

**Attachment Styles, Quality of Attachment Relationships, and Components of
Self-Esteem in Adolescence**

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Attachment Styles, Quality of Attachment Relationships, and Components of Self-Esteem in Adolescence

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Abstract

Attachment style was assessed in relation to self-esteem and quality of parental and peer relationships in a sample (N = 495) of high school students. It was predicted that there would be a high degree of relationship between secure attachment, quality of relationships, and self-esteem, and that there would be differential relationships between the various attachment styles and components of self-esteem. Results indicated that both Secure and Dismissive attachment styles were associated with high quality of attachment to mother and father but only Secure attachment was associated with high quality of attachment to peers. Examination of the components of self-esteem revealed that the quality of relationships to peers predicted Self-Liking but not Self-Competence. The results suggest complexity in the relationship between different elements of attachment and self-esteem.

Introduction

In recent years the precepts of attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969/1997) have been applied to the examination of adult and adolescent relationships. The “continuity of attachment” hypothesis argues that attachment experiences in childhood influence later adolescent and adult relationships via cognitive “internal working models” or schema. Deficient attachment relationships with primary caregivers can result in insecure attachment patterns that become manifested as expectations that others are untrustworthy and unresponsive and that the self is unworthy and unlovable (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). Such negative beliefs are problematic for the development and maintenance of healthy interpersonal relationships, self-concept, and psychological wellbeing.

In research looking at individual differences in attachment representations, the major theoretical positions and their associated measurement technologies have focussed on categorical approaches resulting in a taxonomy of attachment ‘styles’. Ainsworth (Ainsworth, 1979) was the first to outline a scheme of attachment styles in infants. Hazan and Shaver (1987) then applied this scheme to romantic relationships in adults. Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991) presented an alternative model of adult attachment with four categories based on two dimensions: the model of “self” versus the model of “other”. A Secure attachment style is defined as a positive model of self and a positive model of other, a Preoccupied style is defined as a negative model of self

and a positive model of other, a Dismissing style is defined as a positive model of self and negative model of other, and a Fearful style is defined as a negative model of both self and other. Research with adult populations has consistently found that these styles are related to psychological adjustment and the quality of relationships with others (Feeney & Noller, 1996).

Research with adolescents, on the other hand, has focussed on the quality of attachment relationships rather than discrete attachment styles. This is in part due to an emphasis on the developmental perspective of adolescence that researchers have taken. One of the important developmental goals of adolescence is the expansion of the network of both peer and intimate relationships beyond the secure base formed by the immediate family of the individual. The continuity model of attachment predicts that stable and secure attachment relationships with primary caregivers, usually parents, will lead to stable and secure relationships with friends and peers. Further, a secure attachment style will lead to a greater degree of confidence and assurance in the self. According to this model, internal working models tend to generalise when they are applied to new attachment relationships. A positive attachment history and a secure attachment relationship with parents would predict more positive and secure relationships in an expanded relationships network.

There has been mixed evidence to date to support the role of self-reported adolescent attachment relationships in psychological adjustment. Armsden and Greenburg (1987) developed the Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment (IPPA) to assess the quality of adolescent attachment relationships and found that both peer and parental attachment were significant predictors of self-esteem and life-satisfaction. However, peer attachment appeared to more highly related to self-esteem than to life-satisfaction and parental attachment appeared to be equally related to these two outcome measures. Raja, McGee, and Stanton (1992), also using the IPPA, found that parental attachment was a more important predictor than peer attachment for indicators of psychological health.

Wilkinson and Walford (2001), in a study of over 400 Australian adolescents, found that, after controlling for parental attachment, peer attachment had no significant effect on psychological health outcomes. They suggested

that, given the positive findings from previous research, the role of peer attachment in psychological health may be indirect via its relationship with self-esteem/self-concept. Wilkinson (in press), in a series of replication studies, found that self-esteem fully mediated the relationship between peer attachment and psychological health and that the indirect influence of parental attachment on psychological health via self-esteem was more important than the direct effect.

Clearly, attachment processes, either defined as attachment styles or quality of attachment relationships, play an important role in the development and maintenance of self-esteem. However, previous research on these relationships has tended to have a simplistic view of self-esteem as a unitary concept when it may be better conceptualised as a multidimensional construct. A number of authors have argued that there are at least two components to self-esteem: self-liking and self-competence (Tafarodi & Milne, 2002; Tafarodi & Swann, 2001). Self-liking is analogous to our sense of worthiness which can be related to the attachment constructs of caregiver accessibility and responsiveness. Self-competence, on the other hand, is a personal appraisal of one's abilities and skills in relation to goal directed outcomes (Tafarodi & Swann, 2001), and can be related to the attachment theory notions of the "secure base" effect and secure exploration.

