

# The Relationships of Over-Adaptation, Attachment Styles, and Meta-Mood for Negative Emotions

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## Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationships between over-adaptation, 3 attachment styles (secure type, avoiding type, ambivalent type), and people's meta-mood toward negative emotions regarding themselves and others. The respondents of the survey were 191 undergraduates. The study showed that people with a high tendency for over-adaptation displayed the following two characteristics: (1) they show few features of the secure type and strong features of the ambivalent type, (2) they have a strong tendency to avoid their own negative feelings and at the same time show great interest in the negative feelings of others. To reduce the tendency of over-adaptation, the necessity to increase tolerance toward negative emotions which arise in social situations was discussed.

**Keywords** : over-adaptation, attachment style, meta-mood

## 1. Introduction

People are considered to be adapted to their environment if, by getting a positive response or assessment from their environment as a result of having made the right efforts toward their social and cultural environment to meet their own needs, they are able to maintain a healthy physical and emotional state. Through efforts aiming at such social adaptation, people are believed to obtain positive results such as maintaining good human relations and gaining approval from society (Agarwal, 1977).

Through such efforts, people may seem like they are adapting well, but in fact they risk taking their efforts too far, resulting in what is called over-adaptation (Fukushima, 1989). Excessive adaptation is a coping strategy used to maintain a high level of social adaptation through constant efforts that meet the needs and

expectations of others (Ishizu & Anbo, 2008). In Europe and the United States, there is a concept that is similar to over-adaptation called "subjective overachievement" (Oleson, Poehlmann, Yost, Lynch, & Arkin, 2000). While subjective overachievement means making excessive efforts to increase social performance, over-adaptation means making excessive efforts to adapt to the environment with the purpose of avoiding interpersonal conflicts. One can say that over-adaptation is a uniquely Japanese personality type that is different from subjective overachievement. In Japanese culture, maintaining harmony with one's surroundings is considered a virtue (Kawai, 1976). Assertiveness is therefore often frowned upon. For such reason, over-adaptation for the purpose of showing concern for others and avoiding conflict is usually considered as a form of positive adaptation which Japanese people can relate to.

However, prolonged over-adaptation is reported to increase the risks of physical and

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mental illnesses (Asada & Hirose, 1996). In addition, studies suggest that people showing over-adaptation are emotionally less healthy than people not showing over-adaptation (Kanetsuki & Kanetsuki, 2010). This calls for psychological assistance that would reduce over-adaptation. Unfortunately, studies that examine the causes of over-adaptation are few. One must study the causes that trigger over-adaptation in order to pursue a state that allows people to maintain a high level of social adaptation without affecting their health.

As one of the causes presumed to be related to over-adaptation, this study first focused on the attachment style, which is an interpersonal style. Attachment is an important concept in the process of understanding adaptability regarding the self or others in human interactions (Sakagami & Suganuma, 2001), and its style is mainly divided into three categories. The first is the secure type, where one has the perception that the other is responsive and that one is worthy of receiving assistance. The second is the avoiding type, where one has an insecure perception that the other is dismissive and that one is not worthy of receiving help from others. And the third is the ambivalent type, where one has an ambivalent perception that the relationship with the other is built on both trust and distrust. Although it is not clear what kind of interpersonal style people showing a high tendency for over-adaptation have, the fact that over-adaptation tends to be present during interactions with others and that they are highly responsive to the needs of others hypothesizes a state of imbalance. The first objective is therefore to study the relationship between over-adaptation and attachment styles. This study draws attention to the attachment style that refers to a behavior where the subject attempts a physical or psychological contact with the attachment figure as a factor that could be

related to over-adaptation.

The study then focuses on people's meta-mood toward over-adaptation and negative emotions regarding themselves and others. Meta-mood refers to an individual's attitude or coping strategy toward their emotions, which involves monitoring, assessing and adjusting their moods (Mayer & Gaschke, 1988).

Because people with a high tendency for over-adaptation more often than not resort to behavior that avoids confrontation to maintain a good relationship with others (Masuko, 2008), experts believe these people may have little resistance to the negative emotions they have about themselves in the event of a confrontation.

