



Actor and partner effects of self-esteem on relationship satisfaction and the mediating role of secure attachment between the partners

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ABSTRACT

We examined actor and partner effects of self-esteem on relationship satisfaction, using the actor-partner interdependence model and data from five independent samples of couples. The results indicated that self-esteem predicted the individual's own relationship satisfaction (i.e., an actor effect) and the relationship satisfaction of his or her partner (i.e., a partner effect), controlling for the effect of the partner's self-esteem. Gender, age, and length of relationship did not moderate the effect sizes. Moreover, using one of the samples, we tested whether secure attachment to the current partner (assessed as low attachment-related anxiety and avoidance) mediated the effects. The results showed that attachment-related anxiety and avoidance independently mediated both the actor and the partner effect of self-esteem on relationship satisfaction.

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1. Introduction

Self-esteem may well be helpful in forming and maintaining a satisfying romantic relationship and marriage. Research suggests not only that self-esteem is correlated with satisfaction in relationships (e.g., Sciangula & Morry, 2009; Voss, Markiewicz, & Doyle, 1999), but also that self-esteem predicts increases in relationship satisfaction over time (Orth, Robins, & Widaman, 2012). However, relationships are of a dyadic nature and therefore an important question is whether a person's self-esteem contributes not only to his or her own relationship satisfaction, but also to his or her partner's satisfaction with the relationship. Surprisingly, only little is known about the partner effect of self-esteem on relationship satisfaction. The present study extends previous research by systematically examining whether a person's self-esteem predicts his or her own relationship satisfaction (i.e., whether self-esteem has an actor effect) and his or her partner's relationship satisfaction (i.e., whether self-esteem has a partner effect), using five independent samples of couples. In addition, the present study tests a possible mediating mechanism, namely whether secure romantic attachment between the partners mediates the actor and partner effects of self-esteem on relationship satisfaction.

2. Self-esteem and relationship satisfaction

Previous research suggests that self-esteem is positively related to relationship satisfaction (Fincham & Bradbury, 1993; Murray,

Holmes, & Griffin, 1996a, 1996b; Sciangula & Morry, 2009; Shackelford, 2001; Voss et al., 1999; but see Cramer, 2003). Moreover, in a longitudinal study with several waves of data across 12 years, self-esteem consistently predicted increases in relationship satisfaction, controlling for previous levels of relationship satisfaction; conversely, being in a satisfying relationship did not predict increases in self-esteem (Orth et al., 2012). Similarly, another longitudinal study found that self-esteem was related to later relationship satisfaction in both men and women, whereas relationship satisfaction was related to later self-esteem only in men (Fincham & Bradbury, 1993). Thus, the available findings suggest that self-esteem might have a positive influence on the development of satisfaction in marriage and close relationships.

Few studies however have examined whether the individual's self-esteem affects the relationship satisfaction of his or her relationship partner. Using a sample of young dating couples, Robinson and Cameron (2012) found significant actor and partner effects of self-esteem on relationship satisfaction and commitment. Murray et al. (1996b) also examined a sample of young adults, but found that only women's self-esteem but not men's self-esteem had a partner effect. Murray, Holmes, and Griffin (2000) later examined dating and married couples, reporting a small but significant partner effect. Finally, using a sample of dating couples from the college context, Jones and Cunningham (1996) did not find evidence of a partner effect. In sum, although few previous studies examined the partner effect of self-esteem on relationship satisfaction, the available evidence is inconsistent. Moreover, a limitation of previous research is that it does not provide information on the size of the actor and partner effects, either because no effect sizes are reported (Jones & Cunningham, 1996), no standardized effect sizes are reported (Robinson & Cameron, 2012), or because third

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variables are included in the analyses which may have biased the estimates of actor and partner effects (Murray et al., 1996b, 2000). Thus, the available evidence does not allow evaluation of the practical importance of actor and partner effects of self-esteem on relationship satisfaction. Another limitation of previous research is that nearly all of the studies examined samples of young adults involved mostly in dating relationships (the only exception being Murray et al., 2000). Therefore, in the present research we systematically test for actor and partner effects of self-esteem on relationship satisfaction using data from five independent studies. Importantly, the studies include different types of couples (i.e., married, cohabiting, and dating couples), couples with differing lengths of relationship (ranging from a few weeks to several decades), and participants from different life stages (ranging from late adolescence to old age). The analyses will be based on the actor-partner interdependence model (Kenny & Cook, 1999). The model allows testing for dyadic effects between partners (i.e., partner effects), while controlling for the effects of each individual's own score on the predictor variable (i.e., actor effects).

As yet, only one study tested for a possible mediating mechanism that might account for actor and partner effects of self-esteem on relationship satisfaction. In this study, Murray et al. (2000) hypothesized that individuals with low self-esteem may be prone to develop unrealistic doubts about their partner's regard, which in turn undermines relationship well-being. In contrast, high self-esteem may lead to positive perceptions of their partners' regard, strengthening relationship well-being. The results of Murray et al. (2000) supported the hypothesis that perceived regard mediates the relation between self-esteem and relationship satisfaction. However, given that the construct of perceived regard is conceptually and empirically strongly related to the construct of self-esteem, there is a need to test other mediational hypotheses.

