



# Attachment styles and mother's well-being among mothers of preschool children in Korea: The mediating role of marital satisfaction



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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 4 March 2014

Received in revised form 19 May 2014

Accepted 20 May 2014

Available online 14 June 2014

### Keywords:

Attachment styles

Marital satisfaction

Mother's well-being

Korea

Mothers of preschool children

## ABSTRACT

The aim of the current study was to investigate the mediating role of marital satisfaction in the link between attachment styles and mother's well-being among mothers of preschool children in Korea. The participants were 208 mothers of preschool children recruited from 2 daycare centers and 3 kindergartens in Busan, South Korea. The participating mothers completed self-report questionnaires regarding attachment styles, marital satisfaction, and mother's well-being. Mediation model tested using PROCESS (Hayes, 2013) revealed that marital satisfaction partially mediated the associations between anxious attachment and mother's well-being. The findings suggest that both relational representations and present intimate relationships are crucial factors in mother's well-being. The findings enhance the understanding of the paths from anxious attachment to mother's well-being through marital satisfaction.

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## 1. Introduction

Mothers of preschool children may have difficulties taking their new roles as parent. For example, mothers of preschool children reported that the period of transition to parenthood was the most difficult time of their lives (Leigh & Milgrom, 2008). Parenting was closely associated with an increase in maternal depressive symptoms (Evenson & Simon, 2005) and stress (Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2003) as well as a decrease in positive emotions and happiness (Baumeister, 1991; Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2003) for mothers of preschool children. Korean mothers of preschool children also reported high levels of parenting stress (Jang & Han, 2011) and were distressed by parental roles (Park & Peterson, 2006).

The sense of well-being is particularly important for these young mothers and their children because the impact of the mother's well-being on parenting is significant in early childhood (Adam, Gunnar, & Tanaka, 2004) and well-being in early life can be closely associated with well-being in adulthood (Luo & Waite, 2005). Many studies have supported that the positive and negative dimensions of the mother's well-being are closely associated with her children's outcomes. Maternal stress and anxiety have been shown to influence children's behavioral problems (Belsky, 1984;

Gutteling et al., 2005). In contrast, children of mothers who frequently expressed positive emotions were more likely to have high levels of social competence and social understanding as well as low levels of hostility and internalizing problems (Dunn, Brown, Slomkowski, Tesia, & Youngblade, 1991; Rubin, Hastings, Chen, Stewart, & McNichol, 1998).

The mother's well-being may be influenced by the quality and representations of her intimate relationships because relational factors are known as crucial predictors of women's well-being (Ryff & Keyes, 1995). Attachment theory has provided a salient framework for the impact of relational representations on human adaptation and well-being throughout life (Bowlby, 1969, 1982; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007b; van IJzendoorn & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 1996). Particularly, attachment theory explicitly states that qualitatively different attachment styles are associated with individual differences in intimate relationships and emotion processing (Bretherton & Munholland, 2008), which may provide different pathways of how attachment relationships influence individual's well-being. There are two different dimensions of attachment style: anxious and avoidant attachment (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2012; Richard & Schat, 2011). Individuals with high levels of anxious attachment tend to pursue excessively close relationships. Thus, if anxious individuals may not be satisfied with intimate relationships, it would have great influence on their well-being. In contrast, people with high levels of avoidant attachment are more likely to avoid close relationships and thus less likely to be distressed by unsatisfactory relationships. Ultimately, avoidant people's

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well-being may not be much influenced by the quality of intimate relationships.

In line with different pathways of how attachment styles lead individual's well-being, marital satisfaction may be mechanism which explains the associations between attachment styles and well-being, especially for mothers of preschool children. The claim is based on bottom-up spillover theory which suggests that relational representations can transfer to other intimate relationships as well as satisfaction in a certain domain can spill over to satisfaction in another or all other domain (Andrews & Withey, 1976; Campbell, Phillip, & Rodgers, 1976; Diener, 1984). The claim is also supported by the marital discord model of depression (Beach, Sandeen, & O'Leary, 1990). Beach and colleagues suggest that dissatisfaction in marriage have great impact on marital interactions, ultimately influencing couple's negative and positive aspects of well-being. Indeed, the marital discord model of depression argues that the quality of marriage is antecedent of personal well-being. Furthermore, given that marital satisfaction and parent's well-being are important but tend to decrease during the preschool period of their children (e.g., Belsky, 1985; Lawrence, Rothman, Cobb, Rothman, & Bradbury, 2008) and the effects of marital relationships on parent's life satisfaction was empirically supported among mothers of preschool children in longitudinal study (Dyrdal, Roysamb, Nes, & Vitterso, 2010), it is important to examine how attachment relationships and marital satisfaction influence mother's well-being during the preschool years. Taken together, marital satisfaction can be an important mediator linking different attachment relationships and the mother's well-being for mothers of preschool children.

