

The Effects of Childhood Attachment, Self-Esteem, and Personality on Loneliness among University Students^{*}

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The purpose of this study was to investigate the effects of childhood attachment to parents on loneliness among university students, with particular regard to self-esteem and personality as mediating variables. 200 students were selected for the questionnaire study in a university in Busan. There were significant correlations among attachment, self-esteem, and personality with state and trait loneliness. Anxious attachment to one's mother was a significant predictor of state loneliness, while avoidant attachment to one's father was a significant predictor of trait loneliness. The hierarchical multiple analyses revealed only partial support for the hypothesis that the three attachment styles have a direct link with loneliness mediated by self-esteem and personality. The results and limitations of this study are also discussed, from the perspective of attachment theory and previous studies.

Key words : Childhood attachment, self-esteem, personality, loneliness, university students

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I. Introduction

One of the basic tenets of attachment theory suggests that early attachment relationships with primary caregivers influence the quality of children's future relationships. An individual's initial attachment is established early in development with her/ his parent(s). This relationship provides the cognitive framework that informs how an individual will perceive and interact with his/her world beyond early childhood (Bowby, 1969; Collins & Read, 1994). When these attachment representations, or working models, are formed in a loving, supportive environment, a child will have a secure base from which to explore and master his/ her environment. In secure attachment these models reflect relationships with caregivers in which warmth and respect for autonomy are prevalent and include flexible emotion regulation capacities as well as a sense of thrust in the self and caregivers (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2002). Secure people tend to form intimate and close relationships with others and within social groups, and are therefore less lonely than others. Several insecure attachment styles have been described. Anxious attachment, formed in the context of unpredictable availability of the caregivers, involves a negative self-concept, anxiety, low efficacy, and distrust of others. Hyper-activating and anxious displays of emotion

are used to convince to stay close and available. The negative lenses through which these individuals interpret relationships were posited as leading to feelings of loneliness. Avoidant attachment emanate from feeling unloved and rejected by caregivers, excessive self-reliance as a means to counteract this negative experience, deactivating emotions and their display, as well as playing down the importance of close relationships, characterizes these individuals (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2002). These qualities may lead to loneliness because of the low intimacy in the close relationships of these individuals. When a general secure- insecure dimension was used in research on loneliness, secure attachment was associated, as expected, with lower levels of loneliness (Ditommaso, Brannen-McNulty, Ross, & Burgess, 2003; Larose, Guay, & Boivin, 2002). Findings of the specific insecure styles showed (Shaver & Hazan, 1987) that using the three-style measure of attachment (Hazan & Shaver, 1987), secure freshmen were the least lonely. Early in the first semester, avoidant students were the loneliest, but late in the first semester the ambivalent respondents were the loneliest. Using the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI) to assess attachment representations, preoccupied students were the loneliest in one study (Larose & Benier, 2001), yet in another study dismissing students were the loneliest (Kobak & Sceery, 1988). Overall,

secure attachment seems to be consistently associated with lower levels of loneliness, and anxious and avoidant styles, both characterized by a negative self-model, are associated with higher levels of loneliness (Jeon, Lee, 2000; Jeon, 2005).

The positive frame of reference provides a sense of self-efficacy, thereby facilitating an adolescents' successful transition to adulthood (Rice, FitzGerald, Whaley, & Gibbs, 1995). Transition from late adolescence to adulthood is often approached from the individuation perspective, which contends that this period is characterized by a process of separating from primary dependence on parents to reliance of self. Attachment theory, along with corroborating research, posits that working models will have an effect on the individuation process (e.g. Armsden & Greenberg, 1987; Berman & Sperling, 1991; Heiss, Berman, & Sperling, 1996; Kenny, 1987; Kenny & Rice, 1995; Rice, 1990). Paradoxically, at the same time as adolescents are moving towards independence during transition to adulthood, this also appears to be a period of heightened reliance on attachment relationships (Kenny & Rice, 1995).

