The Effects of Attachment Style on Congruence Between Self-Other Perception

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Abstract

This study aims to examine the relation between attachment style and congruence between self-other perception. Previous research has focused on attachment styles in combination with a variety of subjects or self-other perceptions, but never attachment styles and self-other perception jointly. The researcher predicted that either securely attached individuals would have the strongest correlation between how they perceive themselves and how they are perceived by others or securely attached individuals would have the weakest correlation between how they perceive themselves and how they are perceived by others. To investigate these hypotheses, subjects were given a questionnaire with an attachment style survey and a version of the Big Five Inventory, the latter of which they were then directed to ask a friend to complete on their behalf. The data collected from seventeen subjects did not support the hypotheses. The relation between attachment style and congruence was not statistically significant. As both of these components directly influence relationship quality and, furthermore, happiness, this suggests the need for further research to examine the relation between attachment style and congruence between self-other perception.

Keywords: attachment style, congruence, self-other perception
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“Attachment traditionally has had a particular meaning as a specific aspect of the relationship that forms between infant and parent after birth which functions to make the infant, and later child, feel and be safe, secure and protected” (Redshaw & Martin, 2013). Much research on attachment styles has focused on the idea that early (child) attachment experiences influence later (adult) attachment styles, particularly in romantic relationships. Fraley (2010) states that the most popular measures of adult attachment style are Brennan, Clark, and Shaver's (1998) Experiences in Close Relationships (ECR) and Fraley, Waller, and Brennan's (2000) ECR-Revised questionnaire. These measures of adult attachment style are based on two fundamental dimensions: attachment-related anxiety and attachment-related avoidance. A high score on the former variable reflects the tendency to worry over one’s partner’s level of availability, responsiveness, attentiveness, etc., while a low score reflects more security in the perceived responsiveness of one’s partner. A high score on the latter variable reflects the preference not to rely on or open up to others, while a low score reflects more security in relying on others and vice versa, as well as more comfort with intimacy. Thus, there are four possible quadrants for an individual’s results to fall under: secure, preoccupied, dismissing, and fearful-avoidant. Secure individuals score low on both dimensions, while fearful-avoidant individuals score high on both dimensions; preoccupied individuals score low on avoidance and high on anxiety, while dismissing individuals score high on avoidance and low on anxiety.

In a study examining the association between (the same measure of) adult attachment styles and contingencies of self-worth, secure individuals were likely to base their self-worth on familial support; both preoccupied and dismissing individuals were likely to base their self-worth on physical attractiveness; and fearful-avoidant individuals were likely to base their self-worth on others’ approval,
familial support, and God’s love (Park, Crocker, & Mickelson, 2004). Securely attached individuals are the individuals most likely to build an extrafamilial system of support, which has shown to be a protetive factor against psychological issues (Korol, 2008). Fraley (2000) says, “previous research on attachment styles indicates that secure people tend to have relatively enduring and satisfying relationships. They are comfortable expressing their emotions, and tend not to suffer from depression and other psychological disorders.” If those with secure attachment styles tend to exhibit these qualities, such as “enduring and satisfying relationships,” it seems as though it would be likely that they have the strongest correlation between how they perceive themselves and how they are perceived by others. A consistency between self-perception and others’ perception would likely reduce opportunities for conflict which would be advantageous for relationship success.

On the other hand, but related to the idea of security with one’s self and security in relationships, Taylor and Brown (1988) conducted a study in which they explored research evidence that suggested “well-adjusted” people are well-adjusted, in part, because they have an overly rosy view of the world. According Taylor and Brown, the “well-adjusted” individual possesses a view of the self that includes an awareness and acceptance of both the positive and negative aspects of self. Although well-adjusted is not synonymous to secure, the term “secure” means one is dependable; firm; not liable to fail, yield, or become displaced; safe and without anxiety. As these two definitions illustrate, there are similarities between them; they both contain forms of stability and an unlikelihood of feeling displacement. Those with a more “balanced” self-perception actually tend to be individuals with low self-esteem and/or (moderate) depression. “Balanced” referring to the ability to: recall the same level of both positive and negative information of self; show a higher level of impartiality towards outcomes; show a higher correlation between self-evaluations and evaluations of others; praise themselves in a way that is more
likely to be similar to the way in which an objective observers might praise them. “In short, it appears to be not the well-adjusted individual but the individual who experiences subjective distress who is more likely to process self-relevant information in a relatively unbiased and balanced fashion.” (Taylor & Brown, 1988).

