



# Attachment orientations and dispositional gratitude: The mediating roles of perceived social support and self-esteem



Lijuan Zhang<sup>a</sup>, Shupeng Zhang<sup>a</sup>, Ying Yang<sup>b</sup>, Caina Li<sup>a,\*</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Shaanxi Provincial Key Laboratory of Behavior and Cognitive Neuroscience, School of Psychology, Shaanxi Normal University, Xi'an, Shaanxi Province, China

<sup>b</sup> School of Psychology, Australian Catholic University, 25A Barker Road, Strathfield, 2135, NSW, Australia

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## ABSTRACT

The present study seeks to examine the effect of attachment orientations on dispositional gratitude and whether it would be mediated by self-esteem and perceived social support. Nine-hundred-and-twenty-eight Chinese college students completed the Self-esteem Scale (SES), the Multidimensional Perceived Social Support Scale (MPSSS), the Experiences in Close Relationships Inventory (ECR), and the Gratitude Resentment and Appreciation Test (GRAT). It was revealed that both attachment avoidance and attachment anxiety were negatively associated with dispositional gratitude. Mediation analyses showed that attachment avoidance was indirectly related to dispositional gratitude through perceived social support and self-esteem, whereas attachment anxiety exerted effect on dispositional gratitude both directly and indirectly through self-esteem. These findings highlight the importance of attachment security for cultivating virtues such as dispositional gratitude and contribute to a more complete understanding of self- and other-representations.

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## 1. Introduction

Dispositional gratitude refers to 'a generalized tendency to recognize and respond with grateful emotions to the roles of other people's benevolence in the positive experiences and outcomes that one obtains' (McCullough, Emmons, & Tsang, 2002, p. 112; Watkins, Woodward, Stone, & Kolts, 2003). Gratitude, as an important relational virtue, is essential to one's relationship satisfaction (Lambert, Clark, Durtzsch, Fincham, & Graham, 2010), well-being (Snyder & McCullough, 2000; Wood, Froh, & Geraghty, 2010), and prosocial behaviors (Algoe, Gable, & Maisel, 2010). Despite the far-reaching consequences of gratitude on socioemotional functioning, it remains uncovered whether and how dispositional gratitude could be cultivated. Attachment theory postulates that attachment security, as a prevailing inner resource, constitutes positive cognitive representations for self, others and life events. It provides the foundation for personal growth and the development of personal virtues (Bowlby, 1982; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007b). Extending the broaden and build cycle of attachment security (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2009) to dispositional gratitude, little empirical research has yet examined whether attachment security could cultivate dispositional gratitude by fostering cognitive factors such as positive representations of self and others. To fill this void, the current study has investigated whether insecure attachment orientations would be associated with dispositional gratitude and how such linkage would

be mediated by self-esteem and perceived social support in a large sample of Chinese college students.

### 1.1. Attachment orientations and dispositional gratitude

As an inborn regulatory system, attachment behavioral system is biologically presumed to drive individuals to maintain proximity to attachment figures under threatening situations and to attain a relatively stable sense of security (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007a). However, when a sense of security could not be attained, individuals develop a set of secondary attachment strategies that disrupts normal proximity seeking (Mikulincer, Shaver, & Pereg, 2003). Attachment strategies could be conceptualized into two dimensions, namely attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance. Attachment avoidance is characterized by negative beliefs toward others and pursuit of independence and emotional distance, whereas attachment anxiety is defined by negative beliefs about self and worry about the unavailability and responsiveness of others in times of need (Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998).

Mikulincer and Shaver (2007b) further elaborate that attachment security could facilitate the broaden and build cycle involving a cascade of psychosocial processes that eventually lead to personal growth and the actualization of self-potential. Whereas, insecure attachment (high in attachment anxiety or avoidance) may preoccupy mental resources that otherwise are devoted to other behavioral systems, thereby hindering the development of core personality (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007b). Likely, empirical studies have shown that attachment (in) securities

\* Corresponding author.  
E-mail address: [chinali@snnu.edu.cn](mailto:chinali@snnu.edu.cn) (C. Li).

and personality are closely linked in adolescence and adulthood (Davila, Burge, & Hammen, 1997).

Extending the broad-and-build cycle to gratitude, it should go hand in hand with feeling valued, protected and accepted during positive interactions (Frei & Shaver, 2002). There has been preliminary evidence establishing the link from attachment orientations to gratitude. For instance, an early study showed that attachment avoidance and anxiety negatively predicted dispositional gratitude (Dwiwardani et al., 2014; Mikulincer, Shaver, & Slav, 2006). However, it still deserves more discussion particularly when we extend this to a new group who lives in a different culture.

### 1.2. Self-esteem and perceived social support as potential mechanisms

From an attachment perspective, repeated interactions with available and supportive others, along with a sense of attachment security, constitute a major source of cognitive representation of self and others, which in turn serve as a reservoir of cognitive appraisals for diverse life events and eventually foster the development of positive personality (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2005, 2007b). Positive sense of self-worth is a basic element of self-representation which is accompanied by self-efficacy (Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994), self-confidence and self-esteem (Arbona & Power, 2003; Hart, Shaver, & Goldenberg, 2005; Kenny & Sirin, 2006); the central characteristics of other-representation is indicated by the belief that how others are generally supportive and available (Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994). It is also tightly associated with interpersonal trust and perceived social support (Collins & Feeney, 2004; Simmons, Gooty, Nelson, & Little, 2009). To our knowledge, underlying mechanism between attachment orientations and dispositional gratitude through self-esteem and perceived social support has not been explored.