Investigators often use measures of psychosocial adjustment as indicators of the individuation process (see Kenny & Rice, 1995 for a review). A smooth transition is often evaluated in terms of the ease by which

adolescents adjust to adulthood. Although there are direct indices for the transition, adjustment is often measured using indirect measures of psychosocial functioning, such as loneliness (Kenny & Rice, 1995). Loneliness as a complex set of feeling and cognitions reflects the distressing and negative emotional experience emanating from the individual's perceived deficiencies in intimate and social relationships (Ernst & Cacioppo, 1999; Perlman, 1988; Rotenberg, 1999). A particularly high risk of loneliness was found during the transition to university when emerging adults are faced with the stress of living away from their family or of lacking their previous social support system. Although most freshmen reported feeling of some loneliness at the beginning of the transition to university, only about 20% still felt lonely throughout their first year of university. Students who remained lonely tended to be critical of the quality of the relationships they had formed (Shaver, Furman, & Buhrmester, 1985). Individuation theory holds that the transition process results in a competent, functioning adult. University provides challenges that may hasten this process, and as a result, provides researchers with an appropriate context for study (Kenny & Rice, 1995).

Loneliness is one component of psychosocial functioning that researchers have examined in relation to attachment (e.g., Shaver & Hazan,

1992). Attachment has been linked to self-esteem (Armsden & Greenberg, 1987; Richman, Flaherty, 1987; McCormick & Kennedy, 1994) and aspects of social competence including social support seeking (Blain, Thompson, & Whiffen, 1993; Cutrona, Cole, Colangelo, Assouline, & Russell, 1994), social adjustment and social self-efficacy (Rice, Cunningham, & Young, 1997), social desirability (Rice, Cole, & Lapsley, 1990), and dating competence (Kenny, 1987). Early attachment may provide the base from which subsequent social encounters are interpreted (Goldberg, 2000). Attachment style can be interpreted as a fundamental way by which people relate to the world and loneliness may be interpreted as an important manifestation of adjustment difficulty.

Most studies designed to examine the relationship between childhood attachment and later relationship have focused exclusively on attachment to mothers. Although mothers in contemporary society are still likely to serve as the primary caregivers during early childhood, as children approach middle-childhood, the influence of fathers on children's behaviour and development becomes more equivalent to that of mothers. For instance, research by Russell and Russell (1996) suggested that fathers were available to their children an average of 34.6 hours per week and fathers tended to initiate interaction with their 6- and 7-year-olds at a

rate comparable to mothers. The present study also involved an exploration of both effects of attachment to mother and attachment to father on the quality of psychosocial adjustment in young adulthood.

It was hypothesized that secure attachment style would be associated with less reported loneliness and higher self-esteem and positive personality dispositions. Insecure styles were hypothesized to be related to more loneliness, and lower self-esteem and negative personality dispositions. Furthermore, it was hypothesized that self-esteem and personality would play the mediational roles in the direct relationships between attachment and the experience of loneliness.

II. Methods

1. Subjects

Data were collected from 220 first year students (75% female) who were taking family or psychology related classes at a university in Busan, Korea. Respondents, ranging in age from 17 to 25 years ($M = 18.59$, $SD = 1.31$), completed a questionnaire at the end of their first semester at university. Excluding incompleting questionnaires, 200 subjects were used for final analysis.

2. Measures

Adult attachment style was assessed using the 5-item attachment style scales (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). For each item, respondents rated how well each phrase fit their characteristic relationship style, and selected one of the best fitting description. Response options ranged from 1 (*not at all like me*) to 5 (*very much like me*).

NYU Loneliness Scale (Rubenstein & Shaver, 1982) was used to assess loneliness. The scale is composed of 16 items for state loneliness and 20 items for trait loneliness. Respondents rated how they felt, on average, using a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*extremely*). Participants completed the scale under both state(i.e., during the last two weeks), and the trait(i.e., during the last 2-3 years) conditions. Higher scores indicated more state (16 items, Cronbach alpha .86) and trait loneliness (20 items, Cronbach alpha .89).

Self-Esteem was assessed by using Self-Esteem Questionnaire(Kim, 1987) which was combined and revised with the Self-esteem Inventory (Coopersmith, 1967) and Rosenberg's Self-esteem scale(1965). It is 30-item questionnaire (Cronbach alpha .95), using a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*extremely*).