In addition, because people showing over-adaptation are highly responsive to the needs of others, they tend to excessively monitor or pay attention to the emotions of others. In other words, because they excessively fear receiving negative responses from others, it is hypothesized that they may be retaining a state of over-adaptation as a way to avoid triggering negative emotions in others. The second objective of this study is to assess the meta-mood of people showing over-adaptation regarding their own negative emotions and those of others.

## **2. Method**

### **1) Participants and Procedure**

191 undergraduates at University in Tokyo participated in a questionnaire survey. They completed a packet of 4 measures in their psychology classes. The data were obtained from 188 participants (159 men, 29 women,  $M$  age=20.10 yr. ( $SD$  =1.85; range: 18 to 29), valid response rate: 98.43%). All students provided written informed consent.

### **2) Measures**

The following four types of questionnaires

were administered. Reliability and validity were confirmed for all of them.

(1) *The Over-Adaptation Scale* (Ishizu, 2006).

This scale, composed of 33 items, measures the tendency for “over-adaptation” that consisted of 5 subscales. The subscales are “consideration for others”, “effort to meet expectations”, “desire to be liked by others”, “self-restraint” and “self-insufficiency.” The participants were asked to rate the items on a scale of 1 (not at all applicable) to 5 (completely applicable).

(2) *The Internal Working Model Scale* (IWM; Toda, 1988). This scale, developed to assess the quality of the internal working model of adults, includes subscales that can measure 3 attachment styles. The attachment styles are the “secure type”, “avoidant type” and “ambivalent type.” The scale is composed of 18 items. The participants were asked to rate the items on a scale of 1 (not at all applicable) to 6 (completely applicable).

(3) *The Measure of Meta-Mood regarding the Others* (MMO; Suzuki, Kino, Hayamizu, & Nakatani, 1999). This scale, composed of 41 items, assesses behavior and coping strategies toward the emotional state of others. It includes 3 factors, which are “adjusting to the negative emotions of others (ANEO)”, “interest in the negative emotions of others (INEO)” and “negative emotions toward expressing negative emotions (NEENE).” The participants were asked to rate the items on a scale of 1 (not at all applicable) to 5 (completely applicable).

(4) *The Scale for the Tendency to Avoid Negative Emotions* (TANE; Fukumori, & Ogawa, 2005).

This scale, composed of 10 items, measures the tendency to avoid one’s negative emotions. The participants were asked to rate the items on a scale of 1 (not at all applicable) to 7 (completely applicable).

### 3. Results

In order to examine the attachment style of people with a tendency for over-adaptation and their meta-mood regarding their own negative emotions and those of others, we divided the participants into two groups, a high group and a low group, with the mean value of the over-adaptation scale ( $M = 110.38$  points) as reference value. We then performed an analysis using the one-way analysis of variance to determine how different the points in each indicator are between the two groups. Table 1 shows the points of both groups and the results from the analysis of variance.

First, results of the analysis of variance regarding the mean value of the attachment style’s secure type showed that the mean value in the high group was significantly lower than in the lower group ( $F(1,186) = 4.17, p < .05$ ). Meanwhile, results of the analysis of variance regarding the mean value of the ambivalent type showed that the mean value in the high group was significantly higher than in the lower group ( $F(1,186) = 54.11, p < .01$ ). With regard to the avoidant type, no significant difference was observed between the two groups.

As for the results of the analysis of variance regarding the mean value for “adjusting to the negative emotions of others,” no significant difference was observed between the two groups. Results of the analysis of variance regarding the “interest in the negative emotions of others” showed significantly higher values in the high group ( $F(1,186) = 11.15, p < .01$ ). Results of the analysis of variance regarding the “negative emotions toward expressing negative emotions” showed significantly higher values in the high group ( $F(1,186) = 9.19, p < .01$ ). Finally, results of the analysis of variance regarding the “tendency to avoid negative emotions” showed significantly higher values in the high group ( $F(1,186) = 22.63, p < .01$ ).