Self-esteem refers to one's general sense of his or her value or worth (Rosenberg, 1965) which has long been argued as an excellent indicator of self-representation (Doyle, Brendgen, Markiewicz, & Kamkar, 2003; Kamkar, Doyle, & Markiewicz, 2012). Prior research have confirmed that individuals with lower self-esteem tend to build a negative rather than a positive model of self (Cozzarelli, Sumer, & Major, 1998; Roberts, Gotlib, & Kassel, 1996; Wei & Ku, 2007), doubt about being lovable, competent and others' goodwill (Feeney & Noller, 1990; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2010), and be overly contingent on others' approval and erect distorting defenses to counter feelings of worthlessness and hopelessness (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007a; Mikulincer et al., 2006). Basing self-esteem on having power over others may lead to bullying, whereas basing self-esteem on virtue should lead to more prosocial behavior (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001). Individuals with high self-esteem in general have better relationships (Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, & Vohs, 2003), invest additional effort toward benefiting others to enhance their self-concepts (Grant & Wrzesniewski, 2010; Murray & Hazelwood, 2011), and strengthen their perceptions of reciprocity and their confidence that their efforts will be repaid (McCullough, Kilpatrick, Emmons, & Larson, 2001).

Perceived social support has been identified by attachment researchers as important indicator for other-representation, in which attachment security is primarily attained when attachment others are responsive in times of need (Bretherton & Munholland, 1999; Waters & Rodrigues-Doolabh, 2001). Echoing this analysis, a study on gratitude show that grateful persons could appreciate simple pleasures, because they feel secure and notice others' support easily (Fredrickson, 2004; Watkins et al., 2003). The cognitive-emotion theory of gratitude illuminate that the perceived intentionality of others' kindness is the strongest predictor for the feeling of gratitude after receiving the benefit (Heider, 1958). However, insecurely attached individuals, whether anxious or avoidant or both, exist biased perceptions of social support. They are less likely to perceive and remember the available support (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007b) and are less satisfied with the support they received (Blain, Thompson, & Whiffen, 1993; Collins & Feeney,

2004; Davis, Morris, & Kraus, 1998; Volling, Notaro, & Larsen, 1998), then fail to react to a partner's behavior with gratitude (Weiner, 1985).

### 1.3. The present study

As reviewed, there has been preliminary work for the broad-and-build cycle of attachment security for the development of virtues; yet, further work is still needed. First, gratitude is universal and important across different cultures (Cao, 2012; McCullough et al., 2001), but studies on attachment orientations and dispositional gratitude are entirely conducted in Western societies. Consequently, the current study provides a unique window to understand gratitude and its development by exploring whether attachment security may contribute to dispositional gratitude among Chinese. Second, existing literatures mainly focus on the psychosocial implications of gratitude, but little efforts have been devoted to explore whether and how such a virtue could be developed. To investigate this question, the present study tested the mediation effect of self-esteem and perceived social support on the relationship between attachment orientations and dispositional gratitude among Chinese college students. Taken as a whole, we proposed the following hypotheses: (1) Attachment anxiety and avoidance would be associated with lower dispositional gratitude. (2) Self-esteem and perceived social support would mediate the link between attachment orientations and dispositional gratitude.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

We recruited 928 undergraduate students (701 males and 227 females, aged 17–24 years,  $M_{age} = 20.19$ ,  $SD = 1.29$ ) from three universities in Xi'an, China. Of them, 45.2% were the only child in their family. Nearly half of the participants (45.0%) had been involved in or been experienced the romantic relationship for an average of 6.49 months. Participants were given gifts for participation.

### 2.2. Measures

#### 2.2.1. Attachment orientations

Adult attachment orientations were measured by the Experiences in Close Relationships Inventory (ECR) (Brennan et al., 1998). The Chinese version of the ECR has been demonstrated to be a reliable and valid measurement in assessing attachment orientations of Chinese (Li & Kato, 2006). The ECR consisted of 36 items scored on a 7-point scale (1 = *disagree strongly*, 7 = *agree strongly*). Attachment anxiety subscale contained 18 items assessing the degree to which individuals worried about losing a relationship. Attachment avoidance subscale contained 18 items, which measured the extent to which individuals attempted to maintain independence from a partner. In this study, reliabilities of two subscales were high ( $\alpha = 0.84$  for the attachment anxiety scale, and  $\alpha = 0.80$  for the attachment avoidance scale). The construct validity of measure was acceptable ( $\chi^2(555) = 2319.19$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ;  $RMSEA = 0.068$ ;  $SRMR = 0.048$ ;  $CFI = 0.92$ ; and  $TLI = 0.90$ ).

#### 2.2.2. Gratitude

The dispositional gratitude was assessed by the Chinese version of Gratitude Resentment and Appreciation Test (GRAT). The original version of GRAT included 44 items measuring the predisposition to experience the sense of abundance (e.g., "Life has been good to me."), simple pleasures (e.g., "Often I am just amazed at how beautiful the sunsets are"), and the contribution of others (e.g., "I am really thankful to friends and family.") to their lives (Watkins et al., 2003). After revising items that obviously were not applicable to Chinese cultural background and deleting those with low factor loading ( $< 0.40$ ) in exploratory factor analysis, the final version consisted of 34 items with satisfactory internal reliability and structural validity (Sun, Wang, & Han, 2010).

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