Eysenck Personality Questionnaire - Korean version (EPQ - Korean: Eysenck & Lee, 1985) was used for assessing extroversion-introversion and

neuroticism. EPQ was consisted of 4 subscales such as psychoticism, neuroticism, extroversion-introversion, and lie (EPQ: Eysenck & Eysenck, 1975). Two subscales of EPQ such as Extroversion-introversion(E: 15items, Cronbach alpha .78) and neuroticism(N: 18items, Cronbach alpha .80) were used for assessing personality dispositions related to loneliness based on the results of previous studies(Goswick & Jones, 1981; Hojat, 1982; Strokes, 1985).

III. Results

Table 1 and 2 summarize the correlations between the various measures. Secure attachment to mother showed a tendency of negative relations with loneliness, however they were not significant. Higher scores on the anxious attachment to mother were significantly related to higher scores on only trait loneliness. Higher avoidant ratings with mother were related to greater feelings of both state and trait loneliness. Different to secure attachment to mother, secure attachment to father was significantly related to both state and trait loneliness. Higher scores on secure ratings with father were related to lower scores on both state and trait loneliness. Higher scores on anxious attachment to father were significantly related to higher scores on state and trait loneliness. Similarly, findings indicated

Table 1. Correlations between attachment and Psychological Factors (Self-esteem, Personality dispositions)

	Attachment Style					
	attachment to mother			attachment to father		
	Secure	Anxious	Avoidant	Secure	Anxious	Avoidant
loneliness						
State loneliness	-.065	.055	.181*	-.203*	.228**	.198*
Trait loneliness	-.051	.171*	.277**	-.236**	.223**	.282**
Self-Esteem	.387**	-.293**	-.316**	.294**	-.232**	-.284**
Personality dispositions						
Extroversion	.257**	-.119	-.143	.229**	-.101	-.192*
Neuroticism	-.227**	.277**	.247**	-.141	.267**	.175*

* $p < .05$ * $< .01$

Table 2. Correlations between loneliness and Psychological Factors (Self-esteem, Personality dispositions)

	Loneliness	
	State Loneliness	Trait Loneliness
Self-Esteem	-.281**	-.453**
Extroversion	-.260**	-.387**
Neuroticism	.292**	.263**

* $p < .05$ * $< .01$

avoidant attachment ratings with father were related to higher reported state and trait loneliness. Attachment to mother showed a weaker pattern of relationships than attachment to father.

Different patterns emerged for the relationships between attachment styles and self-esteem. Higher self-esteem scores were

significantly related to higher secure attachment scores for both mother and father. However, self-esteem was negatively related to insecure attachment (anxious and avoidant) with both mother and father. Table 1 also showed the relationships between attachment styles and psychological factors. Secure attachment to mother was significantly related to higher extro-introversion, while it was significantly related to lower neuroticism. Similarly secure attachment to father was positively associated with extroversion-introversion. Anxious attachment to mother showed a tendency of negative relationship with extroversion-introversion, but it is not significant. However anxious attachment to mother was significantly related to neuroticism. The same is true for anxious attachment to father. Higher avoidant

attachment scores with mother were significantly related to higher neuroticism, however it showed a tendency of negative relationship with extroversion - introversion, which was not significant. Avoidant attachment to father was negatively related to extroversion, while it was positively related to neuroticism of university students.

Table 2 showed the relationships between loneliness and psychological factors. Both State and trait loneliness were negatively associated with self-esteem. Higher levels of state and trait loneliness significantly correlated with lower extroversion, while lower levels of state and trait loneliness significantly correlated with lower neuroticism.

Hierarchical Multiple regression analyses

According to correlation analysis among independent variables, the coefficients were ranged from .12 to .50. Therefore, there is no doubt of multicollinearity. A series of hierarchical multiple regression analyses were performed to assess the contribution of attachment, self-esteem, and personality in the prediction of state and trait loneliness. The predictors were entered in three steps for each of the three analyses predicting state and trait loneliness: on step 1, three attachment scores for each mother and father were entered followed by self-esteem on step 2, and two personality scores on step 3.

