



The relationship between attachment style and self-concept clarity: The mediation effect of self-esteem

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ABSTRACT

The mediation effect of self-esteem on the relationship between attachment style and self-concept clarity was investigated. In Study 1, the relationship between attachment style and self-concept clarity was examined by correlation and regression analysis. Results from 189 and 85 students at National Taiwan University (NTU) showed that anxiety and avoidance attachment tendencies were negatively related with self-certainty and self-concept clarity. In Study 2, self-esteem was included to determine whether the negative relation between attachment tendency and self-concept clarity was mediated by self-esteem. Participants were 123 NTU students. The mediation effect of self-esteem on the relationship between attachment tendency and self-concept clarity was supported in a path model, indicating people with secure attachment have higher self-esteem, which results in greater clarity of self-concept.

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1. Introduction

Attachment theory, proposed by Bowlby (1969), has become a framework for understanding an individual's model of self. People with different attachment styles have different self-views. A well-documented aspect is self-esteem. Previous studies have indicated that an insecure attachment style is associated with lower self-esteem (e.g., Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Brennan & Bosson, 1998; Brennan & Morris, 1997; Collins & Read, 1990; Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994; Park, Crocker, & Mickelson, 2004; Roberts, Gotlib, & Kassel, 1996), supporting the argument that an insecure person tends to feel worthless or of little value.

In addition to self-esteem, attachment style also plays an important role in the knowledge component of self-concept. Several studies have indicated that people with different attachment styles also differ in self-perception accuracy (e.g., Berger, 2001; Dozier & Lee, 1995; Kobak & Sceery, 1988). These studies investigated the relationship between attachment and self-perception accuracy by examining discrepancies between self- and other-report of participants' characteristics for different attachment groups. Kobak and Sceery (1988) found that self- and peer-reports of social competence and distress lacked congruence among avoidance (dismissing) persons, which suggests that avoidance attachment may be related to distorted self-perception characterized by less acknowledgment of or even denial of distress (Berger, 2001). In addition, Dozier and Lee (1995) found that persons with either avoidant or ambivalent attachment distort their self-con-

cept. However, the type of distortion is not the same. Avoidant persons tend to deny their feelings of distress, while ambivalent persons tend to amplify their feelings of distress. Similarly, Berger (2001) indicated that a person with insecure attachment is more likely to have a greater discrepancy between self- and other-reports of psychosocial symptoms than a securely attached person suggesting that insecure attachment corresponds to a distortion in self-perception. Additional evidence comes from a study which investigated the relationships between attachment style and self-concept in cyberspace. Wu and Lin (2005) found that persons with secure attachment had a higher score on certainty of cyber self-concept than both avoidant and ambivalent attachment persons, implying that persons with different attachment styles tend to exhibit characteristics of self-concept clarity in cyberspace similar to in real life. Although the studies demonstrated differences in self-concept clarity among attachment styles, they did not investigate why different types of attachment are related to different levels of self-concept clarity. The main purpose of this study is to provide a theoretical explanation of this phenomenon by examining the role of self-esteem in attachment theory.

According to attachment theory, secure individuals have higher self-esteem than insecure individuals because of their earlier social interaction experiences. For instance, in secure attachment, caregivers always give feedback in an effective way at the proper time, which allows children to develop feelings of trust and dependence on their caregivers. In addition, they develop a positive self-concept through the stable and predictable feedback from their caregivers, and consider themselves to be lovable, resulting in higher self-esteem. In contrast, children with insecure attachment receive little or at best unstable feedback from their caregivers. With this

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unsupportive or unstable situation, these children develop a model of other people as untrustworthy and unpredictable and think of themselves as unlovable, resulting in lower self-esteem. In other words, attachment theory posits a process which is consistent with the sociometer hypothesis (Leary, Tambor, Terdal, & Downs, 1995) that being liked by others led to more positive self-evaluations. The sociometer hypothesis has been supported in various studies (e.g., Leary, Haupt, Strausser, & Chokel, 1998; Leary et al., 1995; Nezlek, Kowalski, Leary, Blevins, & Holgate, 1997; Srivastava & Beer, 2005) and Srivastava and Beer (2005) especially indicated that anxiety attachment potentiates the sociometer process by showing that the effect of others' liking on self-evaluations was stronger for those individuals who were more anxiously attached.