Other studies show that people have a tendency to maintain a self-enhancement bias in that they are more likely to rate themselves higher on qualities generally considered to be positive or associated with success, as opposed to qualities generally considered to be more negative or associated with failure. Moreover, in a study by Bem and Funder (1978) and analyzed by Funder and Dobroth (1987) where participants described their own personalities and whose personalities were also described by two close acquaintances, results indicate acquaintances’ ratings were higher on qualities generally considered less desirable. This tendency to maintain a self-enhancement bias appears to reflect personality characteristics most closely related to the secure attachment style. For example, secure individuals “cope with feelings of anger, jealousy, and sadness by behaving in ways that bolster their self-esteem”, whereas individuals of the other attachment styles do not appear to respond to negative feelings or conflict situations in such a self-supportive type of way (Guerrero, Anderson, & Afifi, 2013). If secure individuals are more likely to use self-enhancing strategies to protect their self-esteem, then they would presumably be engaging in the Taylor and Brown (1988) "overly rosy" inconsistency between self and other perceptions. Thus, it seems as though it would be likely that securely attached individuals have the weakest correlation between how they perceive themselves and how they are perceived by others.

This study consists of two hypotheses: first, securely attached individuals will have the strongest correlation between how they perceive themselves and how they are perceived by others (because their
relationship success depends on congruent self-other perception), and second, securely attached individuals will have the weakest correlation between how they perceive themselves and how they are perceived by others. Both hypotheses were tested by having participants complete an attachment style survey and judge the degree to which they possessed certain personality characteristics, then asking a friend to judge the degree to which he or she thought the participant possessed those same certain personality characteristics. “Self-other congruence in this context at least indicates how well two people agree about the target’s actual personality, and assessing judgmental agreement in this manner is the only procedure that takes the question of accuracy in personality judgment seriously” (Funder and Colvin, 1997).

Method

Participants

There were 17 participants in this study. The participants were not limited to Hanover College students; however, more than half of the participants attend Hanover, and of those participants, many are currently in introductory psychology courses, whose participation was part of a class incentive. Thus, this was a convenience sample. The participants ranged from 18 to 75 years of age and this study consisted of 88.24% females and 11.76% males. Additionally, the participants were 88.24% Caucasian/White, 5.88% White/Black, 5.88% Black, by self-report. No one had taken this survey before.

Materials

The principal material used in this study was a survey put together by the researcher that combined other questionnaires; it consisted of demographic questions, an assessment created by Fraley, Waller, and Brennan (2000), and an inventory created by UC Berkeley psychologist Oliver D. John.
Participants completed the assessment by Fraley, Waller, and Brennan (2000), which assessed their attachment styles on two scales: attachment-related anxiety and attachment-related avoidance. Each question regarding attachment style was assessed using a 7-point Likert scale, where 1 was “strongly disagree” and 7 was “strongly agree.” Participants completed a Big Five inventory created by John (2003) which assessed (what psychologists consider to be) the five fundamental dimensions of personality. To measure congruence of self-other perception, two questionnaire measures of personality were used: one completed by the subject and the other completed by the subject’s friend of choice. Each question regarding perception was assessed using a 5-point Likert scale, where 1 was “strongly disagree” and 5 was “strongly agree.” This study, in its entirety, looked at the relations among those questionnaires, and was designed to measure the effects of attachment style on congruence between self-other perception. There was only one questionnaire, as there was only one condition (see Appendix).

Procedure

Participants were recruited through facebook posts and contacted through email per request. Each participant agreed to an informed consent form prior to participating in the study. Participants completed the questionnaire on a computer, in a setting of their choosing. The questionnaire began with demographic questions. Following demographics, participants were asked questions from Fraley, Waller, and Brennan's (2000) survey concerning how they feel in emotionally intimate relationships (attachment style). Next, participants were asked questions from the Big Five Inventory concerning their perception about themselves in a variety of situations (self perception). Lastly, participants were asked to create a code, and email that code along with a link of the same version of the BFI to a friend of their choosing, to have their friend rate them (others’ perception). This was to compare people's
judgments of their own personality characteristics to the judgments of friends about the same person's personality characteristics. The subjects were debriefed after completing the questionnaire. The total time required of the participants for this study was about 15 minutes.