For state loneliness, anxious attachment to father was found to be the only attachment style to make a significant contribution to its prediction. More anxious attachment to father was associated with more state loneliness. Attachments explained 12% of the variance in state loneliness. Lower self-esteem was associated with higher levels of state loneliness. Self-esteem explained 6% of the variance in state loneliness scores over attachment. More extroversion was associated with less state loneliness. Extroversion and neuroticism explained 5% of the variance in state loneliness over attachment and self-esteem. Finally results indicated that attachment and self esteem did not make the contributions to the prediction of state loneliness over personality. Extroversion was the best predictor of state loneliness. Results of these Regression analyses are presented in Table 3.

For trait loneliness, avoidant attachment to mother was found to be the only attachment style to make a significant contribution to its prediction. More avoidant attachment to mother was associated with more trait loneliness. Attachments explained 13% of the variance in trait loneliness. Lower self-esteem was associated with higher levels of trait loneliness. Self-esteem explained 11% of the variance in trait loneliness scores over attachment. More extroversion was associated with less trait loneliness. Extroversion and neuroticism explained 8% of the variance in

Table 3. Hierarchical Multiple regression analyses predicting state loneliness

	State Loneliness		
	Step 1	Step 2	Step3
Predictors	Beta	Beta	Beta
Attachment to Mother			
Secure	-.075	-.007	.050
Anxious	-.114	-.151	-.135
Avoidant	.116	.133	.133
Attachment to Father			
Secure	-.048	-.058	-.026
Anxious	.230**	.212*	.169
Avoidant	.089	.013	.012
Self-Esteem		-.253**	-.124
Personality dispositions			
Extroversion			-.214**
Neuroticism			.149
R-Square Changes after step	.118	.058	.051
Total Multiple R	.118	.176	.227

N= 200 * p < .05 * < .01

trait loneliness over attachment and self-esteem. Finally results indicated that extroversion was the best predictor of trait loneliness over attachment and self-esteem. Results of these Regression analyses are presented in Table 4.

The mediating effects of self-esteem and personality on attachment and loneliness

Finally, I regressed state and trait loneliness on both sets of predictors simultaneously, using a technique described by Baron and Kenny (1986). If, as hypothesized, self-esteem and personality mediate the link between attachment and loneliness, then the regression coefficient

observed at step 1 would be greatly reduced when self-esteem and personality were entered into the analyses(step 2 and 3). The results of these analyses revealed only partial support for the hypothesis that the three attachment styles would have their direct link with the loneliness mediated by self-esteem and personality. For state loneliness, only the anxious attachment to father displayed a mediational relationship with state loneliness. While the avoidant attachment to mother displayed a mediational relationship with trait loneliness. Both self-esteem and extroversion mediated the direct relation between anxious attachment to father and state loneliness.

Table 4. Hierarchical Multiple regression analyses predicting trait loneliness

	Trait Loneliness		
	Step 1	Step 2	Step3
Predictors	Beta	Beta	Beta
Attachment to Mother			
Secure	-.041	.086	.147
Anxious	-.023	-.072	-.034
Avoidant	.212*	.197*	.187*
Attachment to Father			
Secure	-.119	-.098	-.048
Anxious	.121	.089	.097
Avoidant	.074	-.005	-.022
Self-Esteem		-.375**	-.287**
Personality dispositions			
Extroversion			-.301**
Neuroticism			.062
R-Square Changes after step	.130	.112	.079
Total Multiple R	.130	.242	.321

N= 200 * p < .05 ** < .01

Similarly, they mediated the direct relation between avoidant attachment to mother and trait loneliness. Anxious attachment and state loneliness were mediated by self-esteem and extroversion. Avoidant attachment to mother and trait loneliness were mediated by self-esteem and extroversion. The regression coefficient for the anxious style with father and the avoidant style with mother decreased from .230 to .169 and from .212 to .187, respectively. These results supported the hypothesis that self-esteem and extroversion partially mediates the associations between attachment and loneliness.