The Current Study

The main aim of this study is to investigate relationships between attachment styles, quality of attachment to parents and peers, and the components of self-esteem in adolescents. The continuity model would predict that there will be a high degree of relationship across attachment styles, quality of attachment, and self-esteem. Those who have a more secure attachment style will also have better quality of relationship with parents and peers and have a more positive view of the self. With respect to particular attachment styles it is predicted that both Secure (positive self, positive other) and Dismissing styles (positive self, negative other) will be associated with higher levels of self-esteem than Preoccupied (negative self, positive other) and Fearful (negative self, negative other) styles. Because both Secure and Dismissing attachment focus on a positive model of self, it is also predicted that they will be amongst the largest predictors of the self-evaluative aspect of self-esteem amongst the set of attachment style and quality of attachment relationship variables. On the other hand, because the self-competence aspect of self-esteem is less reliant on a positive view of the self, attachment styles defined by a positive model of self (Secure & Dismissing) will be similar in importance to other attachment constructs in terms of the prediction of self-competence.

Method

Participants

The participants consisted of 495 students attending secondary schools in the Australian Capital Territory and included 266 males (53.7%) and 229 females (46.3%), aged between 13 and 19 years ($M = 16.41$, $SD = .9$). The majority (64.6%) of adolescents reported living in a family with both parents. The majority of participants' parents were professionals, managers or administrative workers.

Procedure & Measures

Completed consent forms were collected from participants prior to them completing the questionnaire booklet which consisted of a number of self-report questionnaires. Questionnaires were completed in class and brief instructions were included in the booklet.

Attachment style was assessed using the Relationships Questionnaire (RQ) (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). Participants are asked to indicate the extent to which they identify with each of four relationship style descriptions by using a seven point scale, ranging from "not at all like me" (1) to "very much like me" (7) and to also indicate which style is "most like them".

Quality of attachment was assessed using a modified version of the 81-item IPPA (Armsden & Greenberg, 1987). Due to time constraints this self report inventory was adjusted to a 45-item measure with 15 items each separately assessing mother, father and peer attachment quality. Respondents rated each item using a five point scale ranging from "almost never or never" (1) to "always or almost always" (5) to indicate the degree to which the items were true. High scores indicate greater perceived attachment than low scores. The Peer scale asked respondents to think about their friends when completing the items. Internal consistency on the 15-item measure were similar to Armsden and Greenberg (1987) (Mother Attachment $\alpha = .91$; Father Attachment, $\alpha = .92$; Peer Attachment, $\alpha = .85$).

Self-esteem was measured using the 16-item Self-Liking/Self-Competence Scale – Revised (SLSC-R) (Tafarodi & Swann, 2001). This measure differentiates between self-esteem identified as the personal appraisal of oneself in relation to social values and worth (Self-Liking) and the value of qualities that reflect abilities and skills (Self-Competency). A five point rating scale was used to indicate the extent to which participants agreed with each item description (1 = "strongly disagree" to 5 = "strongly agree"). Internal consistency of both scales were high (Self-Liking $\alpha = .87$; Self-Competence $\alpha = .89$).

Results

Prior to the data analysis, accuracy of data entry and missing values were examined and data were screened for

normality. Assumptions underlying multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) and multiple regression analysis were tested in accordance with the procedures outlined by Tabachnick and Fidell (1996). There were no gross violations of normality identified.

Table 1: Means and Standard Deviations for Mother, Father and Peer Attachment and Self-Liking and Self-Competence by Attachment Style

Attachment Description	Mean	SD	n
Mother Attachment			
Secure	56.20	11.22	202
Fearful	49.68	13.22	100
Preoccupied	51.75	11.91	75
Dismissing	56.69	11.56	112
Father Attachment			
Secure	51.84	11.72	202
Fearful	45.41	13.41	100
Preoccupied	42.97	12.32	75
Dismissing	49.21	12.67	112
Peer Attachment			
Secure	57.15	8.88	202
Fearful	50.98	9.42	100
Preoccupied	52.92	9.24	75
Dismissing	50.37	10.44	112
Self-Liking			
Secure	28.06	5.89	202
Fearful	23.80	6.42	100
Preoccupied	23.37	6.26	75
Dismissing	28.06	6.00	112
Self-Competence			
Secure	26.59	5.12	202
Fearful	23.84	5.03	100
Preoccupied	23.36	4.89	75
Dismissing	26.75	5.77	112

Attachment Styles

A MANOVA was performed on the data with Attachment Style as the independent variable and Mother, Father, and Peer Attachment, Self-Liking and Self-Competence as the dependent variables. A significant main effect was found for Attachment Style (Pillai's Trace = 0.25, $F(15, 1449) = 8.765$, $p < .001$). Univariate F 's were examined and significant main effects were obtained for Attachment Style on Mother Attachment $F(3,485) = 9.50$, $p < .001$, Father Attachment $F(3,485) = 12.06$, $p < .001$, Peer Attachment $F(3,485) = 16.64$, $p < .001$, Self-Liking $F(3,485) = 20.06$, $p < .001$, and Self-Competence $F(3,485) = 12.60$, $p < .001$. Table 1 illustrates the means and standard deviations for all dependent variables. Bonferroni post-hoc tests were performed on the data to determine which attachment styles were significantly different from each other for attachment quality, and for Self-Liking and Self-Competence. These results are presented in Table 2.