Many empirical findings have shown that insecure attachment is associated with low levels of well-being (Kobak, Sudler, & Gamble, 1991; Priel & Shamai, 1995), whereas secure attachment is related to high levels of well-being (La Guardia, Ryan, Couchman, & Deci, 2000; Torquati & Raffaelli, 2004). In addition, marital satisfaction has been consistently shown to be a crucial determinant of well-being for married people (DeLongis, Folkman, & Lazarus, 1998; Dyrdal et al., 2010; Proulx, Helms, & Buehler, 2007; Ryff, Singer, Wing, & Love, 2001; Whisman, 1999). Marital satisfaction has also been closely associated with attachment relationships in the literature (Brennan & Shaver, 1995; Feeney, Noller, & Callan, 1994; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2012).

However, little information is provided concerning the mechanisms that might play a mediating role in the association between attachment styles and well-being. Although a few studies have explored the mediating model in the link between attachment relationships and well-being, they have typically used intrapersonal characteristics as mediators (e.g., emotion regulation, resilience, self-compassion, and relational satisfaction), and the findings on the relationship between attachment styles and well-being have presented mixed results (Karreman & Vingerhoets, 2012; Towler & Stuhlmacher, 2014; Wei, Liao, Ku, & Shaffer, 2011). In addition, most of data investigating the associations have been conducted in individualistic cultures. Thus, more data is needed to enhance the understanding of processes how attachment styles might influence well-being particularly for people in collectivistic cultures that values interdependence and relationships (Markus & Kitayama, 1991).

Based on theoretical perspectives and empirical findings, the current study aims to explore marital satisfaction as a mediator between attachment styles and mother's well-being in a sample of mothers of preschool children in South Korea. The specific goals of this study are to investigate whether anxious and avoidant attachment styles predict mother's well-being and to examine whether marital satisfaction plays a mediating role in the association between attachment styles and mother's well-being. Based on theory and empirical findings, it is hypothesized that marital

satisfaction will mediate the associations between anxious and avoidant attachment and mother's well-being in a sample of Korean mothers of preschool children. The specific hypotheses are: (a) anxious and avoidant attachment styles will decrease marital satisfaction; (b) anxious and avoidant attachment styles will decrease mother's well-being; (c) marital satisfaction will increase mother's well-being; and (d) marital satisfaction will mediate the link between anxious and avoidant attachment styles and well-being for Korean mothers with young children.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Participants

Participants included a total of 208 mothers with young children in South Korea. The participating mothers in the current study were recruited from two daycares and three kindergartens in Busan, South Korea. Of 300 surveys, 210 were replied to and two were excluded due to missing values. In terms of mother's age, 2.9% of mothers were between 21 and 30 years old, 83.6% of mothers were between 31 and 40 years old, and 13.5% of mothers were between 41 and 50 years old. With respect to mothers' education, 13.3% of mothers had graduated from high school, 79.8% of mothers had a bachelor's degree, and 6.7% of mothers had a master's degree or above. Furthermore, 52.9% of mothers had jobs and 53.4% of mothers had girls. For monthly family income, 43.8% of families earned \$2000–4000 (2,000,000–4,000,000 KRW), 36.5% of families earned \$4000–6000 (4,000,000–6,000,000 KRW), 12.1% of families earned \$6000–8000 (6,000,000–8,000,000 KRW), and 6.8% of families earned \$8000 and above (above 8,000,000 KRW). For children's age, 60.8% of mothers had children who were between 2 and 4 years old, and 39.1% of mothers had children who were between 5 and 7 years old. The participating mothers were involved in middle class with regards to education and income level.

### 2.2. Measures

#### 2.2.1. Anxious and avoidant attachment

Mothers' anxious and avoidant attachment were measured using the Experience of Close Relationships-Revised (ECR-R) (Fraley, Waller, & Brennan, 2000). ECR-R consists of a total of 36 items that reflect attachment-related anxiety (18 items) and avoidance (18 items). The items of attachment-related anxiety reflect the fear of rejection and giving up (sample example, "I am afraid that I will lose my partner's love.") whereas those of attachment-related avoidance are involved in discomfort with intimate relationships (sample example, "I am nervous when partners get too close to me."). Mothers rated themselves from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) on the Likert scale. Higher scores on anxiety reflect a mother's higher levels of fear of rejection and abandonment and higher scores on avoidance reflect higher levels of discomfort of close relationships. Cronbach's  $\alpha$  of internal consistency of anxiety and avoidance in the present study was .91 and .93, respectively. The alphas in original study were .91, respectively (Fraley et al., 2000). These suggested that the ECR-R used in this study had high internal consistency.

#### 2.2.2. Marital satisfaction

Marital satisfaction was assessed by the Kansas Marital Satisfaction Scale-Revised (KMSS-R) (Chung, 2004). The KMSS-R is a self-report questionnaire that assesses marital satisfaction, which was revised so that it was appropriate to Korean culture. The KMSS-R consists of four questions: (a) how satisfied are you with your husband as a spouse?; (b) how satisfied are you with your

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