The difference in self-esteem results in a different basis for forming self-concepts. The existing literature indicates that the level of self-esteem has a positive relation with self-concept clarity. Baumgardner (1990) and Campbell (1990) reported that people with low self-esteem seem to know less about themselves than people with high self-esteem. Campbell and Lavalley (1993) indicated that low-esteem people exhibit less extremity in self-descriptions, lower confidence on self-descriptive tasks, less stability of self-schema, and less internal consistency of self-belief than high self-esteem people. In terms of behavior, since low self-esteem people tend to be less sure of themselves, they are more susceptible to external self-relevant cues, and more behaviorally plastic than high self-esteem people (Brockner, Wiesenfeld, & Raskas, 1993; Campbell & Lavalley, 1993). Although the causal direction between self-esteem and self-concept clarity is unclear (e.g., Campbell, 1990; Campbell & Lavalley, 1993; Setterlund & Niedenthal, 1993), a longitudinal study by Nezlek and Plesko (2001) showed that daily events lead to changes in self-esteem, which in turn lead to changes in self-concept clarity, suggesting that the level of self-concept clarity is influenced by the level of self-esteem. In addition, past studies have usually regarded self-esteem as a personality trait and the level of self-concept clarity as a characteristic of high versus low self-esteem people. For example, Brockner (1984) reviewed the reactions-to-feedback literature and advanced the concept of plasticity for low self-esteem people. He indicated that low self-esteem people are more susceptible to the effects of self-relevant social cues than are high self-esteem people. Specifically, high self-esteem people tend to accept and be affected by external cues that are consistent with their self-concept, but low self-esteem people tend to be susceptible to a broad range of self-relevant stimuli, with the result that high and low self-esteem people differ in self-concept clarity (Campbell, 1990).

However, if we take a perspective from attachment theory, the role of self-esteem can be regarded as a characteristic of security that results from attachment experiences. As stated previously, a secure attachment relationship leads to a positive self-view because of the stable and reliable external social environment. Accordingly, the difference between high and low self-esteem in self-concept clarity is not due to the trait of high versus low self-esteem, but due to the underlying psychological sense of security inherent in an individual's attachment style. For example, secure attachment persons usually get feedback in an effective way and at the proper time from their caregivers. This stable and reliable environment leads them to consider themselves lovable and allows them to form a positive self-view. With this positive self-regard, they have more confidence in interacting with others, creating opportunities to gain others' feedback, and can build a clear self-concept out of the feedback received in their positive stable environment. In contrast, insecure attachment people did not have those features in their social environment and thus lack the resulting self-characteristics. From this perspective, the relationship between self-esteem and self-concept clarity can be viewed as a function of the sense of security rather than as individual differences in self-esteem trait and self-esteem can be

viewed as a basis of self-concept clarity. Therefore, according to attachment theory and studies on self-esteem and self-concept clarity, it is expected that secure attachment persons would have higher self-concept clarity due to their higher self-esteem than insecure attachment persons.

Thus, this study aims to examine whether the mediation effect of self-esteem on the relationship between attachment style and self-concept clarity can be supported. Two studies were conducted. Study 1 examined the relationship between attachment style and self-concept clarity. In Study 2, self-esteem was included to examine whether the effect of attachment style on self-concept clarity would be mediated by self-esteem.

2. Study 1

This study examined the relationship between attachment style and self-concept clarity. Two measurements were used to operationally define self-concept clarity (in accordance with Baumgardner (1990) and Campbell's (1990) definition). The first measure was a self-certainty rating scale (Baumgardner, 1990; Campbell, 1990). Confidence in personality trait ratings indicates the level of self-certainty. The second measure was the self-concept clarity scale developed by Campbell et al. (1996). This scale measures perceived internal consistency and temporal stability of self-beliefs, along with more generic self-certainty items. The self-concept clarity scale is broader than the self-certainty rating scale in capturing the meaning of self-concept clarity. A two-dimension (anxiety and avoidance) attachment scale was used and correlation and regression analysis was conducted to see if there are significant negative relations between the two attachment styles and self-certainty/self-concept clarity.

2.1. Method

2.1.1. Participants

(1a) Participants in the first sample were 82 male and 107 female undergraduate students at National Taiwan University (NTU). Their ages ranged from 18 to 28 years ($M = 20.76$, $SD = 1.34$). They spent about 30 min filling out the adult attachment scale and self-certainty rating scale in exchange for extra credit in their introductory psychology course.

(1b) Participants in the second sample were 36 male and 49 female (one participant did not report his/her gender) undergraduate students at NTU. Age data were not included in this sample. They spent an average of 10 min completing the adult attachment scale and the self-concept clarity scale in exchange for extra credit in their social psychology course. Before participating in the study, participants did not take a course on adult attachment.

2.1.2. Instruments

2.1.2.1. *Adult attachment scale Taiwan version (AAS-TW)*. The adult attachment scale Taiwan version (AAS-TW) was revised from the adult attachment scale (AAS, Collins & Read, 1990) by Wu (2005) to measure participants' attachment style. The AAS-TW has 10 items. Participants scored each item using a five-point Likert scale ranging from not at all to very. There are two factors underlying the AAS-TW. The first factor is anxiety (four items), which measures the extent to which an individual is anxious or fearful about abandonment or being unloved. The second factor is avoidance (six items), which measures the extent to which an individual is uncomfortable with closeness and dependence on others emotionally close to them. In four different samples, the internal consistency (coefficient α) was ranged from 0.71 to 0.80 for the anxiety subscale and from 0.72 to 0.81 for the avoidance subscale (Wu, 2005). In Wu's (2005) study, results of exploratory and confirmatory factor

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