Overall, and as can be seen from Tables 1 and 2, those with a Secure attachment style reported a higher quality of relationship with parents and peers than those classified with the other attachment styles. The Dismissing attachment style also reported a similar level of Mother Attachment as the Secure attachment style. However, they reported lower quality of attachment with fathers and peers. It also appears that it is in the Dismissing style that quality of Peer Attachment is particularly poor when compared with Secure attachment and it is similar in level to the other insecure styles.

With regard to the self-esteem dimensions, both Secure and Dismissing attachment styles report similar levels of both Self-Liking and Self-Competence. Both Preoccupied and Fearful attachment styles reported similar low levels of Self-Liking and Self-Competence when compared to Secure and Dismissing styles.

Prediction of Self-Esteem

The correlations between Mother and Father Attachment, $r = .266$, $p < .01$, Mother and Peer Attachment, $r = .248$, $p < .01$, and Father and Peer Attachment, $r = .186$, $p < .01$, are all lower than expected. Self-liking and Self-Competence were moderately correlated. $r = .667$, $p < .001$, and this relationship is comparable to the findings of Tafarodi and Swann (2001). Self-Liking and Self-Competence showed relatively low correlations with all variables and essentially no correlation with Peer Attachment.

A simple regression analysis with Self-Liking as the dependent variable showed that Sex, Secure, Fearful, Preoccupied and Dismissing attachment styles and Mother, Father and Peer Attachment accounted for 36% of the variance in Self-Liking, $F(8,485) = 33.91$, $p < .001$. As can be seen in Table 3, the strongest predictor of Self-Liking was Sex followed by Secure, Dismissive, Fearful and Preoccupied attachment style, then Mother Attachment, and Peer Attachment. Father Attachment was not a significant predictor of Self-Liking. Being male, reporting more secure and Dismissing attachment style attributes, less fearful and preoccupied style attributes, and good relationships with mothers and friends were thus associated with an increased liking of the self. In the context of this variable set, Father Attachment did not predict self-esteem.

A simple regression with Self-Competence as the dependant variable showed that Sex, Secure, Fearful, Preoccupied and Dismissing attachment styles and Mother, Father and Peer Attachment accounted for 23% of the variance in Self-Competence $F(8,485) = 17.940$, $p < .001$. As can be seen in Table 4, the strongest predictor of Self-Competence was Sex, followed by Preoccupied, Secure and Fearful attachment styles, then Mother Attachment and Dismissing Attachment. Father and Peer Attachment were not significant predictors of Self-Competence. Similar to the case for Self-Liking, being

male, reporting more secure and Dismissing attachment style attributes, less fearful and preoccupied style attributes, and a good relationship with mothers were all predictors of increased self-reports of Self-Competence. However, in this case neither the quality of the relationship with fathers nor friends appear to predict ratings of self-esteem with respect to competence.

Discussion

The results of this study only partially support the predictions based on the continuity model of attachment and the multidimensional description of self-esteem. There was a relative lack of correspondence between the quality of attachment measures and relatively low correlations with the self-esteem dimensions. Participants who categorised themselves as having a dismissing attachment style, which is considered to be an insecure attachment pattern, reported similar quality of attachment to mothers and father as those who categorised themselves as having a secure attachment style. When considering the combined influences of the attachment style and attachment quality variables on self-esteem, only a modest proportion of the variance was accounted for.

The weak pattern of inter-correlations between mother, father, and peer attachment is not consistent with the view that the perceptions of these relationships are patterned on a powerful cognitive model based on prior relationship experiences. Those adolescents, for example, who have a high quality of attachment with their mother do not necessarily have high quality relationships with either their fathers or friends. It may be the case that previous attachment experiences may be only one of many factors that impinge on relationship satisfaction, and its influence may be less than many researchers would expect (Meeus, Osterwegel, & Vollebergh, 2002).