**Table 1**

Descriptive statistics with one-way ANOVA of measures regarding attachment styles and meta-mood for negative emotions

Meta model for negative emotions							
	Over-Adaptation				<i>F</i> (1,186)	<i>p</i>	<i>η</i> <sup>2</sup>
	High ( <i>n</i> =97)		Low ( <i>n</i> =91)				
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			
IWM							
Secure Type	19.24	5.78	20.92	5.52	4.17*	.04	.02
Ambivalent Type	24.70	5.08	18.98	5.59	54.11**	.00	.23
Avoidant Type	18.72	18.89	18.89	5.19	n.s.	.83	.00
MMO							
ANEO	54.86	11.37	53.29	11.43	n.s.	.35	.00
INEO	57.00	8.14	53.00	8.28	11.15**	.00	.06
NEENE	21.98	3.45	20.56	2.92	9.19**	.00	.05
TANE	133.84	16.01	126.85	18.12	22.63**	.00	.11

Note: IWM=The Internal Working Model Scale; MMO=The Measure of Meta-Mood regarding the Others; ANEO=Adjusting to the Negative Emotions of Others; INEO=Interest in the Negative Emotions of Others; NEENE=Negative Emotions toward Expressing Negative Emotions; TANE=The Scale for the Tendency to Avoid Negative Emotions

\*\**p* < .01; \**p* < .05; n.s.=not significant

## 4. Discussion

This study first investigated the relationship between over-adaptation and attachment style. This revealed that the group with a high tendency for over-adaptation showed fewer features of the secure type compared to the low group and more features of the ambivalent type. It is interesting to see that even with the maladaptive interactive type people with a high tendency for over-adaptation are particularly associated with the ambivalent type. One of the features of the ambivalent type is that the individual has an ambivalent perception of human interaction which involves both trust and distrust (Toda, 1988). The tendency for over-adaptation is thought to be enhanced as a result of distrust toward others. For example, the individual will think: “Unless I treat others well, they will cast me aside.” Meanwhile, studies also suggest that people who, as children, were raised

in an environment where they are forced to be sensitive to their parents’ reactions show a strong ambivalent type, and that if they grow up without resolving the issue, they’ll still show such tendency as adults (Sakagami & Suganuma, 2001). This tendency is similar to how over-adaptation is linked to being excessively responsive to the needs of others, and thus the findings obtained in this study are convincing. It is therefore important to take into account the developmental context of human relations as one of the reasons people show over-adaptation. It is interesting to see that, even among the different maladaptive human relation types, there is a particular relationship with the ambivalent type.

The second objective of this study is to assess the meta-mood of people showing a tendency for over-adaptation regarding their own negative emotions and those of others. Results revealed that people showing over-adaptation have a high tendency to avoid their own negative emotions.

In addition, people showing over-adaptation proved to have a higher interest in the negative emotions of others than those not showing over-adaptation. Although Suzuki et al. (1999) suggest that people have difficulty adjusting to the negative emotions of others when they have strong negative emotions toward their own negative emotions, perhaps people with a high tendency to show over-adaptation excessively monitor the negative emotions of others and they do this as a strategy to avoid feeling negative emotions themselves.

In addition, the fact that people with a high tendency to show over-adaptation have strong negative emotions toward other people expressing negative emotions suggests that they are intolerant toward the negative emotions of others. If they have low tolerance toward negative emotions of others, they might be excessively considerate of others to make sure they stay happy, which as a result may lead to over-adaptation. Based on the above points, future studies focusing on over-adaptation must include discussions on how to address one's negative emotions and those of others.

Results of this study suggested that increasing tolerance toward the negative emotions that arise during human interactions may help to tone down over-adaptation. Future studies must investigate if over-adaptation can be alleviated through behavioral experiments in situations of interpersonal interactions, so that people showing over-adaptation can be more receptive to their own negative emotions and those of others. Increased tolerance toward negative emotions could in the long run result in a change in the ambivalent type, often seen in people showing over-adaptation, and also resolve the issue of imbalance between self-orientation and other-orientation. This could ultimately lead to enhanced mental health of people showing over-adaptation.

However, because the study targeted science students, most of the data were obtained by male students. Future studies need to increase data from women and investigate whether there is a difference between sexes. Meanwhile, because this study was a survey study, experimental examination regarding the causal relationship between the causes discussed in this study is also required.

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