3. The mediating role of secure attachment between the partners

One possible mediator of the link between self-esteem and relationship satisfaction is the romantic attachment between the relationship partners. Hazan and Shaver (1987) proposed that the concept of attachment, which was initially explored in the field of child development (Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980), can be adapted to the context of romantic relationships (see also Fraley & Shaver, 2000; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003). Hazan and Shaver (1987) found that attachment styles in adulthood are similar to the patterns that have been described with regard to early interactions in childhood (such as, e.g., secure, avoidant, and anxious attachment). Brennan, Clark, and Shaver (1998) proposed that individual differences in adult attachment can be reduced to two independent dimensions. The first dimension has been labeled attachment-related anxiety and is defined as the degree to which individuals worry about being rejected or abandoned and about whether their partner is available and responsive. The second dimension has been labeled attachment-related avoidance and is defined as the degree to which individuals feel uncomfortable with dependency, intimacy, and closeness to their partner. Being low on both dimensions is defined as secure attachment. As discussed below, theory suggests that secure attachment to the current relationship partner might provide for an explanation of actor and partner effects of self-esteem on relationship satisfaction. Therefore, in this research we test whether secure romantic attachment between partners mediates the dyadic effects of self-esteem on relationship satisfaction.

With regard to the link between self-esteem and adult attachment, research consistently suggests that self-esteem is related to being securely attached, i.e., having low scores on attachment-related anxiety and avoidance (Bringle & Bagby, 1992; Bylsma,

Cozzarelli, & Sumer, 1997; Collins & Read, 1990; Feeney & Noller, 1990; Foster, Kernis, & Goldman, 2007; Mickelson, Kessler, & Shaver, 1997; Srivastava & Beer, 2005). For example, in a large nationally representative sample, self-esteem predicted anxious and avoidant attachment at about medium effect size (Mickelson et al., 1997). Moreover, Foster et al. (2007) found that attachment-related anxiety and avoidance were negatively related to level of self-esteem even when the intraindividual stability of self-esteem was controlled for. However, no previous study has examined whether an individual's self-esteem predicts more secure attachment in his or her relationship partner. For example, it is possible that individuals with low self-esteem show specific negative behavior (e.g., reducing closeness and derogating their partner in conflict situations; Murray, Rose, Bellavia, Holmes, & Kusche, 2002) that increases attachment-related anxiety (e.g., worries about being abandoned) among their relationship partners. Or, to put it differently, it is possible that individuals with high self-esteem show more adaptive interpersonal behavior that fosters secure attachment in their partners.

With regard to the link between adult attachment and relationship satisfaction, a large body of research suggests that secure attachment is related to greater relationship satisfaction (for a review, see Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Moreover, the relation holds when third variables such as depression, negative life events, self-criticism, and dependency are controlled for (Lowyck, Luyten, Demyttenaere, & Corveleyn, 2008). Furthermore, the study by Shaver and Brennan (1992) suggested that adult attachment is a stronger predictor of relationship satisfaction than are the Big Five personality traits. Previous research also provides robust evidence for partner effects of adult attachment on relationship satisfaction (for a review of available studies, see Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Theory supports the notion that attachment security should have partner effects. For example, being securely attached positively influences relationship behavior such as providing support to the partner (e.g., Collins & Feeney, 2000; Simpson, Rholes, & Nelligan, 1992), which in turn likely increases the partner's satisfaction with the relationship. Moreover, attachment-related anxiety may lead to problematic interpersonal behavior such as excessive reassurance seeking (Shaver, Schachner, & Mikulincer, 2005), which in the long run may decrease the partner's satisfaction and commitment to the relationship (Starr & Davila, 2008).

4. The present research

Our first goal was to examine whether a person's self-esteem predicts his or her own relationship satisfaction (i.e., an actor effect) and his or her partner's relationship satisfaction (i.e., a partner effect). Moreover, we tested for moderating effects of gender, age, and length of relationship on the actor and partner effects of self-esteem on relationship satisfaction. For the analyses, we used data from five independent samples of married, cohabiting, and dating couples from the United States and Europe.

Our second goal was to test whether secure attachment to the current partner (operationalized as low attachment-related anxiety and avoidance) mediates the actor and partner effects of self-esteem on relationship satisfaction. On the basis of previous research (cf. Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007), we hypothesized that attachment-related anxiety and avoidance mediate the actor and partner effects of self-esteem because self-esteem is related to the individual's own attachment-related anxiety and avoidance, but we had no specific hypothesis with regard to the possible mediating pathway from the individual's self-esteem through the partner's attachment on the partner's relationship satisfaction. These analyses were based on one of the five samples because only one data set included measures of attachment.

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