The results of this study, with regard to the dismissing style, indicate some question on the extent to which it should be considered an insecure attachment style. Dismissing participants reported similar levels of quality of attachment to mothers and fathers as Secure participants. Similarly, and consistent with Bartholomew and Horowitz's (1991) conceptualisation of the "positive self" component of the dismissing style, higher self-

Table 3: Multiple Regression of Self-Liking on the Predictor Variables

Predictor	Beta	<i>t</i>
Sex	.535	8.166**
Secure Attachment Style	.273	6.816**
Fearful Attachment Style	-.157	-3.921**
Preoccupied Attachment Style	-.146	-3.742**
Dismissing Attachment Style	.163	4.211**
Mother Attachment Quality	.145	3.676**
Father Attachment Quality	.046	1.159
Peer Attachment Quality	.099	2.137*

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .001$

Table 4: Multiple Regression of Self-Competence on the Predictor Variables

Predictor	Beta	<i>t</i>
Sex	.224	4.720**
Secure Attachment Style	.151	3.432**
Fearful Attachment Style	-.151	-3.434**
Preoccupied Attachment Style	-.178	-4.132**
Dismissing Attachment Style	.125	2.954**
Mother Attachment Quality	.150	3.476**
Father Attachment Quality	.057	1.300
Peer Attachment Quality	.000	-.008

** $p < .001$

ratings of dismissing attachment were associated with increased levels of self-esteem. On the other hand, a dismissing attachment style was associated with lower quality of peer attachment and was similar to both preoccupied and fearful styles in this respect. Overall, these results provide support for the view that a simple secure versus insecure conceptualisation of attachment should be avoided. There is clearly a level of complexity in how these styles relate to different domains of relationships that warrant further theoretical and empirical exploration.

A number of issues emerge from the results with regard to the multivariate relationship of the attachment constructs to the self-esteem dimensions of self-liking and self-competence. Firstly, sex is a far better predictor of self-esteem in adolescence than any of the relationship variables examined here. Secondly, and consistent with

Table 2: Mean Differences for Attachment Quality by Attachment Style Comparisons

Attachment Style	Attachment Style Comparison	Mother Attachment	Father Attachment	Peer Attachment	Self-Liking	Self-Competence
Secure	Fearful	6.52***	6.43***	6.17***	4.26***	2.75***
	Preoccupied	4.46*	8.87***	4.23**	4.69***	3.23***
	Dismissing	-.048	2.63	6.78***	0.00	-0.16
Dismissing	Fearful				4.26***	2.91**
	Preoccupied				4.69***	3.39***

n = 489; *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

our predictions, both secure and dismissing attachment style ratings were the most important predictors of self-liking. This supports the view that a positive model of self is particularly important for this aspect of self-esteem. With regard to self-competence, and consistent with the view that a positive model of self should be less important with respect to this aspect of self-esteem, the weightings for both Secure and Dismissing were smaller in magnitude in the regression equation. Thirdly, the results indicate that peer attachment is implicated in self-liking but not in self-competence. Findings with regard to the role of peer attachment in psychological outcomes have been inconsistent in the literature to date (Wilkinson & Walford, 2001). However, by examining the components of self-esteem in relation to attachment, some of this inconsistency may be resolved.

The fact that differential weightings were found for the relationship variables when predicting self-liking and self-competence, combined with the moderate correlation between them, lends support to Tafarodi and Swann's (2001) view that these are distinguishable components of self-esteem. The results also support the view that self-liking is linked to the working models of self (Bowlby, 1969/1997) while self-competence, as an appraisal of skills and abilities, is more related to external expectancies. However, the implications for these findings, in relation to other psychological outcomes, will need further exploration.

A number of potential limitations of this study and further avenues for research in this area need to be addressed. While the self-report measures employed in this study are well validated and have been used previously in different contexts, neither the RQ nor the SLSC-R were devised specifically for use in adolescent populations. While this did not appear to create any problems here, future research should develop versions of these instruments for use in adolescent populations. Further, the single-item nature of the RQ is not ideal and alternative measures of the four attachment style model should be investigated. Finally, this study did not examine potential interactions between sex and quality of attachment relationships. Various theoretical positions (Bowlby, 1969/1997; Meeus, et al., 2002) suggest possible interactions between gender of child and gender of parent in terms of attachment and psychological health outcomes and these should be explored in future research.

In conclusion, this study has demonstrated that it is useful to consider multidimensional aspects of self-esteem when examining the role that attachment relationships and styles play in adaptive functioning during adolescence. The results also highlight the importance of attending to intra-individual differences in attachment relationships with key attachment figures rather than relying on "global" measures of attachment quality or style. The poor inter-correlations between the quality of attachment measures for mothers, fathers, and peers, as well as the

complex relationships between these measures and attachment styles indicate that simplistic applications of attachment theory formulations will not enhance our understanding of the interpersonal world of the adolescent.

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