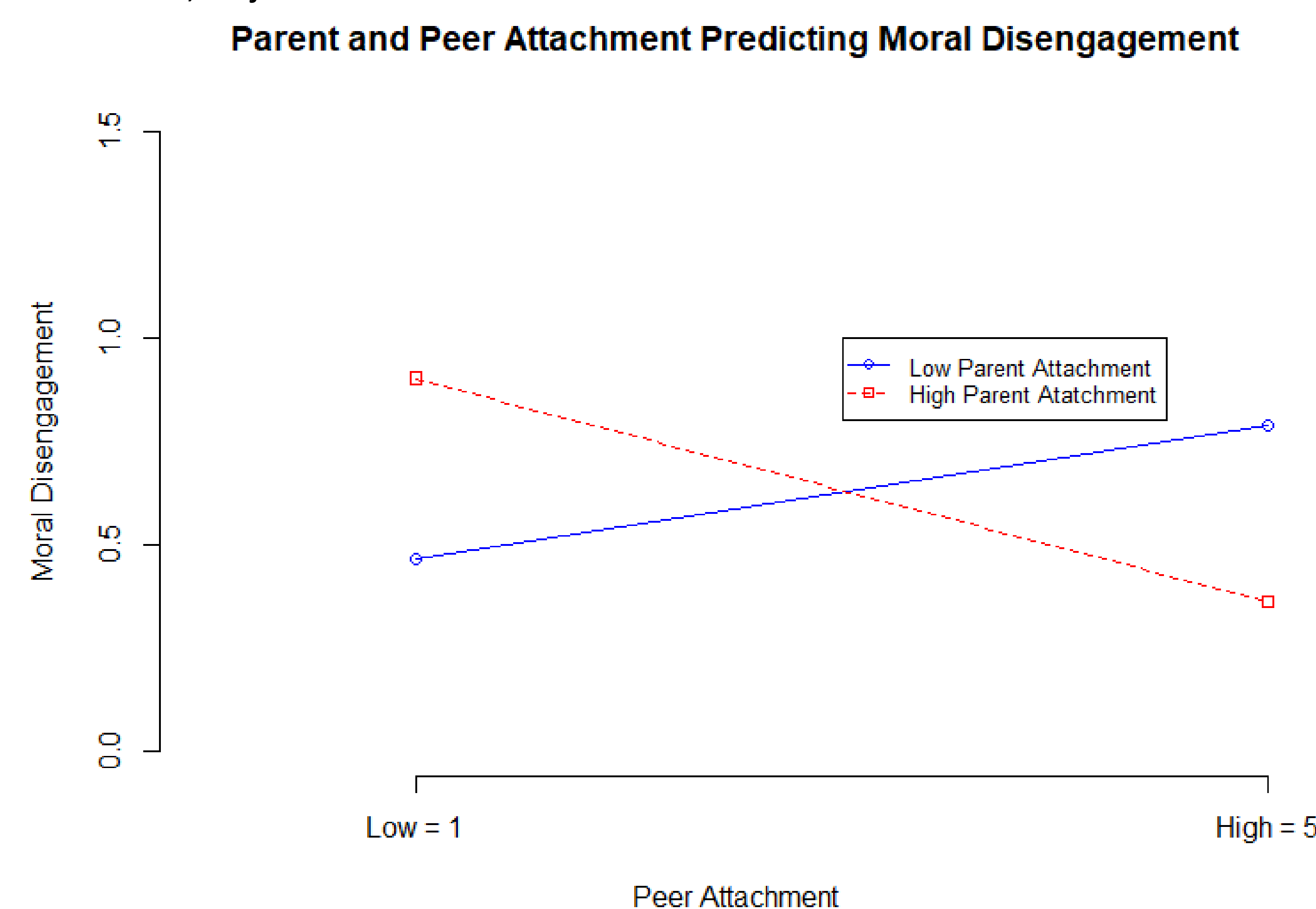


Figure 1. Interaction between peer attachment and parent attachment predicting moral disengagement

Results & Conclusions

- Using multiple regression, we tested associations between parent attachment, peer attachment, and moral disengagement while controlling for gender.

Initial model

- In our initial model, after controlling for gender, parent attachment was not a significant predictor of moral disengagement ($B = -.03, ns$).
- Peer attachment was a significant negative predictor of moral disengagement ($B = -.06, p < .05$).

Exploratory interaction model (see Table 2 and Figure 1)

- At the lowest levels of parent attachment, greater peer attachment not significantly related to moral disengagement (simple slope = .08, ns).
- At the highest level of parent attachment, greater peer attachment was associated with less moral disengagement (simple slope = -.14, $p < .01$).
- Additionally, men reported more moral disengagement than women.

Limitations

- Lack of age, race/ethnicity, and gender diversity within the sample limit generalizability (Nielsen et al., 2017). Additionally, student samples impact generalizability (Gallander Wintre et al, 2001).

Conclusion:

This study provided an uninvestigated perspective on how secure attachment relationships with parents and peers might influence moral disengagement.

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