**Results**

To test whether there was a relation between attachment style on congruence between self-other perception, I began by measuring the congruence between each individual’s self-assessment and his/her friend’s assessment. Congruence was measured by correlation; therefore, each individual received a score that represented the correlation between Self and Other perception. Take Table 1 for example:

Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Self-Other Perception</th>
<th>Self</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>..Is helpful and unselfish with others</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>...Is curious about many different things</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>...Is a reliable worker</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The larger the discrepancy between Self and Other scores, the lower the correlation, which indicates that this friend did not know the subject very well, or the subject did know him/her-self very well. Conversely, if the Other column was 4, 6, 4, the discrepancy between the two would be minimal and correlation would be high, indicating high congruence. The resulting correlations between self-other perception ranged from 0.071 to 0.737, with an average of 0.488. The second step, in order to test whether there was a relation between attachment style on congruence between self-other perception, was comparing each of the resulting correlation coefficients to each individual’s attachment style. This
was done by separating the two dimensions that are used in measuring attachment style, as each individual received two scores (one score for level of avoidance and one score for level of anxiety), and graphing the correlation coefficient among each dimension. The dimension of attachment style was the independent variable and the correlation between self-other perception was the dependent variable. For anxiety and congruence, $r = -0.096$ with a p-value of 0.714. Figure 1 shows the lack of association between anxiety and congruence. For avoidance and congruence, $r = -0.071$ with a p-value of 0.788. Figure 2 shows the lack of association between avoidance and congruence. So, these results did not support either possibility I expected.

![Figure 1. Association between anxiety and congruence.](image1)

![Figure 2. Association between avoidance and congruence.](image2)

**Discussion**

Based on previous research and my own expectations, I hypothesized that either securely attached individuals would have the strongest correlation between how they perceive themselves and how they are perceived by others or securely attached individuals would have the weakest correlation between how they perceive themselves and how they are perceived by others. My research question
inquired as to whether there is an effect of attachment style on congruence between self-other perception. I was unable to make a clear prediction of whether attachment style had any effect on the congruence between how one views oneself and how one is perceived by others. The study I performed did not support my hypotheses and I found no significant correlation between congruence and attachment style ($p > .05$) in my results.

Though my study did not support my hypotheses, I am not convinced that this means my hypothesis is wholly rejected. An interesting trend found in my study was the wide range of responses. Both hypotheses may be correct, but there could be some third variable that predicts which way the effect goes (i.e. social desirability). One apparent reason I believe I did not find support is my choice of method. The measure of congruence I chose may not be sensitive enough; it is possible congruence of broad personality dimensions (such as the Big Five used in this study) is less important than specific traits. A questionnaire with asking an individual to rank themselves on various personality dimensions, and to arbitrarily choose a friend to do the same, may not be an effective way of measuring self-other perception.

In the same paper by Funder and Colvin (1997) that I mentioned in my introduction, “Funder (1980a) classified the 100 items of the California Q-set along a dimension of ‘outward observability,’ … it seems obvious that traits [like “rumination”] are more observable by the people who possess them than by acquaintances, because … internal activities are only accessible to acquaintances to the extent that the persons who perform them let others in on the secret” (Funder & Colvin, 1997). Traits like “talkativeness” are more observable to acquaintances, maybe even more so than to the person who possess them. Moreover, because every relationship is unique, the amount and/or types of information that the person who possess the characteristics chooses to “let others in on the secret” is going to vary
(maybe intentionally, but also unintentionally). I gave people free range for choosing a friend which likely resulted in a variety of levels of closeness (i.e. person A could have asked their best friend of 4 years and person B could have asked their classmate). In addition, it was a stretch to ask people to ask a friend. At this point in the survey, many people dropped out; they did not want to go to that much trouble for a survey they were voluntarily participating in. Thus, a survey that attempts to measure possible causes of inaccurate self-knowledge, such as motives for self-deception (social desirability), may be a better way to test whether there is a relation between attachment style and self-other perception. This method would control for the possibility that broad personality dimensions (measuring both external and internal traits) might be less important than specific traits that may be more central to one’s internal motives, potentially having more of an effect on self-other perception.

Additional possibilities for limitations could be attributed to gaps in external validity. One, a potential gender bias, as 88.24% of my participants were female and only 11.76% of my participants were male. This could have been controlled for if we had 50% female and 50% male participation, or the percentage difference could have been reduced if we had a larger sample size. Two, a potential ethnicity bias, as 88.24% of my participants Caucasian. It is possible my results varied by some underrepresented or excluded group. A larger sample size would result in greater statistical power and external validity. This study could have also benefited from random selection. However, the insignificance of my data was substantial enough that these biases would most likely have been insignificant as well.