IV. Discussion And Conclusion

The goal of the present study was to investigate the relation between childhood attachment to parents and loneliness, considering self-esteem, personality dispositions in young adulthood. Previous studies had evaluated both attachment and loneliness as one-dimensional, continuous constructs. Studies such as those conducted by Rice and colleagues (1990, 1995, 1997) have used a measure of parent and peer attachment that yields a security score. In addition, measuring both state and trait loneliness allowed a clearer picture to emerge in

relation to this indicator of psychosocial adjustment. The results lend support to the theoretical view of the relationship between attachment and psychological factors, although there was partial support for a mediational effect of self esteem and personality on the direct relation between attachment and loneliness.

Attachment and individuation are complex concepts. This study provides only a glimpse into this process. To function effectively with the demands of relationships and university life, an individual needs self-esteem and positive personality dispositions. Insecure individuals who have mixed feelings about themselves and others appear to lack of self-esteem, or have negative personality dispositions, which may hinder an adaptive transition to adulthood. Anxious attachment to father during childhood, who may have lower self-esteem and extroversion, may experience more state loneliness. The best predictor of state loneliness is extroversion, and attachment and self-esteem are no longer significant after personality dispositions were considered. Individuals who are more sociable and outgoing are less likely to feel lonely in situational changes. Similarly, avoidant attachment to mother during childhood, who may have lower self-esteem and extroversion may experience more trait loneliness. Individuals who had anxious and avoidant experiences with parents may encounter the higher levels of adjustment

difficulties, and display negative personality and loneliness.

The current study sheds light on some of the mechanisms by which attachment might affect the development of loneliness. Secure attachment might be related to low levels of loneliness through the individuals' high self-esteem and extroversion, whereas anxious and avoidant attachment may lead to loneliness through the individuals' low self-esteem and extroversion. The negative self view may affect the way these individuals interpret the company they keep leading to a negative interpretation of their actual levels of social contact.

This indirect approach has several limitations. First, attachment research using styles such as the assumption that security is a positive characteristic thus correlates positively with various indicators of psychological robustness. Conversely, insecure styles are viewed as negative attributes that are less than ideal, thus are negatively associated with measures of well-being. Second, the results of our correlational analyses indicated that several important relationships exist between attachment, self esteem, personality and loneliness. By using a university sample, the generalizability of these results is limited. There are many adolescents who enter the workforce straight from high school, or pursue other training. In addition, feelings of loneliness are only one aspect of psychosocial adjustment.

Further examination into a wider range of adjustment measures could expand and refine our understanding of factors that are appropriate indices of individuation ease. Finally, our self-esteem and personality model appears to be limited to social adjustment. A more comprehensive model that includes social support seeking and giving might have a greater impact on the direct link between attachment and psychosocial adjustment.

However, these results shed light on one of the most notable painful experiences of young adults: feeling lonely during the transition to university. It seems that cognitive-emotional schemas that emerging adults carry with them to this new context from early relationships with parents are responsible in part for their feeling lonely. Future research might elaborate on other contributing factors, such as concurrent support (Larose et al., 2002), or organizational climate of the college.

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아동기 부모와 애착, 자존감과 성격이 대학생의 외로움에 미치는 영향

전 효 정¹⁾

동아대학교 가정관리학과

본 연구는 생애전환시점에 있는 대학신입생들을 대상으로 아동기 부모와의 애착이 현재 외로움에 미치는 영향을 자존감과 성격특성을 고려하여 알아보고자 하였다. 200명의 대학신입생을 대상으로 설문조사한 결과에 의하면, 아동기 부모와 애착, 자존감과 성격특성은 일시적, 기질적 외로움과 유의한 상관관계가 나타났다. 어머니와 불안저항 애착은 일시적 외로움, 아버지와 회피형 애착은 기질적 외로움의 유의한 예측변인으로 나타났으며, 자존감과 외향성 성격특성은 일시적, 기질적 외로움의 유의한 예측변인이다. 위계적 회귀분석결과, 자존감과 성격특성이 분석에 투입됨으로서 아동기 애착의 유의성이 현저히 감소함으로 자존감과 외향성의 부분적 매개효과가 입증되었다. 연구결과 및 제한점이 애착이론 및 선행연구를 바탕으로 논의되었다.

주요어 : 아동기 부모와 애착, 자존감, 성격, 대학생, 외로움