Overall, although I see no significant relationship between congruence and attachment style, with some changes to this study and further research, the results could change to support my hypothesis. I hope that I sparked interest in this topic and provided a gateway to exploration in a new area of study.
These topics and particular areas of research (attachment styles, self-other perception, etc.) are important because they directly influence relationship quality and, furthermore, happiness. The more disconnects and discrepancies within interpersonal communication, the more unhappy relational partners will be. “People with different attachment styles vary along a wide array of communication variables … People also report different levels of relational satisfaction depending on their attachment style and the attachment style of their partner” (Guerrero, Anderson, & Afifi, 2013). Anything that may help further our understanding of the workings within interpersonal relationships is worth researching.
References


Appendix

[The Experiences in Close Relationships-Revised (ECR-R) Questionnaire
By: Fraley, Waller, and Brennan (2000)]

Please answer the following questions according to how you perceive yourself in a romantic relationship. If you are not currently in a romantic relationship, please answer the following questions according to how you would feel if you were in one.

1. I'm afraid that I will lose my partner's love.
2. I often worry that my partner will not want to stay with me.
3. I often worry that my partner doesn't really love me.
4. I worry that romantic partners won’t care about me as much as I care about them.
5. I often wish that my partner's feelings for me were as strong as my feelings for him or her.
6. I worry a lot about my relationships.
7. When my partner is out of sight, I worry that he or she might become interested in someone else.
8. When I show my feelings for romantic partners, I'm afraid they will not feel the same about me.
9. I rarely worry about my partner leaving me.
10. My romantic partner makes me doubt myself.
11. I do not often worry about being abandoned.
12. I find that my partner(s) don't want to get as close as I would like.
13. Sometimes romantic partners change their feelings about me for no apparent reason.
14. My desire to be very close sometimes scares people away.
15. I'm afraid that once a romantic partner gets to know me, he or she won't like who I really am.
16. It makes me mad that I don't get the affection and support I need from my partner.
17. I worry that I won't measure up to other people.
18. My partner only seems to notice me when I’m angry.
19. I prefer not to show a partner how I feel deep down.
20. I feel comfortable sharing my private thoughts and feelings with my partner.
21. I find it difficult to allow myself to depend on romantic partners.
22. I am very comfortable being close to romantic partners.
23. I don't feel comfortable opening up to romantic partners.
24. I prefer not to be too close to romantic partners.
25. I get uncomfortable when a romantic partner wants to be very close.
26. I find it relatively easy to get close to my partner.
27. It's not difficult for me to get close to my partner.
28. I usually discuss my problems and concerns with my partner.
29. It helps to turn to my romantic partner in times of need.
30. I tell my partner just about everything.
31. I talk things over with my partner.
32. I am nervous when partners get too close to me.
33. I feel comfortable depending on romantic partners.
34. I find it easy to depend on romantic partners.
35. It's easy for me to be affectionate with my partner.
36. My partner really understands me and my needs.

[The Big Five Inventory (BFI)]

I see (myself/my friend) as someone who...

1. ...Is talkative
2. ...Tends to find fault with others
3. ...Does a thorough job
4. ...Is depressed, blue
5. ...Is original, comes up with new ideas
6. ...Is reserved
7. ...Is helpful and unselfish with others
8. ...Can be somewhat careless
9. ...Is relaxed, handles stress well
10. ...Is curious about many different things
11. ...Is full of energy
12. ...Starts quarrels with others
13. ...Is a reliable worker
14. ...Can be tense
15. ...Is ingenious, a deep thinker
16. ...Generates a lot of enthusiasm
17. ...Has a forgiving nature
18. ...Tends to be disorganized
19. ...Worries a lot
20. ...Has an active imagination
21. ...Tends to be quiet
22. ...Is generally trusting
23. ...Tends to be lazy
24. ...Is emotionally stable, not easily upset
25. ...Is inventive
26. ...Has an assertive personality
27. ...Can be cold and aloof
28. ...Perseveres until the task is finished
29. ...Can be moody
30. ...Values artistic, aesthetic experiences
31. ...Is sometimes shy, inhibited
32. ...Is considerate and kind to almost everyone
33. ...Does things efficiently
34. ...Remains calm in tense situations
35. ...Prefers work that is routine
36. ...Is outgoing, sociable
37. ...Is sometimes rude to others
38. ...Makes plans and follows through with them
39. ...Gets nervous easily
40. ...Likes to reflect, play with ideas
41. ...Has few artistic interests
42. ...Likes to cooperate with others
43. ...Is easily distracted
44. ...Is sophisticated in art, music, or literature
45. ...Is politically liberal